

FRIEDRICH HEINRICH ALEXANDER von HUMBOLDT (1769-1859), c. 1852

Moses Wight (1827-95)

after his 1852 composition

oil on canvas

30 1/4 x 25 (76.84 x 63.50)

Gift of Isaac Davis and George Frisbie Hoar, 1877

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Hewes Number: 70

Ex. Coll.: John Wooldredge; sold at auction by Joseph Leonard Auctions, August 29, 1877; purchased by donors.

Exhibitions:

1891, 'Portraits by American Artists,' Worcester Public Library.

1902-4, stored at the Worcester Art Museum, exhibited occasionally.

Alexander von Humboldt, the prominent German scientist and explorer, was elected to membership in the American Antiquarian Society in 1816. He made important contributions to the study of South American botany and zoology, invented a filtered breathing apparatus for gold miners, and, attempting to bring the sciences to the attention of the general public, lectured widely on such topics as volcanoes, sunspots, magnetism, and optical theory. Humboldt was the author of several extensive treatises on natural history, including Voyages aux Equinoxiales du Nouveau Continent and Cosmos: Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe, in which his purpose 'was to provide an accurate scientific picture of the physical structure of the universe in such a way as to interest the general educated public and stimulate interest in scientific discovery among intelligent laymen.'¹

After the scientist's death in 1859, American Antiquarian Society member Charles Folsom (1842-1907) declared that, because of Humboldt's interest in accumulating knowledge, he was 'the patron saint of all Antiquarian Societies' and expressed the hope that the Society's walls would 'soon be adorned with the portrait or the bust of Alexander Humboldt.'² Eighteen years after Folsom's memorial speech, this portrait was donated to the Society by two members.

The Boston artist Moses Wight began painting portraits in 1845. He travelled to Europe in 1851 and, during a visit to Berlin the following year, received permission to paint the eighty-two-year-old Humboldt. The portrait that he produced, now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, was widely acclaimed for the accuracy of the likeness. 'It is admitted that Wight has

been the most successful artist who has attempted the likeness of Humboldt, in catching at once the intellectual and the physical expression of his face.’³ Wight kept the original portrait and found a ready market for copies, as he explained in an 1878 letter to American Antiquarian Society Librarian Samuel Foster Haven: ‘The portrait you have of Humboldt is not the original. I made at different times three copies, one for Professor Longfellow for a literary club in Portland, and one for Mr. Sturges of Boston, which he presented to Harvard University, and the one you now have. The original I have in my possession.... Humboldt gave me five sittings of about an hour and a half each, the conversation was almost wholly upon America, he having visited our country in his younger days, and he seemed to take a lively interest in our affairs.’⁴

The Society’s copy of the Humboldt portrait was purchased at an 1877 auction of the contents of 224 Beacon Street, occupied by a Mr. John Wooldredge. An advertisement for this sale mentioned Axminster carpets and a Willard hall clock and indicated that Wooldredge was a patron of the arts: ‘About forty valuable old paintings, among them The Old Oaken Bucket and Return from the Well by Amos [sic], cost \$2500 each; Rachel by the same; Humboldt by Moses Wight--the finest portrait of Humboldt ever painted, and from life; [also] Wight’s copy of Stuart’s Washington....’⁵

¹ Voyage aux Régions Equinoxiales du Nouveau Continent, Fait en 1790, 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803 et 1804, par Al. de Humboldt et Bonpland, Rédigé par Alexandre de Humboldt; avec un Atlas Géographique et Physique, 14 vols. (Paris: Librairie grecque-latine-allemande, 1814-26); Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe, E. C. Otté, trans., 5 vols. (New York: Harper & Bros., 1850-59). Douglas Botting, Humboldt and the Cosmos (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 259. There are many biographies of Humboldt, including Botting’s and Helmut de Terra, The Life and Times of Alexander von Humboldt (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955).

² ‘Report of the Council,’ Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society (October 1859): 14.

³ Samuel Foster Haven, ‘Some Remarks on Humboldt and American Archaeology,’ Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society (October 1877): 92.

⁴ Moses Wight to Samuel F. Haven, from Paris, September 25, 1878, AAS Archives. The copy at Harvard University is in the Fogg Art Museum. American Paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1969), 289, states that in 1932 another Wight copy was sold in Philadelphia. The Museum of Science, Boston, has a copy, also by Wight. Yale University Art Gallery owns a smaller version, in oval, by Wight.

⁵ Boston Evening Transcript, August 22, 1877. The sale was held by Joseph Legrand, Auctioneer and Appraiser.