

CALVIN COOLIDGE (1872-1933), 1934
Frank O. Salisbury (1874-1962)
copy after his own 1928 composition
oil on canvas
50 x 40 (127.00 x 101.60)
signed, l.r.: 'Frank O. Salisbury'
Commissioned by members of the American Antiquarian Society, 1934
Weis 40
Hewes Number: 33

Exhibitions:

1934, 'American Leading Men: Portraits by Frank O. Salisbury,' Anderson Galleries, Chicago.
1935, 'Recent Portraits by Frank O. Salisbury,' Wildenstein & Co., New York, no. 2.
1981-89, Cabinet Room of the White House, Washington, D.C.

Although Calvin Coolidge, the thirtieth president of the United States, was a native of Vermont, he was active in Massachusetts politics, serving as both a state senator and governor. Warren G. Harding selected him as his vice presidential running mate in 1920. After Harding's death in 1923, Coolidge was sworn in as president and he was later elected in his own right in 1924. As president he is remembered for tax reduction, pro-business stance, and other conservative positions, as well as for a dry wit. At a press conference in Washington, D.C., Coolidge was once asked about a recently published book that was critical of George Washington. In response, Coolidge 'turned half way around to where the Washington Monument was visible through the trees and said only, "I see his monument is still there."' ¹

Coolidge was elected to the American Antiquarian Society in 1925, the eleventh United States president to become a member (John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Theodore Roosevelt were among his predecessors). ² After completing his service as president of the United States in 1929, Coolidge was elected to the presidency of the American Antiquarian Society, a position he held until his death in 1933. Coolidge was elected to the Society because of his interests in American history and books. Clarence Brigham (cat. 11), librarian of the Society, recalled that 'Mr. Coolidge was a great reader. [He]...was particularly interested in history and the study of government.' Coolidge and his wife Grace had a house in Northampton, Massachusetts, and Coolidge was acquainted with many Society members from his days in state politics. Brigham noted: 'He already

knew most of [the Society's] officers, especially Chief Justice Rugg who was Vice President of the Society. The meetings brought him in touch with many members of scholarly pursuits... He has been keenly interested in the welfare of the Society and has aided in many of its undertakings.'³ Coolidge eventually donated a small number of his personal papers to the Society.⁴

In 1928, American Antiquarian Society member Clarence Bowen (cat. 10) commissioned a portrait of Coolidge for the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society. After Coolidge's death in 1933, Bowen arranged for a copy to be made for AAS. He wrote to Brigham, 'After seeing you...at the funeral of Calvin Coolidge, it occurred to me that it would be wise to ask the English artist Frank O. Salisbury to paint a portrait of Calvin Coolidge... I called on Mr. Salisbury this morning and told him that if he would make a very low price, I would suggest that he paint for the American Antiquarian Society a replica of the Coolidge portrait owned by the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society.'⁵

Resources were limited because of the Great Depression, but several members of the Society pooled their funds to commission the portrait. From the outset, Brigham, who had known Coolidge for nearly twenty years, had a definite idea of what he wanted in the finished portrait and did not wish Salisbury to merely copy the 1928 canvas. Their correspondence in the Society's archives contains details about the changes to be made, among them the color of the sitter's suit, which in the original was a pale grey. In 1933 Salisbury wrote: 'I think your suggestion to paint a dark coat is a good one. It will give the portrait a unique touch, much better than being a copy. If you will make any other suggestions I shall be pleased to consider them.'⁶

Brigham was only too happy to make suggestions and sought the opinion of Mrs. Coolidge before responding. He noted: 'the chin is a little too rounded, perhaps because of the shadow between the chin and the mouth. This, too, makes the lower lip a little too full.... The ears, eyes and upper part of the face are wonderfully well drawn and very characteristic, although it seems to me that the back of the head is a little elongated toward the top.'⁷ Brigham sent dozens of photographs of Coolidge to Salisbury, who was working in his London studio from sketches and reproductions of the 1928 canvas.

In May 1934, Salisbury sent a photograph of the nearly completed copy, to which Brigham responded: 'I do not think you have got in this portrait the thin, ascetic mouth that we always associated with Mr. Coolidge's expression.... I am sending you under separate cover some more photographs showing this expression... I remember you once told me that Mr. Coolidge was a hard man to paint and that has been the judgment of every artist who has painted him.'⁸ By the end of the summer, Salisbury had made enough changes to the portrait to satisfy Brigham, and the portrait was shipped to the American Antiquarian Society and presented at the October annual meeting to a delighted membership.⁹

Nearly fifty years later, the Society's portrait of Coolidge was sent to Washington, D.C., at the request of the fortieth president of the United States, Ronald Reagan. The portrait hung in the Cabinet Room (fig. 15) and remained on loan to the White House for eight years. Upon its return Reagan wrote: 'As you know my admiration runs deep for "Silent Cal," his legendary patience, his bone-dry wit, and especially his philosophy of government: order, honesty and common sense. The picture has served well as a gentle reminder of an important part of our heritage of personal character and individual liberty, and it has been a pleasure and privilege to have it here.'¹⁰

¹ Clarence S. Brigham, 'Remarks at the Fire Society,' April 3, 1933, Calvin Coolidge Papers, 1918-1933, AAS Manuscript Collection. For a biography of Coolidge, see Donald R. McCoy, Calvin Coolidge (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967).

² In all, thirteen United States presidents have been elected to membership in AAS: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, James Monroe, Rutherford B. Hayes, Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Coolidge, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Jimmy Carter.

³ 'Calvin Coolidge,' October 21, 1932, AAS Newsclipping File.

⁴ Coolidge Papers.

⁵ Clarence Bowen to Brigham, January 9, 1933, AAS Archives.

⁶ Frank O. Salisbury to Brigham, December 9, 1933, AAS Archives.

⁷ Brigham to Salisbury, January 24, 1934, AAS Archives.

⁸ Brigham to Salisbury, May 8, 1934, AAS Archives.

⁹ Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 44 (October 1934): 195-98.

¹⁰ Ronald Reagan to Marcus McCorison, January 19, 1989, AAS Archives. In his autobiography, Reagan wrote: 'I'd always thought of Coolidge as one of our most underrated presidents. He wasn't a man with flamboyant looks or style, but he got things done in a quiet way.' (An American Life [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990], 244.)