

JOHN MAY (1748-1812), 1789

Christian Gullager (1759-1826)

oil on canvas

30 1/8 x 25 1/8 (76.52 x 63.82)

signed, l.r.: 'C. Gullager Pinx. 1789'

Bequest of Mary Davenport May and Charlotte Augusta May, 1874

Weis 85

Hewes Number: 86

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; to his wife Abigail May; to their daughters, the donors.

Exhibitions:

1921-22, 'Loan Exhibition of English and American Paintings of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,' Worcester Art Museum.

1929, 'Exhibition of American Eighteenth Century Art Owned in and Near Worcester,' Worcester Art Museum, no. 308.

1943, 'The Art of Colonial America in the Early Republic,' Vose Art Gallery, Boston.

1949, 'Christian Gullager,' Worcester Art Museum.

1971, 'Early American Paintings from the Collections of the Worcester Art Museum and the American Antiquarian Society,' Worcester Art Museum.

1975, 'The Face of Liberty,' Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

1976, 'Christian Gullager: Portrait Painter to Federal America,' National Portrait Gallery.

1977, 'Wellsprings of a Nation,' Worcester Art Museum.

Publications:

Alan Burroughs, Limners and Likenesses (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 93, 98, no. 74.

Louisa Dresser, 'Christian Gullager,' Art in America 37 (July 1949): 148-49.

Dresser, 1969, 723.

William Dunlap, ed., A History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States, 3 vols. (Boston: C. E. Goodspeed & Co., 1918), 3: 305.

James T. Flexner, The Face of Liberty (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1975), plate 71.

Marvin Sadik, Christian Gullager: Portrait Painter to Federal America (Washington, D.C.: National Portrait Gallery, 1976), 56-57, plate 5.

Dwight Smith, The Western Journals of John May (Cincinnati: Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, 1961), frontispiece.

John May was born in Pomfret, Connecticut, and moved to Boston as a young man. On December 16, 1773, along with other Boston residents angry over increased taxes, May participated in the Boston Tea Party, helping his neighbors dump a shipload of tea into the city's harbor. In 1778, at the age of thirty, he joined the First Regiment of the Boston Militia as a

captain. He rose steadily through the ranks, becoming a colonel in 1787. After the war, May served as a Boston fire warden and selectman and purchased valuable wharf property along the waterfront. In 1788, he travelled to the Ohio Territory to stake a claim on a parcel of land he hoped to use for future investment.¹

This portrait of May wearing his military uniform was painted in the spring of 1789, just before he departed on a second trip to Ohio. His wife Abigail noted her husband's departure in her diary on April 23: 'Mr. May and Mr. Breck started on their journey for the West, not in the best health or spirits, leaving us very dull.' The next day, when Abigail's brother delivered this portrait to the house, she wrote: 'What a present! The most welcome he could have made me, unless it had been the original himself... Much praise is due the painter. He has done his work well, and I don't wonder he says his hall is stripped of its greatest ornament.'²

The artist, Christian Gullager, was born in Copenhagen, Denmark. He completed his studies at the Royal Academy there in 1780 and immigrated to the United States sometime between 1782 and 1786. Gullager travelled around the country, taking likenesses, painting signs, and making backdrops for theater performances. He also worked as an ornamental painter, decorating military silks and fire buckets. In 1789 Gullager painted John May and signed and dated the canvas. As the only known work signed and dated by Gullager, this portrait is a key picture for the study of this artist's work.³

¹ John May's papers, including journals of his visits to Ohio, are in the collections of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio (Cincinnati) and the Western Reserve Historical Society (Cleveland). The journals were published in Dwight Smith, The Western Journals of John May (Cincinnati: Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, 1961). AAS owns papers relating to John May's daughter, Sophia May (1784-1870).

² Marvin Sadik, Christian Gullager: Portrait Painter to Federal America (Washington, D.C.: National Portrait Gallery, 1976), 56. Abigail May (m. 1773) later founded and was director of the Boston Asylum for Female Orphans. Both she and her husband had their portraits painted by Gilbert Stuart about 1815. (See Lawrence Park, Gilbert Stuart, 4 vols. [New York: William Edwin Rudge, 1926], 2: 513-14.)

³ For a complete study of Gullager, see Sadik and Louisa Dresser, 'Christian Gullager,' Art in America 37 (July 1949): 105-79. In 1963 a copy of Gullager's portrait of John May was offered to the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum. (See their letters of July 18 and 26, 1963, in the AAS Archives.)