

Benjamin West (1746-1817), c. 1805

Anonymous

watercolor on ivory

3 1/2 x 2 3/4 (8.89 x 6.99)

inscribed, on verso of frame: 'Benjamin West, Esq./Charleston/N.H./ Died Sept. 1817 aged about 70.'

Bequest of Dwight Foster Dunn, 1937

Weis 138

Hewes Number: 145

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; possibly to his niece Mary Maccarty Stiles (cat. 108); through the Stiles/Foster family to the donor.

Publications:

Sibley's Harvard Graduates, s.v. 'West, Benjamin.'

Benjamin West, son of the Reverend Thomas West (1708-90), built a large legal practice in Charlestown, New Hampshire. He graduated from Harvard College in 1768 and, after serving briefly and without enthusiasm as a minister in Wrentham, Massachusetts, entered the study of law in New Hampshire.<sup>1</sup>

West's budding legal career was interrupted during the Revolutionary War when he travelled to Charleston, South Carolina, to work as a tutor for a wealthy planter. He described his astonishment at the behavior of slave-holding southerners in a letter to his brother: '[A] man will shoot a Negro with as little emotion as he shoots a hare. Several instances of which have come within my own knowledge since I have been here. They also have a brief way of trying Negroes for capital crimes. The Court consists of one justice and two freeholders, who order the Negro before them, try him and hang him up immediately. But there would perhaps be but a few Negroes prosecuted were it not from interested motives. For when a Negro is hanged by authority, the Government pays his master his full value, which if he shoots him he loses.'<sup>2</sup>

West returned to New England in 1779 and two years later married Mary Maccarty (cat. 148) of Worcester, the daughter of the Reverend Thaddeus Maccarty (cat. 75).

West rose to prominence in the legal profession. 'His bleached hair, his placid countenances, his sweet and fine toned voice made an impression...too deep to be soon forgotten. The judges, the lawyers, spectators and all, seemed to pay him that respect which genius and virtue united only can command.'<sup>3</sup> As his legal practice grew and he was recognized for his eloquence, he became famous for repeatedly refusing public office. He declined a position as a

member of Congress and turned down posts as New Hampshire attorney general and judge of probate, citing lack of fiscal compensation for the attorney general position.<sup>4</sup> In 1814, however, he agreed to represent New Hampshire at the Hartford Convention.

West also declined other honors. When elected a member of the newly formed American Antiquarian Society in 1814, he characteristically refused, writing: 'I think it wrong to accept the honor of being a member of a society to the interest of which I cannot in any degree contribute. I must therefore request that my name be omitted in the list of members and at that same time beg you to assure the society that I think their designs and pursuits highly useful and considerable and sincerely wish them success.'<sup>5</sup>

This miniature of West depicts him at about age 60, toward the end of his life. It is by an unidentified artist and reflects the popularity of profiles in the United States beginning in the late eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> The artist chose to darken the background of the miniature with closely connected hatching marks, thus helping to define the sitter's pale profile, even on such a small scale.

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<sup>1</sup> For more biographical information on West, see Sibley's Harvard Graduates, s.v. 'West, Benjamin.'

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin West to Samuel West, July 23, 1778, Samuel West Memoirs, 1807, AAS Manuscript Collection.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel L. Knapp, Biographical Sketches of Eminent Lawyers, Statesmen, and Men of Letters (Boston: 1821), quoted in Sibley's.

<sup>4</sup> Sibley's Harvard Graduates, s.v. 'West, Benjamin.'

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin West to Samuel Burnside, July 30, 1814, AAS Archives.

<sup>6</sup> For more on profiles and profile making, see Ellen G. Miles, '1803--The Year of the Physiognotrace,' and Peter Benes, 'Machine-Assisted Portrait and Profile Making in New England after 1803,' both in Painting and Portrait Making in the American Northeast, Dublin Seminar for New England Folk Life, Annual Proceedings, 1994 (Boston: Boston University Press, 1994): 118-50.