

The American Painted Portrait and Sculpture Collection

Among the collections of books, manuscripts, and graphic arts held at the American Antiquarian Society is a group of 164 portrait paintings, miniatures, and sculptures. These include portraits of members, benefactors, officers and directors of the Society; other portraits came into the collection with or because of related manuscript or book collections. Some are by Worcester artists; others reflect the changing styles and tastes in portraiture from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries. Descriptive entries accompanying each portrait include an image and information about the subject and the artist (when known). Taken together, these pictures tell a part of the Society's story since its founding in 1812 in Worcester, Massachusetts. Art historian Linda J. Docherty, who has written an introductory essay for the publication of the Society's entire portrait collection, notes that 'subject matter always took precedence over artistic quality at the Society, which, eschewing aesthetic standards, formed a collection of visual range and great historical import.'

The AAS portraits reveal some of the complex relationships of community life. When Isaiah Thomas, the staunch patriot, moved his business to Worcester in 1775, William Paine, a Loyalist, had already left for medical training in Scotland and would return to the colonies as a surgeon in the British Army during the Revolution. Paine and his family moved back to Worcester in 1793, and in 1812, old political sentiments set aside, this physician would join with Isaiah Thomas as one of the founding members of the American Antiquarian Society. Likewise, we learn of the regional and even national importance of some of the sitters. For example, Aaron Bancroft was the minister of the Second Parish in Worcester from 1786 to 1839, but also served as president of the American Unitarian Association from 1825 to 1836.

Since many of the portraits came to AAS together with manuscript collections or were commissioned by the Society, we have extraordinary information about the circumstances of their production. There are occasional first-person accounts of the process of sitting for portraits as well as important documents revealing the costs of the paintings and even their frames. Newspaper advertisements found in the AAS collection provide documentation about itinerant artists who came to Worcester. In an effort to obtain commissions for one artist, Isaiah Thomas, Jr., placed an advertisement in the September 12, 1804, issue of the Worcester Spy saying that examples of Gerrit Schipper's portraits could be seen in his home or office. Other early nineteenth-century Worcester residents, such as Edward D. Bangs and Isaiah Thomas, traveled to Boston to sit for oil portraits by artists established in Boston studios; later in the century, Stephen Salisbury II went to New York for sittings with Daniel Huntington.

The research and documentation of the Society's portrait collection were undertaken by Lauren B. Hewes. The previous catalogue of the portrait collection had been published by Frederick Weis in the Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society in 1946. Hewes's work was published in the Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society as Volume 111, part 1, and with the addition of twenty-four color plates, as Portraits in the Collection of the American Antiquarian Society (Worcester: American Antiquarian

Society, 2004). These two sources illustrate the entire collection with text and images for each of the portraits. Introductions by Linda Docherty, professor of art history at Bowdoin College, and Hewes, who researched the collection, shed further light on the collection as a whole and an interpretation of institutional collecting. Others who have taken part in this collaboration include Charles Barlow, Georgia B. Barnhill, Megan Bocian, Ellen Dunlap, Christine Estabrook, James N. Heald 2nd, John B. Hench, Henry Peach, Katherine St. Germaine, Caroline F. Sloat, Caroline W. Stoffel, and Therasa Tremblay.

- Georgia B. Barnhill and Caroline Sloat