

BASS OTIS (1784-1861), 1860

self-portrait

oil on tin

10 1/8 x 8 1/4 (25.72 x 20.96)

inscribed, on verso: 'Bass Otis/Painted by himself/Aged 76/
for F. J. Dreer, AD 1860'

Gift of Charles Henry Taylor, Jr., 1928

Weis 91

Hewes Number: 91

Ex. Coll.: Ferdinand Julius Dreer (1812-1902); sold at 'F. J. Dreer's Collection of Oil Portraits and Engravings,' auction by Stan T. Henkels, June 6, 1913; purchased by Charles E. Goodspeed for \$65; sold to donor.

Exhibitions:

1969, 'A Society's Chief Joys,' Grolier Club, New York, no. 212.

1976, 'Bass Otis: Painter, Portraitist and Engraver,' Historical Society of Wilmington, Delaware, no. 80.

Publications:

Wayne Craven and Gainor B. Davis, Bass Otis: Painter, Portraitist and Engraver (Wilmington, Del.: Historical Society of Delaware, 1976), 112.

William Dunlap, A History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States, 3 vols. (Boston: C. E. Goodspeed & Co., 1918), 2: 282.

Thomas Knoles, 'The Notebook of Bass Otis: Philadelphia Portrait Painter,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 103 (April 1993): 180.

Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 37 (October 1913): frontispiece.

A Society's Chief Joys (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1969), 104.

That Bass Otis became an artist, specializing in portrait painting, instead of taking up the family trade of scythe-making in the area of Bridgewater, Massachusetts, was a result of following his natural inclination. He learned the basic elements of grinding pigments and mixing colors from a coach maker. He may have studied with Gilbert Stuart in Boston between 1805 and 1808 before moving to New York City, where he may have worked briefly as an assistant to John Wesley Jarvis (1780-1840).¹ In 1812 Otis moved to Philadelphia, where his portraits were well-received. He painted businessmen, politicians, children, and members of the city's middle and upper classes. His account book, which lists the names of some three hundred sitters for portraits, other types of commissions, prices he charged, and notes on his technique, is preserved at the American Antiquarian Society.² Although he was based in Philadelphia during this period, Otis travelled regularly in search of commissions and often visited Baltimore and Washington, D.C.

Otis was elected a member of the Society of Artists of the United States in 1812. That year, eight of his portraits were exhibited in a show presented by the Society of Artists and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, to which he was elected in 1824. His studio became a place for young painters to learn their craft, and Otis was an able teacher. Both John Neagle (1796-1865) and Henry Inman (1801-46), two of Philadelphia's most successful portrait painters, studied with him.³

Early in his career, Otis experimented with lithography. The July 1819 issue of the Analectic Magazine featured an article on this newly invented printing process and included a lithographed scene by Otis of a building at water's edge (fig. 24). This image, which has been termed the first lithograph published in America, introduced Otis to the possibilities of printmaking as a supplemental form of income. Several lithographs, engravings, and aquatints by Otis are preserved in the AAS Graphic Arts Collection.

Throughout his life Otis painted self-portraits, leaving a remarkably complete record of his changing physical appearance. The earliest one is dated 1812, when he was starting his career as a young artist in Philadelphia. Two images from the 1830s show him in the prime of life.⁴ The self-portrait owned by the American Antiquarian Society was painted during the last year of his life and is his last known work. It was commissioned by Ferdinand Julius Dreer, a Philadelphia jewelry dealer, who was a patron of the arts.⁵ The painting was sold at the sale of Dreer's collection in 1913 and was eventually purchased by the book and print collector Charles Henry Taylor (1867-1941), a member of the American Antiquarian Society, who was keenly interested in the history of lithography.⁶

¹ American National Biography, s.v. 'Otis, Bass.'

² Bass Otis Account Book, 1815-1854, AAS Manuscript Collection. Parts of the account book have been published in Thomas Knoles, 'The Notebook of Bass Otis: Philadelphia Portrait Painter,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 103 (April 1993): 179-253.

³ Wayne Craven and Gaior B. Davis, Bass Otis: Painter, Portraitist and Engraver (Wilmington, Del.: Historical Society of Delaware, 1976), 13-14.

⁴ Craven and Davis, Bass Otis, 21. Two of the self-portraits are illustrated as plate 1 and frontispiece.

⁵ Craven and Davis, Bass Otis, 96. In 1836 Otis painted the young Dreer and his wife, Abigail.

⁶ For more on Taylor, see Taylor Family Papers, 1880-1937, AAS Manuscript Collection. Also see the obituary by Clarence S. Brigham in Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 51 (October 1941): 237-41. In 1931 Taylor donated Otis's account book to AAS.