

American Portraits of the Late 1700s and Early 1800s

Neither art schools nor internationally recognized painters existed in the colonies; so, many early American artists traveled to Europe for training. While abroad, as students at an academy or apprentices to a master, they could learn anatomy and perspective, the proportion of oil to pigment, and the touch of the brush.

London set the standards of taste in America, mainly because more than seventy percent of the colonists were of British ancestry. Several of the paintings in this room, in fact, were created in England. Even after the United States became a self-governing nation in 1789, painters of the federal period still considered London to be their cultural center.

Most important artists in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America and Britain knew each other, and many of their patrons and sitters were related by blood or marriage. Such an exclusive, close-knit society can be attributed to the sharp divisions between social classes and the low population density. All thirteen colonies totaled only about two and a half million people — fewer than in metropolitan Washington, D.C., today.

Benjamin West as the "Father of American Painting"

With the financial support of several Philadelphia patrons eager to sponsor America's first professionally trained artist, twenty-one-year-old Benjamin West sailed to Europe in 1760. After three years' work in Italy, primarily Rome, West settled in London and soon became Britain's leading painter of scenes from history. In 1792, he was unanimously elected second president of the Royal Academy of art — a position held, with only one short interruption, until his death twenty-eight years later. Although West never returned to America, he served his homeland well as the most influential teacher in the English-speaking art world.

Among the many colonial painters who studied or lived in West's residences at Covent Garden and near Windsor Castle were Charles Willson Peale, Gilbert Stuart, Ralph Earl, John Trumbull, and Mather Brown. West's pupils of the federal period following the Revolutionary War included Charles Willson Peale's son Rembrandt Peale, Thomas Sully, and the artists-turned-inventors Robert Fulton and Samuel F. B. Morse.

With his considerable tact and perception, West assisted other American painters abroad who were not strictly his protégés, such as John Singleton Copley and Edward Savage. His advice to English artists also was significant; for instance, West urged John Constable to give up portraiture in favor of landscape painting. Canvases by most of these artists hang in this room or in nearby galleries.



Mather Brown

American, 1761–1831 (Worked in Britain, 1781–1831)

William Vans Murray, dated 1787

Descended from the Mathers, a family of famous clergymen in colonial Massachusetts, Mather Brown moved permanently to England in 1781 at the age of twenty. Under the tutelage of Benjamin West, he began painting biblical subjects and scenes from Shakespeare. The greater influence on Brown's portraits, though, was the fluid style of Gilbert Stuart. If anything, Brown was even more flamboyant than Stuart in his application of richly colored, thickly textured paint. In *William Vans Murray*, for instance, Brown outlined the sitter's eyelids in bright red. The hair, cravat, and curtain were rendered with pirouettes of a dancing brush.

Murray studied law in London from 1784 to 1787 before returning to his farm near Cambridge, Maryland, on the Chesapeake Bay's Eastern Shore. He later served in Congress and as minister to France. In addition to other prominent Americans abroad, such as Thomas Jefferson, Brown's clientele included members of the royal family.

This patronage sparked sarcasm from an exasperated, anonymous English painter: "Mr. West paints for the Court and Mr. Copley for the City. Thus the artists of America are fostered in England, and to complete the wonder, a third American, Mr. Brown of the humblest pretences, is chosen portrait painter to the Duke of York. So much for the Thirteen Stripes — so much for the Duke of York's taste."

Oil on canvas, 0.762 x 0.637 m (30 x 25 1/16 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1940.1.1



Charles Willson Peale

American, 1741–1827 (Worked in Britain, 1767–1769)

John Beale Bordley, dated 1770

John Beale Bordley, a Maryland planter and judge, raised the funds to send Charles Willson Peale to London, where the young artist trained under Benjamin West for two years. Bordley also helped Peale obtain his first major commission in America — two life-size portraits, including this allegorical work, that were to be shipped to London as declarations of colonial independence.

The theme of tyranny dominates the foreground. Trained as a lawyer, Bordley raises his hand in a gesture of debate. He points to a statue of British Liberty holding the scales of justice, reminding English viewers that the American colonists lived under British law and thus were entitled to the rights it guaranteed. Britain's violation of these rights is signified by the legal document, lying torn and discarded at Bordley's feet. Growing at the statue's base is jimsonweed, a poisonous plant, which serves to warn of the deadly consequences of any attack on American civil liberties.

America's agricultural self-sufficiency is referred to in the background, which depicts Bordley's plantation on Wye Island in the Chesapeake Bay, where Peale painted the canvas. A peach tree and packhorse signify America's abundance, while the grazing sheep suggest freedom from reliance on imported British woolsens.

Oil on canvas, 2.010 x 1.476 m (79 1/8 x 58 3/16 in.) Gift of The Barra Foundation, Inc. 1984.2.1



Charles Willson Peale

Benjamin and Eleanor Ridgely Laming, 1788

Peale was a major figure in both art and science during America's revolutionary and federal periods. In 1786 he converted the painting gallery attached to his Philadelphia home into a museum of "Natural Curiosities." Peale's enthusiasm for learning was such that he named most of his seventeen children after famous scientists or painters.

In 1788 the Lamings of Maryland commissioned Peale to paint this double portrait. In addition to working on the picture, which incorporates a "view of part of Baltimore Town," Peale studied natural history and collected specimens while in residence at the Lamings' suburban estate. Peale's diary records his progress from 18 September, when he "sketched out the design" after dinner, to 5 October, when he added the finishing touches "and made the portrait much better."

Peale cleverly devised a leaning posture for the husband so that his portly figure would not overshadow his petite wife. This unusual, reclining attitude binds the couple together and tells of their love. The spyglass and exotic parrot may indicate Laming's mercantile interest in foreign shipping. Mrs. Laming's fruit and flowers, although symbols of fertility, might refer to her own gardening activities. The detailed attention to the bird, plants, scenery, telescope, and complicated poses attests to Peale's encyclopedic range of interests.

Oil on canvas, 1.066 x 1.529 m (42 x 60 1/4 in.)
Gift of Morris Schapiro 1966.10.1



Edward Savage

American, 1761–1817 (Worked in Britain, 1791–1831)

The Washington Family, about 1790–1796

When George Washington married Martha Custis, she was a wealthy widow. In 1781 the couple adopted her orphaned grandchildren, Eleanor and George. Edward Savage's nine-foot-wide picture is the only group portrait developed from life sittings of America's first "First Family." In 1789–1790 the Washingtons posed for studies in New York City.

From 1791 to 1794 Savage lived in London and did not resume work on the huge oil painting until he returned to the United States. On 20 February 1796 he advertised *The Washington Family* as the main attraction at the Columbian Gallery, his private museum in Philadelphia, where visitors could see "The President and Family, the full size of life." Engravings after this image earned the artist a fortune, as did the entrance fees collected from his frequent exhibitions of the canvas.

Savage's catalogue states that Washington's uniform and the papers beneath his hand allude to his "Military Character" and "Presidentship." With a map of the District of Columbia in front of her, Martha is "pointing with her fan to the grand avenue," now known as Pennsylvania Avenue. Because Savage had never seen Mount Vernon, he added imaginary elements such as marble columns and a liveried servant. The formal symmetry derives from British portraits in the Grand Manner, but the stiff postures and awkward anatomy reveal Savage's limited experience.

Oil on canvas, 2.136 x 2.842 m (84 1/8 x 111 7/8 in.) Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1940.1.2



Thomas Sully

American, 1783–1872 (Worked in Britain, 1809–1810)

Captain Charles Stewart, 1811–1812

During the half-century from the War of 1812 to the Civil War, American connoisseurs judged portraits by the romantic, even theatrical, standards set by Thomas Sully. Gifted with the ability to make the difficult look easy, Sully dashed off both flattering likenesses and scenes from history with equal facility. During his eighty-nine-year life, he documented his incredible productivity in an account book that lists 2,631 paintings, of which 2,017 were portraits.

According to Sully's *Register*, the artist's second full-length, life-size portrait was *Captain Charles Stewart*, begun on 10 June 1811. Having recently won victories over French privateers, the handsome naval officer commissioned the work as a gift for his mother. The canvas was finished on 13 April 1812. A few months later, Stewart took command of the *Constitution*, which already had acquired the nickname "Old Ironsides" after a British cannonball bounced off its oak hull. Neither ship nor commander, who eventually was promoted to rear admiral, ever lost a battle. Therefore, "Old Ironsides" came to identify them both.

Sully lit the thirty-three-year-old captain with a fiery orange glow and depicted his feet braced apart as though planted on a rolling deck. Stewart's thumb aggressively presses down on a nautical chart, while a world globe, underneath the tablecloth, alludes to navigation.

Oil on canvas, 2.370 x 1.492 m (93 1/4 x 58 3/4 in.) Gift of Maude Monell Vetlesen 1947.4.1



Thomas Sully

Lady with a Harp: Eliza Ridgely, dated 1818

Born to an English family of actors, Sully was nine years old when his parents brought their theatrical company to the United States. Trained by minor American painters, he studied in London briefly during 1809–1810. Sully's paintings reveal his upbringing in the dramatic arts. Here, he transformed the daughter of a Baltimore merchant into a personification of gentility, posed before a breathtaking sunset.

Fifteen-year-old Eliza Ridgely dreamily plucks the strings of an imported pedal harp. Her empire satin gown is accented by a regally draped shawl. In reality, however, it is doubtful whether Eliza actually had fingers so slender, arms so lengthy, or torso and thighs so svelte. Sully later admitted, "From long experience I know that resemblance in a portrait is essential; but no fault will be found with the artist, (at least by the sitter,) if he improve the appearance."

In 1828, ten years after posing for Sully, Eliza married John Ridgely, a cousin who was the son of a Maryland governor. Other portraits that sometimes hang in this room depict members of her family. Distant relatives posed in 1788 for *Benjamin and Eleanor Ridgely Laming* by Peale. Sully's *Governor Charles Ridgely of Maryland*, dated 1820, depicts her father-in-law at age sixty. (The National Gallery often changes the selection of its seventeen portraits by Thomas Sully.)

Oil on canvas, 2.145 x 1.425 m (84 3/8 x 56 1/8 in.) Gift of Maude Monell Vetlesen 1945.9.1



John Trumbull

American, 1756–1843 (Worked intermittently in Britain, 1780–1804)

Patrick Tracy, 1784/1786

Trumbull's *Patrick Tracy* reveals a young American painter adjusting to the Grand Manner of British portraiture. The subject, a shipowner and merchant from Newburyport, Massachusetts, stands on a shell-strewn beach amid crates and barrels of trade goods. Tracy's weathered face betrays his seventy-some years and typifies the straightforward realism of an American colonial artist. His body, however, with its delicate fingers and slender calves, approaches the idealized proportions advocated by British society portraitists.

Murray Trumbull's account book for 1784 explains the contrast between honesty and flattery; "Whole length of Mr. P. Tracy (father of Nat) leaning on an anchor — head copied." Thus while Patrick remained in America, his son arrived in London on business and lent the artist a portrait of his father from which to work. Trumbull then invented the body according to the sophisticated methods he was acquiring in Europe.

This patronage Trumbull, the son of a Connecticut colonial governor, received a great honor from his teacher Benjamin West while working on this life-size likeness. West, abandoning the idea of painting scenes from the Revolutionary War, turned the novel idea over to his pupil. Trumbull's carefully researched depictions of American patriotic history culminated in his world-famous murals in the Rotunda of the U. S. Capitol.

Oil on canvas, 2.325 x 1.337 m (91 1/2 x 52 5/8 in.) Gift of Patrick T. Jackson 1964.15.1



Benjamin West

American, 1738–1820 (Worked in Britain, 1763–1820)

Colonel Guy Johnson and Karonghyontye (Captain David Hill), 1776

The British superintendent of northeastern America's six Indian nations, Guy Johnson commissioned this impressive portrait in 1776 while in London to secure that royal appointment. Sailing from Canada, Johnson must have been accompanied by his close friend Karonghyontye, a Mohawk chief who also went by the English name of David Hill. The alliance between British forces and several Indian tribes seriously threatened the rebel colonists' chances of victory during the Revolutionary War.

For this likeness, Benjamin West devised a complex allegory. To signify Johnson's role as ambassador to the Indians, his red-coated uniform is equipped with moccasins, wampum belt, Indian blanket, and Mohawk cap. Karonghyontye points to a peace pipe, while Johnson grasps a musket. This suggests that harmony between Europeans and Indians will be maintained at all costs. The concept of cooperation extends to the background, where an Indian family gathers peacefully before a British military tent.

West claimed that Pennsylvania Indians had taught him to mix paints from berries and clays when he was a child. A notably diplomatic man, he served George III as a court painter while urging the king to grant independence to the colonists! (West's historical and religious pictures hang in the adjoining Gallery 61.)

Oil on canvas, 2.030 x 1.380 m (79 3/4 x 54 1/1 in.) Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1940.1.10