

DeWITT CLINTON (1796-1828), December 1824
George Catlin (1796-1872)
watercolor on ivory
3 3/4 x 3 3/16 (9.53 x 8.10)
Gift of Augusta Clinton Winthrop, 1893
Weis 35
Hewes Number: 31

Ex. Coll.: Clinton family; to the sitter's great-granddaughter, the donor.¹

DeWitt Clinton, best known today for his leadership in the construction of the Erie Canal, was a lifelong politician. He was elected to the United States Senate in 1802, became the mayor of New York City in 1803, and was elected governor of New York in 1817. A steadfast supporter of public education, he promoted legislation that improved school systems in New York.

Ardent about history, Clinton was elected to membership in the American Antiquarian Society in 1814 and became vice president seven years later. In 1828 he gave the Society an inscribed lead land marker (Celeron Plate), used by French explorers in the eighteenth century to mark claimed territory. His research on the inscription and history of the marker was published in the Society's *Archeologia Americana* in 1836. In an introduction to the essay, a fellow member noted: 'Amidst the laborious duties of a life of uncommon activity, Governor Clinton found time for the prosecution of extensive inquiries into the history of the country.'²

He also pursued his interests in history, literature, and the arts through memberships in several societies and institutions and was a founding member of The New-York Historical Society.³ In a presidential address to the American Academy of Art, Clinton discussed the history of the fine arts in America and described his vision of the future value of the Academy's collections. 'In this place,' he said, 'shall be deposited the portraits, the busts, and the statues of these illustrious men, who have extended the fame of their country, brightened the path of glory, illuminated the regions of knowledge, and exemplified the blessings of religion. Here shall the future great men of America, the guides, the lights, and the shields of unborn generations, repair to view the monuments of art—to behold the departed worthies of former times—to rouse the soul of generous emulation, and to catch the spirit of heroic virtue.'⁴

This miniature of the governor was owned by the Clinton family in the nineteenth century. It was reproduced in 1825 as an engraving in a commemorative publication celebrating the completion

of the Erie Canal (fig. 14).⁵ George Catlin, best known today for his paintings of Native Americans, began his career as a miniaturist, taking likenesses on ivory. In 1821 he exhibited miniatures in Philadelphia and over the next decade worked in Washington, D. C.; Hartford, Connecticut; and Albany, New York.⁶ This miniature of Clinton exhibits several characteristics of Catlin's work, including the sculpted quality of the hair, the broad brushwork used to create shadows, and a careful attention to facial contours.

¹ Mary C. D. Staples to AAS, April 25, 1893, AAS Archives. This letter documents the donation.

² DeWitt Clinton, 'Essay on Leaden Plates Deposited by the French in the West,' Archaeologia Americana, 7 vols. (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1836), 2: 537-40.

³ Dictionary of American Biography, s.v. 'Clinton, DeWitt.' For additional biographical information, see Steven E. Siry, DeWitt Clinton and the American Political Economy (New York: Peter Lang, 1989).

⁴ Clinton, A Discourse Delivered Before the American Academy of the Arts, by the Honourable DeWitt Clinton, LL.D. (President), 23rd October 1816 (New York: T. A. W. Mercein, 1816), 20.

⁵ Cadwallader Colden, Erie Canal Memoir (New York: W. A. Davis, 1825-26), appendix, opp. 271. The miniature was engraved for this publication by J. B. Longacre and identified as being taken from 'a miniature by G. Catlin painted at Albany, December 1824.' This was presumably the most current likeness of the governor at the time.

⁶ Dale T. Johnson, American Portrait Miniatures in the Manney Collection (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990), 92-93.