

ROBERT FULTON (1765-1815), 1815  
Elizabeth Emmet (1794-1878)  
after Benjamin West (1738-1820)  
oil on canvas  
36 x 27 3/4 (91.44 x 70.49)  
Gift of Clarence Bowen, 1935  
Weis 61  
Hewes Number: 55

Ex Coll.: Artist;<sup>1</sup> in the possession of Mrs. David Colden by 1864; presented by her to the Reverend Francis Vinton in 1864; to his daughter Gertrude Vinton in 1872; purchased from her estate by the donor, 1935.

Exhibitions:

1909, 'Hudson Fulton Celebration,' New-York Historical Society.

Publications:

Cadwallader Colden, Life of Fulton (New York: Kirk & Mercein, 1817), frontispiece. Engraving by William Satchwell Leney (1796-1831).

Thomas Addis Emmet, Thomas Addis Emmet and Robert Emmet (New York: The Emmet Press, 1915), 525.

R. W. G. Vail, 'The Robert Fulton Portraits,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 45 (October 1935): opp. 183.

Helmut von Erffa and Allen Staley, The Paintings of Benjamin West (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 507.

As a young man, Robert Fulton was a talented draftsman who was as comfortable sketching schematics for weapons as drawing portraits of his friends and neighbors. Fulton spent many years in England and France, where he initially hoped to improve his artistic abilities, but soon his grasp of engineering overshadowed his painterly talents, and it is as an inventor that he is generally remembered. Famous as one of the early developers of steam-powered boats, he also improved canal digging equipment and advanced submarine and torpedo technology.<sup>2</sup> He was elected to membership in the American Antiquarian Society in 1814, the year before he died.

This portrait of Fulton was copied after an image painted by Benjamin West in London in 1806. West and Fulton became acquainted when the young inventor first travelled to England to study art in 1786. Like many other American painters, Fulton sought the advice of West at London's Royal Academy. Over the years, Fulton became an important patron of West, encouraging American institutions such as the Pennsylvania Academy of Art to purchase his work.<sup>3</sup>

Fulton eventually hung his portrait by West in his New York City home, where it was probably seen by Elizabeth Emmet, the daughter of Fulton's lawyer and intimate friend Thomas Addis Emmet (1764-1827). Elizabeth, an amateur artist who took painting lessons from Fulton, altered the background of her image, replacing West's view of an exploding brig with a depiction of a floating battery that Fulton designed for the City of New York in 1814.<sup>4</sup> In 1817 Emmet's portrait of the inventor was engraved by William Satchwell Leney (1796-1831) and appeared as the frontispiece to Cadwallader Colden's Life of Fulton (fig. 18). Emmet, who later married William H. LeRoy of New York, continued to paint for most of her life, producing oil and pastel portraits and genre scenes. She exhibited her work at the National Academy of Design in 1873.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The pre-1864 provenance of this work is unclear. Three possibilities were outlined by R. W. G. Vail in 'The Robert Fulton Portraits,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 45 (October 1935): 183-92. When this painting arrived at AAS, it was accompanied by a written statement from the Reverend Francis Vinton declaring that it had been painted 'for Mr. Charles Wilkes,' who gave it to his daughter Mrs. David Colden. However, in 1909 a Fulton descendant, Alice Crary Sutcliffe, stated that this image was first owned by Cadwallader D. Colden, who passed it to his daughter-in-law Mrs. David Colden. This was accepted by Helmut von Erffa and Allen Staley in The Paintings of Benjamin West (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 507. Vail suggests a third possibility: according to the artist's nephew, about 1847 the portrait was loaned to Dr. John W. Francis, the Emmet family's physician, and was in his possession until at least 1857. Vail speculated that Mrs. David Colden may have purchased the portrait from the Francis estate in 1861.

<sup>2</sup> Among the many biographies of Fulton are H. W. Dickinson, Robert Fulton—Engineer and Artist—His Life and Works (London: John Lane Co., 1913), and Cynthia Owen Phillip, Robert Fulton (New York: Franklin Watts, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> von Erffa and Staley, The Paintings of Benjamin West, 153, 507. The portrait by West, which is owned by the New York State Historical Association, is illustrated and discussed in detail by the authors.

<sup>4</sup> von Erffa and Staley, The Paintings of Benjamin West, 507. Thomas Addis Emmet [II] argued in his Memoir of Thomas Addis Emmet and Robert Emmet (New York: The Emmet Press, 1915), 525, that his aunt Elizabeth painted the portrait of Fulton from life and that West then based his image on hers, an opinion accepted by Vail in 1935. In 1986 this theory was proven to be false by von Erffa and Staley, based on specific information regarding the date of West's image. The New-York Historical Society has two additional Fulton portraits featuring the floating battery. One is illustrated as 'by or after' Elizabeth Emmet in its Catalogue of American Portraits in the New York Historical Society, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 1: 278.

<sup>5</sup> The New-York Historical Society's Dictionary of Artists in America, 1564-1860, s.v. 'Emmet, Elizabeth.' Illustrations of Elizabeth Emmet's work can be found in Emmet's Memoir of Thomas Addis Emmet and Robert Emmet. Many women in the Emmet family were artists. In 1936 an exhibition of their work was held at the Arden Gallery in New York. See 'The Arty Emmets,' Art Digest (October 15, 1936): 28.