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The Craft of Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century America

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College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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THE CRAFT OF PORTRAITURE IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

A Thesis
Presented To
The Faculty of the Department of American Studies
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree Of
Master of Arts

by
Anne M. Fuhrman
1992
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Approved, April 1992

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Encouragement for a project of this sort often comes from varied sources: from helpful research librarians and enthusiastic museum personnel; from learned scholars and tolerant friends. Even family members, who seemed unfailingly to know when the question, “Did you finish your thesis yet?” would cause the most irritation, served as some kind of stimulus. I feel fortunate to have benefited from all of their expertise and guidance. I am especially grateful, however, to Richard S. Lowry for his thoughtful reading of this essay, and to Walter P. Wenska for his astute and helpful comments. I would also be remiss if I neglected to acknowledge Thomas J. Schlereth, whose essay “Artisans and Craftsmen: A Historical Perspective” revived my enthusiasm just when I was certain this project was doomed.

Finally, and particularly, I would like to thank my advisor, Mr. Graham Hood, who thought this was a good idea from the beginning.
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ABSTRACT

This essay examines pre-Revolutionary American portraits as products of a genre which encompassed both written and painted works. Beginning with a discussion of the historical interpretation of poetry and painting as sister arts, the thesis uses comparative analyses of five works to examine the artistic development and social applications of verbal and painted portraits in eighteenth-century America. Finally, the essay argues that the process of portrait-making was an interactive one involving the subject, the artist, and the viewer.
A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Spelling, grammar, and punctuation were often inconsistent in the eighteenth century, as evidenced by the primary source quotations in this essay. I believe the flavor and color of an age are captured visually as well as verbally in its language, and so I have neither cluttered the text with [sic]s nor made any attempt to modernize these idiosyncrasies.
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PREFACE

My father took me to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the first time when I was twelve. He had spoken often of a Rembrandt portrait which was one of the most expensive purchases the Museum had ever made, and which had generated such public interest that people lined up to see it unveiled. I knew Rembrandt painted portraits of men like those on Dutch Masters cigar boxes, but I'm afraid that my interest in Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer was something less than aesthetic. Seeing it for myself made me feel hip and culturally aware, in step with sophisticated New Yorkers. I liked that.

I didn't really pay attention to another portrait until I participated in a study abroad program when I was twenty. For four months I lived in England's Wroxton Abbey, which had been the country home of Frederick, Lord North. Prime Minister from 1770 to 1782, Lord North spearheaded passage of the Boston Port Bill and was one of the most hated men in the American colonies. In 1983 he gazed haughtily from a canvas hung over the back staircase, a swollen and pompous coot, while I laughed at the exquisite irony of twentieth-century American students swarming through his pastoral retreat. At the same time that I sniggered at Lord North, I fell in love with the suave and dashing Robert Orme, Captain of the Coldstream Guard. Security personnel in London's National Gallery would sigh and shift their weight as I gazed, smitten, at the Reynolds portrait. New York City savvy had been vanquished by romance.

From start to finish, portraits have always demanded a personal response: from the artist’s attempt to capture a sitter to the viewer’s reaction to the completed work.
Every level of interaction is governed by subtle, often unconscious, social and individual standards and ideas. In each of the above examples, I responded to a portrait in a personal, emotional way. My art historical ignorance precluded any more sophisticated reaction. Responses to portraiture in eighteenth-century America could not have differed in form too radically from mine—although verbally sophisticated, colonial Americans were not trained art historians. Rather than noticing a stylistic similarity with earlier Dutch genre paintings, and without remarking on the differences between Italian painterliness and American linearity, an eighteenth-century Bostonian was probably more likely to react to a portrait on an emotional or socially correct level. The success or failure of a portrait, in fact, depended on some kind of interaction with a viewer or viewers. The process of creating a portrait was threefold: the artist looked at a sitter; the artist translated a mental image into a physical representation; the completed portrait catalyzed a mental reaction in a viewer. Our challenge is to look at a portrait and complete the creative process begun by an artist 250 years ago. We have to allow ourselves the intellectual pleasure of an imaginative connection to early American portraiture, and stop struggling to fit it all into some great and grand art historical framework. To deny ourselves this opportunity is to forever leave these works half-finished.

To do this successfully, however, we have to alter our patterns of thinking. We have to change our very concept of art. For more than one hundred years artists have routinely challenged us to see the world in unaccustomed ways. Art has become an intellectual, elitist game as contemporary artists push our perceptions to extremes, daring us to see “Art” in everything from blocks of unmodulated color to assortments of fluorescent lighting tubes. The artist is now a social antagonist around whom we tiptoe warily.

After so many years in our collective unconscious the visionary essence of art is
not easily dismissed. But we must do so if we want to view early American portraiture in an appropriate light. Although we can never hope to see eighteenth-century portraits with eighteenth-century eyes, if we study the social parameters which shaped the concept of portraiture we can approximate the conditioned response of an eighteenth-century viewer. We can learn to regard a portrait as a pragmatic, socially useful, utilitarian object—which is often beautiful enough for us to call it Art. We should begin by expanding our focus to include a type of verbal portrait endemic to the eighteenth century: the funeral elegy. Like the painted portrait, the elegiac poem is a succinct, artificially structured character sketch, the product of a well-established tradition. Considering the two forms together would have seemed natural to the eighteenth-century mind, which tended to focus on similarities among the arts, rather than on the differences which we exploit today.

My reasons for choosing the five poetic and painted portraits which constitute the focus of this essay were, appropriately I think, completely personal. I wanted an academic excuse to fill my eyes with the luscious silks and satins painted by John Singleton Copley. Benjamin Church’s elegies were longer and more interesting than most of the others I read, and like Copley he lived and worked in New England in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. The challenge of conducting a parallel study of poetry and painting unnerved me enough that I reluctantly decided to limit myself to portraits with similar subjects; as much as I wanted to write about Copley’s Mary MacIntosh Royall and Elizabeth Royall or his breathtaking Henry Pelham (Boy with a Squirrel), the meatiest elegies I could find were about ministers. This essay should not be read as a study of eighteenth-century religious portraits.

I realized later my choices did have some scholarly logic: Copley and Church were among the most commercially successful artists of their day. This does not necessarily imply aesthetic superiority, simply that their work satisfied a popular demand,
and so may be regarded as quintessential eighteenth-century American portraiture. If we examine the internal art historical traditions and the external social demands which shaped their work we can discover not only what portraitists tried to accomplish but also what consumers expected of these works. Then perhaps we can gaze a bit more sympathetically at the faces on museum walls, and recognize some of the spirit lingering in their archaic smiles and almond-shaped eyes.
THE CRAFT OF PORTRAITURE IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

However willing the eighteenth century was to link the sister arts of painting and poetry, there are some intrinsic differences we must acknowledge before we can proceed with a parallel discussion. A poem unfolds over time; it can explain something a painting can only suggest. A painting, on the other hand, has an immediacy which poetry—even "shaped verses"—can never have. Visual images are usually more accessible than words; locked behind the symbols of language, poetry bars entry to anyone unable to interpret those symbols. Although each can be said to exist only through the eyes or ears of a spectator, the nature of that existence is fundamentally different. The mind exploring a painting moves inward from the general impact to the lines and brush strokes which created it. The mind exploring a poem moves outward from the specific words and images to the overall theme. If we regard a painting as primarily a visual experience, we must consider the elegiac poem as an auditory one. Few early American printers demonstrated concern for the design of the documents they produced. Many styles and sizes of type were mixed together in one publication, and the overall quality of printing was poor. Words and the manner in which they were linked conveyed meaning;

1"Shaped verses," also called "picture poems," are poems which are printed in a shape or design appropriate for the subject. See, for example, George Herbert's "Easter Wings" or "The Altar."


the visual appearance of words on a page was rarely an issue.

Happily for this essay, these distinctions did not overly concern the eighteenth-century aesthete. Indeed, the historical tradition of unity between the arts was a long and honored one. Horace, writing in the first century B.C., proclaimed, “‘Poetry is like painting . . . there is a kind which appeals to you more when you stand near and others when you step back farther.’”\(^4\) In sixteenth-century Italy, the artist and author Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo pointed out that because hieroglyphics were pictures, writing was a type of picture-making. This link between literature and painting was brought to northern Europe by the artist and poet Charles Alphonse duFresnoy. His poem, \textit{De arte graphica}, included many of Lomazzo's ideas; it was published in French in 1668 and several English editions followed. Among Lomazzo's notions was the idea that the goal of painting was “‘to stirre up mens mindes with the emulation of . . . Glorious enterprises.’”\(^5\) This could be most easily effected through the representation of the noble deeds of noble men. Lomazzo's words reverberated throughout late Renaissance and Mannerist aesthetics, and carried straight through to the eighteenth century: in \textit{The Art of Painting after the Italian Manner}, published in London in 1704, author John Elsum answered the question, “‘To what end were painting and sculpture invented?’” with the assertion, “‘For no other reason but to record and perpetuate the Effigies of Famous Men.’”\(^6\) Such notions were so commonplace that even seventeenth-century Boston became aware of them.\(^7\)


\(^6\)Ibid., p. 421.

\(^7\)Ibid., p. 422.
England had its counterpart to Italy’s Lomazzo: Sir Philip Sidney, poet and statesman, explained in the sixteenth century that “poetry was the art of making speaking pictures.”8 Renaissance and Mannerist aestheticians insisted that any literature, but especially poetry, related directly to painting. Both media could be vehicles of instruction by depicting the “Glorious enterprises” of worthy men. From this general goal of painting, specific objectives of portraiture were refined. Portraits—whether painted on canvas, verbalized on tombstones or in diaries, or versified in poems—had practical social applications. They could commemorate specific events, highlight social positions, or honor persons’ memories upon or after death.9 “A portrait could be sent to family far away as a token of the physical presence of a loved one, or it could descend to family distant in time, providing a kind of material immortality.”10 The undercurrent of every portrait was a reminder of time’s swift passage and the transience of earthly life.11

If similarities between paintings and poems were assumed, it followed that similarities were likewise expected between painters and poets. In 1730 Mather Byles published a poem entitled “To Mr. Smibert on the Sight of his Pictures” in which he neatly outlines the similar creative processes of the poet and the painter. Alike in conception and execution, differences appear only in the nature of the finished product:

Yet, Smibert, on the kindred muse attend,  
And let the Painter prove the Poet’s Friend.  
In the same Studies nature we pursue,  
I the Description touch, the Picture you;  
The same gay scenes our beauteous Works adorn

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8Ibid., pp. 421-422.

9Ibid.


11Fairbanks, pp. 421-422.
The flamy Evening, or the rosy Morn:
Now, with bold hand, we strike the strong Design,
Mature in Thought now soften every line,
Now, unrestrained, in freer Airs surprise,
And sudden at our Word new Worlds arise;

Alike our Labor, and alike our Flame,
’Tis thine to raise the Shape, and mine the Name.  

Thirty-five years earlier John Dryden had explored the concept in somewhat more detail. His essay, “A Parallel of Poetry and Painting,” prefixed to the 1695 edition of duFresnoy’s De arte graphica, offers useful insight into the goals and motivations of the eighteenth-century artist. Both the poet and the painter, Dryden insists, want to please their audiences. They strive to do this by imitating nature: “To imitate Nature well in whatsoever subject, is the perfection of both arts; and that picture, and that poem, which comes nearest to the resemblance of Nature, is the best.” At this point we might assume Dryden means that artists who succeed in capturing an accurate, lifelike, even what we might call photographic image of nature in words or pigments are the most successful. We might assume that his words inspired painters to strive toward realism, culminating nicely in the late eighteenth-century portraits by John Singleton Copley. But how, then, can we explain public acceptance and acclaim for the works of Charles Willson Peale, which seem to present the same oval countenance on canvas after canvas? Surely, after Copley’s realism, Peale’s work must have seemed provincial at best. Suddenly we are tripping over twentieth-century assumptions; to proceed, we must recognize that what Dryden meant by “the resemblance of Nature” was not photographic realism. The basis of art, and of the pleasure it generates, he explains, is deception: “The means of this

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pleasure is by deceit; one imposes on the sight, and the other on the understanding. Fiction is of the essence of Poetry, as well as of painting; there is a resemblance in one, of human bodies, things, and actions, which are not real; and in the other, of a true story by a fiction.”

This seemingly incongruous juxtaposition of truth and fiction at the core of artistic expression was an essential of eighteenth-century aesthetics. In 1710 Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, argued “the most natural beauty in the world is honesty and moral truth. For all beauty is Truth. True features make the beauty of a face. . . . In poetry, which is all fable, truth is the perfection.” Toward the end of his essay, Dryden explains how the compilation of truths leads to a perfection not found naturally:

As truth is the end of all our speculations, so the discovery of it is the pleasure of them; and since a true knowledge of Nature gives us pleasure, a lively imitation of it, either in Poetry or Painting, must of necessity produce a much greater: for both these arts, as I said before, are not only true imitations of Nature, but of the best Nature, of that which is wrought up to a nobler pitch. They present us with images more perfect than the life in any individual; and we have the pleasure to see all the scattered beauties of Nature united by a happy chemistry, without its deformities or faults.

Strict realism, then, was neither the goal of the portrait painter nor the expectation of the viewer; each would look for “small lies to approach large truths.”

Even so, Dryden’s assertion that “that picture, and that poem, which comes nearest to the resemblance of Nature, is the best” is troublesome. The word “nature,” as

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14Ibid., pp. 128-129.


16Dryden, p. 137.

Dryden used it, is an ambiguous term referring to that which is representative, universal, and permanent, as opposed to the idiosyncratic, the individual, or the temporary. Central to the concept of portraiture, however, is the issue of resemblance; can a "resemblance," can a "likeness" be anything less than a mirror image? Perhaps not today, but most certainly in the eighteenth century and earlier. In the eighteenth century "resemblance" referred to "the external appearance, or characteristic features, peculiar to an individual or a class of persons or things." The arts and letters of the eighteenth and preceding centuries abound with examples of this focus on characteristic features of types. In fifteenth-century Germany, for example, Dürer's teacher, the artist Wolgemut, used the same woodcut print in the "Nuremberg Chronicle" to represent four different cities. The essential information—that a city was an enclosed group of many small buildings, some larger ones, and a church—is successfully conveyed by Wolgemut's generic image. In the seventeenth century, topographical artist Matthäus Merian portrayed Paris' Cathedral of Notre Dame as a lofty symmetrical building with large rounded windows. In actuality, however, Notre Dame is asymmetrical with pointed Gothic windows. Merian adapted his ecclesiastical schema to include a few particular features; like Wolgemut, he is more concerned with conveying an idea than architecturally accurate information. Three literary heavyweights of the eighteenth century provide additional evidence of the subtle difference in meaning connoted by "resemblance" centuries ago. In his long didactic poem "Charity," William Cowper writes, "The soul, whose sight all quickening grace renews, / Takes the resemblance of

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20 Gombrich, pp. 68-72.
the good she views." The soul adopts features of goodness — not unlike Merian's interpretation of Notre Dame. Joseph Addison in *The Spectator* described Satan as "gliding through the Garden, under the resemblance of a Mist." Clearly this evocative image refers solely to outward appearances; there is no intrinsic change in the nature or concept of Satan. Finally, in *Rights of Man* Thomas Paine pointedly differentiates between resemblance and reality: "[Burke] is not affected by the reality of distress touching his heart, but by the showy resemblance of it striking his imagination. He pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird." Resemblance for Paine is something less than reality; it describes external features only, without substance. Paine also introduces another idea critical to an understanding of portraiture: the role of the imagination. If we put all these examples together, we see that a "resemblance" in the eighteenth century was more of a suggestion than an actuality; that visual accuracy was not an essential component; and that the imagination necessarily participated in the encounter.

All of these concepts of truth, beauty, deception, reality, nature, and resemblance shaped the prevailing attitudes toward painted portraiture in the eighteenth century. Jean Etienne Liotard, the Swiss pastellist to whom Copley wrote asking advice, stated in his *Traité des principes et des règles de la peinture*, "'Painting is the most astounding sorceress. She can persuade us through the most evident falsehoods that she is pure Truth.'" Although Horace Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting*, first published in 1762,

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24Gombrich, p. 33.
provided reliable information about the history and appreciation of art,\textsuperscript{25} Americans not involved in the production of portraits generally paid them little intellectual heed:

The complex structure of neoclassical aesthetics was received by Americans in a passive manner; they engaged in little domestic debate about the theories of Hogarth, Reynolds or Barry. Conventions about the nature of art entered national thought but without any vigorous counterthrusting or measuring; there was little awareness of their implications and almost no directed argument about their meaning. Political theory, by contrast, received a full-scale consideration in newspapers, pamphlets, debates and assemblies; in the political sphere argument and activity interacted with benefits for both theory and practice. Thought was hewn out and shored up by empirical needs, and, as a result, American political assumptions achieved a balance, integrity, and subtlety denied to American art theory.\textsuperscript{26}

Copley wrote bitterly of the artistic ignorance of the “New England connoisseurs” who surrounded him, but he pragmatically took advantage of their indifference to perfect his craft, selling them unsuccessful compositions as well as successful ones.\textsuperscript{27} His patrons apparently did not mind. They were not shopping for works of art, but for identifiable effigies.\textsuperscript{28} If Copley’s grander aspirations, nurtured by Reynolds’ theories, caused him to disdain portraiture in favor of the nobler and more sublime history painting, economic realities persuaded him to remain in Boston until the charged political climate (his father-in-law imported the tea which was dumped into Boston Harbor) made relocation to England expedient in 1774. His own talent, the absence of serious competition, and the general affluence which followed the French and Indian War allowed Copley to earn enough from his painting to live quite comfortably on Beacon Hill, and yet there is virtually no record of any public reaction to his work. There were no exhibitions, no

\textsuperscript{25}Denvir, p. 13.


artists' guilds, and "no townsmen interested enough in artistic activities to keep informative journals." Copley complained at length about the apathy he encountered:

The people generally regard it no more than any other usefull trade, as they sometimes term it, like that of a Carpenter tailor or shewmaker, not as one of the most noble Arts in the World. Which is not a little Mortifiing to me. While the Arts are so disregarded I can hope for nothing, eith[e]r to incourage or assist me in my studies but what I receive from a thousand Leagues Distance, and be my improvements what they will, I shall not be benifitted by them in this country, neighther in point of fortune or fame.

We cannot overestimate this indifference to artistic creation. While it is true that colonial printers and booksellers kept English prints in constant supply through the latter half of the eighteenth century, indicating an obvious consumer demand, prints were purchased as much for decoration as for inspiration or information and were frequently advertised along with wallpaper. A painted portrait in eighteenth-century America was one more material possession, not inherently different from a tea service or a piece of case furniture. The creator of the product was less important than the final image; in many cases, in fact, the name of the sitter survives while that of the artist is forgotten. Similarly, elegies were often published anonymously, or signed only with the author's initials. Nevertheless, the portrait became an essential element of affluent pre- and post-Revolutionary decor. John Neal, America's most prolific early nineteenth-century art critic, wrote in his Observations on American Art, "You can hardly open the door of a best room anywhere without surprising, or being surprised by, a picture of somebody

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32 Neil Harris, p. 7.
plastered to the wall and staring at you with both eyes and a bunch of flowers.’ “

As late as 1832 Americans were happily unconcerned with painters’ artistic skill: “The finish of drapery was considered as the highest excellence, and next to this, the resemblance . . . ; I do not remember ever to have heard the words drawing or composition used in any conversation on the subject,” wrote Mrs. Trollope in her scathing American commentary.34

So it seems Americans did not particularly care who painted a portrait or how well it was done; this does not mean, however, that they adorned their walls with any face they could obtain. Resemblance was the key; Copley grumbled about it, Mrs. Trollope observed it. William Gordon, writing in the 1720s, provides valuable insight:

> Family Pictures have always been in much Esteem, because they represent to us, the Face and Countenance of our Ancestors. A Family History is a Picture of their Minds, and represents to us the noble Qualities thereof, by which they were enabled and pusht forward to atchieve great and heroick Actions; and so the one is as much to be preferr'd to the other, as the Virtues of the Mind are to the Features of the Face.35

Gordon’s bias stems from Dryden’s contention that words are more suited to instruction than visual images — these lines, after all, are taken from a verbal history of Gordon’s family — but his statements are enlightening nonetheless. The pictures are representations of the past; they engage the imaginations of the viewers and enable them to consider the stock from which they rose. A verbal history fills in the background.

Armed with these “new” old assumptions, we can consider John Singleton Copley’s portrait of the Reverend John Ogilvie, dated 1771 [fig. 1]. Completed when Ogilvie was 47, this portrait is the only one of a minister Copley painted during his six-

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34Neil Harris, p. 59.

[fig. 1]

John Singleton Copley
Rev. John Ogilvie (1724-1774)
oil on canvas
1771
50 x 40”
L1972.1

Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society, New York City
month sojourn in New York. The 50 x 40-inch canvas depicts a stout man sitting on an upholstered bench at a table with an open book. In the left background a drawn curtain reveals shelves of more books. Without knowing a thing about Ogilvie we are able immediately to identify him as a minister: Copley depicts him in clerical garb. If we think of a resemblance as a representation of a type, we see that a clergyman makes for a succinct example. Few eighteenth-century professionals were so easily recognized by their clothing; presumably Ogilvie had a say in how Copley depicted him, and he had the artist emphasize the class or group to which he belonged. We must also recognize what we don’t see: although painted when Copley was at the height of his American success, this portrait illustrates few of the decorative accessories in which Copley’s talents flourished. We see no shimmering textiles, no highly polished wood surfaces, no flamboyant use of color. American ecclesiastical portraits traditionally were simple bust portraits. Boston’s clergymen seemed to favor unostentatious portraits for economical as well as spiritual reasons: not only were the smaller pictures less expensive, they also prohibited use of the portrait as an arena for display of material possessions.36 The focus instead is on the head, the robes, the hands, the book. The robes establish the role of the subject. The head (source of intellect), the book (source of inspiration), and the hand gesturing persuasively all serve to create the character. This is less a picture of John Ogilvie, minister, than it is a portrait of a minister who happens to be named John Ogilvie. Whether or not the features of his face were accurately rendered on canvas was secondary. It is unlikely that Ogilvie himself would have demanded an exact image; this was primarily a representation of what he was, rather than what he looked like. By this time in the eighteenth century small, affordable mirrors were readily available if Ogilvie

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36Prown, Copley, pp. 73-74.
wanted to study his face. A mirror reflected a particular, a portrait reflected a type. Still influenced by the symbolic universe of the early American settlers, eighteenth-century portrait buyers avoided the particular in favor of the general, and decorated their homes accordingly.

Verbal portraiture exhibited this typological bent as well. By the early eighteenth century there were two recognizable varieties of biography: brief, sarcastic, journalistic pieces; and the formal panegyric. The latter form, which included the funeral elegy, developed from the pious hagiography of earlier centuries. Neither type was expected to produce a three-dimensional portrait, nor was either regarded seriously as a work of art. Elegists themselves admitted their portraits were idealized; they "falsified the actual for the sake of the ideal . . . lying with a glorious and patent candor." In fact, the more personalized a biography was in the eighteenth century the less likely it was to find favor with its readers. When Boswell claimed to present Samuel Johnson with "warts and all," one critic, the celebrated Mrs. Montagu of the Blue Stocking Circle, vociferously objected:

Would any man who wish'd his friend to have the respect of posterity exhibit all his little caprices, his unhappy infirmities, his singularities; these were excused by friends and intimates who[?] are soften'd by experienced kindness and demonstrated virtues but they disgrace a character to a reader as wens and warts would do a statue or Portrait to a spectator.40


40 Clifford, p. 87.
The tradition of literary portraiture as it existed in the eighteenth century depended on idealization. The seventeenth-century Protestant community was nurtured on the exemplary Life, as the clergy used spiritual biography to reaffirm the Reformed churches and to ground dogma in everyday experience. For the individual Puritan, spiritual biography provided a guide for incorporating doctrine into earthly existence; it presented a role model by illustrating the transformation of a life from the ordinary to the pious ideal. Cotton Mather carried spiritual didacticism into the eighteenth century with his 1702 biographical work, Magnalia Christi Americana. Although Mather enthusiastically dwells on man’s faults in his other writings, in Magnalia such imperfections are muted. He gives us, for example, the story of William Bradford, likening the Pilgrim to Moses. While drawing most of his information from Bradford’s own history, Mather leaves out the problems of wickedness and indifference described at the end of Of Plymouth Plantation, creating instead an idealized biography. Like Copley’s Ogilvie, the genericized minister, Mather shows us in Bradford an image of a Puritan saint.

As the eighteenth century progressed and secular humanism became more entrenched, the exemplary Life flourished—but the emphasis changed. Writers as early in the century as Mather demonstrated this shift; in “The Life of His Excellency Sir William Phips, Knt.”—a man concerned more with financial than spiritual growth—Mather attributes worldly success to divine beneficence: “Reader, now make a Pause, and behold One Raised by God!” Aware that his subject’s motivations run counter to Puritan intentions, Mather focuses on Phips’s honesty and industry, effectively

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illustrating qualities to which his readers could aspire. Interest in spiritual role models was replaced by "a desire—conscious or otherwise—to provide legendary and mythical as well as historical and biographical materials for a new society and a new political experiment."\(^43\) Piety gave way to practicality. Painter John Durand's advertisement in *The New York Journal*, April 7, 1768, reveals the artist's awareness of the social role of portraiture: "'Men who have distinguished themselves for the good of their country and mankind may be set before our eyes as examples and to give us their silent lessons.' \(^44\)

John Durand's words indicate an understanding of the intellectual relationship between art and society. An example—rather like the sound of a tree falling in a forest—cannot exist without an observer. The most saintly cleric, the most civic-minded citizen fail as role models if they aren't noticed, if they fail to engage the imaginations of their audiences. Their lessons would not be merely silent, but nonexistent. Benjamin West hoped his contemporary history paintings would inspire and instruct viewers, for "'to instruct the rising generation in honorable and virtuous deeds... are the good and great points which the historical pencil has to effect—and that can only be done, by placing before them, those bright examples of their predecessors or contemporaries, and to transmit their virtues from generation to generation.' \(^45\) Samuel Johnson, the prolific biographer of the late eighteenth century, recognized the importance of empathy to portraiture in his essay entitled, "The Dignity and Usefulness of Biography" (13 October 1750):

> All joy or sorrow for the happiness or calamities of others is produced by an act of the imagination, that realizes the event however fictitious, or approximates it however remote, by placing us, for a time, in the condition of him whose fortune


\(^44\)Saunders and Miles, p. 18.

\(^45\)Silverman, pp. 178-179.
we contemplate; so that we feel, while the deception lasts, whatever motions would be excited by the same good or evil happening to ourselves. . . . Our passions are . . . more strongly moved, in proportion as we can more readily adopt the pains or pleasures proposed to our minds, by recognizing them as once our own, or considering them as naturally incident to our state of life.46

Johnson goes on to explain why the imagination achieves empathy, why it is able to connect emotionally with circumstances or events beyond its immediate radius:

Not only every man has, in the mighty mass of the world, great numbers in the same condition with himself, to whom his mistakes and miscarriages, escapes and expedients, would be of immediate and apparent use; but there is such an uniformity in the state of man, considered apart from adventitious and separable decorations and disguises, that there is scarce any possibility of good or ill, but is common to human kind. . . . We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure.47

These lines echo the themes we discovered earlier, broadened this time to a larger generality: underneath the externals ("adventitious and separable decorations and disguises") people are alike. Examine the actions of one and you will find the motivations of all. Is it any wonder that Thomas Jefferson was able to write, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal"? Suddenly we can make sense of Copley's frequently similar poses and accoutrements, and even of Peale's repetitive images — would not similar internal characteristics suggest a similar external cast?

According to Johnson, then, a portrait succeeds when it pares away peculiarities and reveals a representative truth. Discovering this universal truth in nature was the primary goal of Augustan writers — including Pope, Addison, Swift, and Steele — in early to mid-eighteenth-century England. Benjamin Church, a popular literary figure in the northern colonies on the eve of the Revolution, modeled his own essays and poems on


47Ibid., pp. 110-111.
the diction and style of the English Augustans. His “Elegy on the Death of the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew, D. D.” [fig. 2], published in Boston in 1766, consists of fifty rhymed iambic pentameter quatrains. A portrait emerges from the confluence and development of three themes: first, the idealization of the subject; second, the solicitation of reader empathy; and third, the generalization of particular characteristics.

Growing from the tradition of the seventeenth-century exemplary Life, Church undertakes his attempt at portraiture by idealizing—nearly deifying—his subject in an effort to create a model of human virtue. This begins in the “Advertisement” prefixed to the poem; here Church apologizes for his creation, explaining that if he had originally intended it for publication “it might have appeared . . . more worthy the exalted Subject.”

Except for the title, Church never actually names his “exalted Subject” until the twenty-second stanza—almost halfway through the elegy. Earlier, however, he explains the motivation underlying his versified portrait. While he admits that glorifying the dead hardly seems worth the effort—they die, we die, even Shakespeares and Miltons die—he proclaims that all labor in “Virtue’s Cause” leads to a glorious end: the preservation of “Exemplars” for future generations. And what a model Mayhew will be: as the poet explains in stanzas twenty-three and twenty-four, Mayhew’s virtues provide “such a copious Theme, / A Theme so dazling, so divinely high” that he knows not where to begin. Instead, he reiterates his justification for this elegy: “The Good, the Wise, the Virtuous, and the Just, / Demand the Stamp of Immortality.” We praise and exalt the dead to reassure ourselves of life’s meaning; clearly the dead cannot benefit.

Church never chronicles specific incidents in Mayhew’s life (aside from some political allusions), but he leaves no doubt over the excellence of Mayhew’s character.

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Elegy on the Death of the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew, D. D.,
Who Departed This Life July 9th, Anno Domini 1766, Aetatis Suae 46.

Advertisement
The Author of the following POEM, having composed it in the Intervals of Business, designing it till towards the Close for the private Inspection of a Friend -- thinks it necessary to inform the Publick, that had he originally intended to publish it, he should have endeavoured that it might have appeared more seasonably, and more worthy the exalted Subject -- such as it is, he hopes for a candid Reception of it, not having sufficient leisure at present to introduce it into the World in a better Dress.

Elegy, &c.

Soft is my Pollio's Heart, I've mark'd the Tear
Drop after Drop succeed, a num'rous Train
To Woe's low Murmurs patient is thine Ear,
Thy Soul responsive to a Tale of Pain.

2

How oft beneath this consecrated Shed
We've nam'd the Wise, the Good, of ev'ry Clime
With home-felt Re'rence for the learned Dead,
Deplor'd thy Havock, fell Destroyer Time!

3

Full, on our Parent-Isle our Eyes revert
O'er her long List of Worthies breathe a Sigh;
Why shall Ambition seize this little Heart,
When Shakespear's, Milton's, Pope's, and Dryden's die?

4

What boots the Song, ah what avails the Meed!
To make Immortals, by the gen'rous Lay?
E'er long these Bodies to the Dust decreed,
Shall surely want the tender Tear we pay.

5

Great is the Task, and glorious is the End,
When the chaste Muse in Virtue's Cause engage;
Tis her's to patronize, protect, defend,
And hold th' Exemplars to a distant Age.

6

Deep into Times roll'd by -- to dart her Ken,
At the Tribunal of her lordly Mind
T'arraign the Conduct of the mightiest Men,
Acquit, or doom the Nimrod's of Mankind.

7

To sift the Motive stript of wily glare,
And thro' each call the lurking Guilt pursue;
The Heart dissecting till the Bottom bard,
Betrays the Villain to the naked View.
8

Here 'tis no Sacriledge to burst the Tomb,
Call up the Dead, and rake the rotten Core,
To search for genuine Virtue's sweet Perfume,
Till the rank Carrion tempt her there no more:

9

Awake ye Dead! Say is the Call severe?
Ye Worms, give up your vile and loathsome Prey,
Like the last Clarion to the guilty Ear,
The Ghosts shrink backward, and detest the Day.

10

What have ye done? omnipotent in Rage
When awful Conscience sounds the dread Alarm,
Can ye one Virtue in your Cause engage?
The rifting Thunder of his Voice to charm,

11

What have ye done to deck th' historic Lore,
To bribe Posterity, and snatch your Name,
When rigid Justice scanns your Conduct o'er,
From that avenging Demon, endless Shame?

12

Nay, could ye bribe with Crowns, can M--f--d's Tongue,
Or M--n's murd'rous Arm which scourg'd Mankind,
Corrupt the Judgment, or emblazon Wrong,
Before that sacred Umpire, mighty Mind!

13

Whence then this Lust to praise? that not a Knave,
Tho' Dupe to Folly, Meanness, Vice abow'd,
Can kennel with his Vermine in the Grave,
Or hide his leprous Carcase in the Shroud:

14

Tho' not one Virtue, not one spark of Worth,
No close Acquaintance with fair Wisdom sought,
In his long Roll of Follies since his Birth;
No gleam of Grace illum'd a single Thought!

15

But some officious Bard, intent to twine,
A Wreath of Glory, licks him o'er with Care;
While stern Remembrance blasts the dark Design,
Still bids his Follies live, and damns him there.

16

Commend the dead! I would not be severe,
E'en tho' th' imperfect Heart to Vice decline;
Sure human Frailties claim a feeling Tear,
If Virtue's genuine Ore, possess the Mine!
17
This Candour bids -- who errs without Design,
His Follies slumber as committed not,
The erring Heart is close allied to mine,
I ask of Charity -- be such forgot. --

18
Come then, thou honest Muse! tho' coy, sincere,
Nor foul Suspicion on thy Verse shall light,
Resolv'd in Truth, O make that Truth appear,
That Fear, nor Tenderness have dim'd thy Sight;

19
Tho' all the Choir averse the Lay disown,
Be Truth's rough Canon reverently read;
Praise when deserv'd, out-lives the mould'ring Stone,
Entails Remembrance, and embalms the Dead:

20
Spirit of Truth! discriminating Guide!
The humane Heart submits to thy Controll;
Thy Residence, if guiltless; far and wide,
Thou know'st th' ambiguous Warpings of the Soul;

21
Those Mists of Passion which mislead, chastise,
Undazzled, unseduced, assist my Care,
(Pomp's flitting Meteor quench beneath these Eyes,)
To Speak of Men and Manners as they are:

22
MAYHEW, this Verse be thine! as in some Wild,
Dark, devious and unknown; the tim'rous Swain,
Wanders irresolute, with Horrors thrill'd,
Now stops, Despairs, now Hopes, and walks again:

23
Thus in Suspense my struggling Thot's contend,
O'er Mayhew's Praise, unfathomable Deep,
I view the Ocean on the Margin's End,
And clinging to the Verge, delay the Leap:

24
But shall those Virtues, such a copious Theme,
A Theme so dazling, so divinely high;
Shall they be mention'd with a cold Esteem,
Or pass like common Things unheeded by?

25
Forbid it awful Guardian! of the Dust
Of slumb'ring Virtue; GENIUS thou art he!
The Good, the Wise, the Virtuous, and the Just,
Demand the Stamp of Immortality:
Mayhew! In thy fair Bow'r of Bliss enthron'd,
Bold in the Front of Angels rise erect,
Had'st thou one Fault unwept, or unattorn'd?
Hadst thou one Virtue clouded with defect?

Mayhew! stand forth from every Seraph there,
Claim Admiration from the few forgiven,
A mortal Being never rose more fair,
Nor shone more radiant mid'st the Files of Heav'n:

Why need we mark that all-discerning Mind,
That shot thro' Science with a Light'nings Speed,
That left Tuition's gradual Streams behind,
And snatch'd Repletion at the Fountain Head?

Why need we note that Dignity of Soul,
That 'stablish'd Reason's controverted Sway?
Thrice sacred Guide! we yield to thy Controll,
Nor fling the Honours of Mankind away:

Hail Ray celestial! rescued from the Yoke,
Of Hood-wink'd Zealots, we assert thy Claim;
Out purblind Folly! god-like Mayhew spoke,
And Reason, and Religion are the same:

Why need we note his Honesty of Heart,
That every Sentiment with Freedom taught,
Fix'd in his Right of Judgment, scorn'd to part,
From native Independency of Thought?

His earliest Joy was Liberty, for this
His Soul to labours, Watchings, Prayers he gave,
Freedom was all his Ardor, all his Bliss
His Heart turn'd Rebel at that Tho't, a Slave:

Vain the Design, and fruitless the Essay,
Tho' Duty prompt us to pourtray his Mind,
The finish'd Blessing in a nobler Way,
Lives in his learned Labours deep inshrin'd:

In vain their Waters, barrier Oceans spread,
To sever Kingdoms. Years revolve in vain,
Mayhew! thy Virtues, thro' rair Volumes spread,
O'er Time, and Space, with gather'd Glories reign:
35
But O ye happy, ye selected few!
Who to his social Heart had soft Access,
Has Science lost a Son, a Patron too?
What you have lost, I read in your Distress:

36
True sterling Genius, like you orient Sun,
A Blaze of Glory, to a Distance throws,
While private Virtues, in small Circles run,
Shed milder Influence, and a sweet Repose.

37
Friends of the Dead! I ask each conscious Breath
That felt his Goodness, universal, free,
When pain'd with Tenderness, how oft you've guest
In silent Wonder? — "such must Angels be".

38
O'er his soft Features, kind Complacence smil'd,
And plaintive Sorrow, wrung his tender Heart,
His lenient Tongue, keen Anguish oft beguil'd,
He catch'd th' Infection, and allay'd the Smart:

39
He nurs'd the Sons of Want, by his Command,
The Streams of copious Bounty hourly flow,
Till Death's stiff Palsy bound his clay-cold Hand,
Never was Mayhew backward to bestow:

40
Where'er the Buds of Genius he survey'd,
With Parent-culture he enrich'd the Soil,
The Brow of wrinkled Care, with Smiles array'd,
Assists to Labour, and rewards the Toil:

41
And thou once-envied, now compassion'd Spouse!
Whose streaming Eyes, a ceaseless Tribute shed,
While fond Reflection, still forbids Repose,
And bleeding Love still hovers o'er the Dead;

42
Say shall th' intruding Muse demand thine Ear,
Point to yon Shroud, and moralizing say?
"Suppress thy Sorrows, stop th' effusive Tear,
"Thy dear-lov'd Mayhew beckons thee away:

43
That awful Stroke which widow'd thee of Joy,
Too soon thy Virtues shall to Bliss translate,
Some future Bard, shall all his Powers employ,
To paint thy Beauties, and lament thy Fate:
Till then thine Offspring claim thy fostering Care, 
Dear lovely Pledges of a mutual Flame, 
Those infant Cherubs to thy Virtues rear, 
And crown the Blessing, with their Father's Fame:

While stor'd Remembrance pains the grateful Heart, 
In speechless Agony, see yonder Train! 
Unhappy Flock! we share a tender Part, 
Adopt the Pang, and weep him o'er again:

Yes he was good, indeed divinely good, 
The Zest of Grace enrich'd his pregnant Mind, 
O'er the inferiour World, the Victor stood, 
And trampled on the Idols of Mankind:

Blest Saint! we wonder, and at once despair, 
Such an Assemblage of Desert to see, 
Such glorious Talents are indeed but rare, 
Still rarer, such exalted Piety:

Methinks I see him with his beaming Face, 
Pour in some Seraph's Ear his wondrous Tale, 
Of mighty Power he speaks, redeeming Grace, 
While Love by turns, and rev'rent Awe prevail;

Around attent, illustrious Spirits Throng, 
Catch from his lips, the well-instructed Lore, 
Then shout, such Dictates from a mortal Tongue, 
Such Strength of Mind, they never knew before;

Then clasp the heav'nly Stranger, and with Joy, 
Wooe his Acquaintance, his Arrival bless, 
All emulous to please, their Harps employ, 
To teach the rapt'rous Song, with glad Success.
After proclaiming that “A mortal Being never rose more fair” than Mayhew, and after describing him as “god-like,” Church concludes his elegy by depicting Mayhew as superhuman, unique in goodness and piety. The three final stanzas paint a poetic vision of the Reverend Mayhew holding forth among the heavenly host, a wonder even among angels.

Exaggeration, certainly, but of a type the eighteenth-century audience, groomed as it was by “the groaning grief of Whig sentimentalism,” expected of elegiac verse. Church, however, did not rely on literary convention alone to keep his work from being dismissed as mere hyperbole. Throughout the poem, he skillfully weaves connectives between his subject and his readers, accenting their common ground. Kinship is assumed as early as stanza three, as “on our Parent-Isle our Eyes revert.” Church even creates a link between himself and his readers; in the first stanza, after describing his own grief, he explicitly includes his audience in his sorrow: “To Woe’s low Murmurs patient is thine Ear, / Thy Soul responsive to a Tale of Pain.” He compliments his readers on their sensitivity, and later builds on this presumed sympathy with lavish descriptions of Mayhew’s mourners. Church smoothly illustrates the rippling effect of grief, beginning with Mayhew’s “once-envied, now compassion’d Spouse! / Whose streaming Eyes, a ceaseless Tribute shed;” moving to Mayhew’s children, “Dear lovely Pledges of a mutual Flame, / Those infant Cherubs;” and finally encompassing Mayhew’s congregation, “Unhappy Flock! we share a tender Part, / Adopt the Pang, and weep him o’er again.”

In these stanzas (forty-one through forty-five) Church exploits the method he neatly contained in stanza one: he elicits sympathy by describing grief, and then includes his audience through a direct address (“we share a tender Part”). Yes, Mayhew is described as godlike, but still his is an image understandable to any of Church’s readers who have experienced or who can imagine sorrow. By sharing grief such readers actually become

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part of the poem. Church nicely demonstrates that this interaction works the other way as well, from his side of the page outward:

O ye happy, ye selected few!
Who to his social Heart had soft Access,
What you have lost, I read in your Distress.

In this elegy Church does provide glimpses of Jonathan Mayhew's human characteristics, and it is in these flashes that Church's assumption of an intellectual or imaginative interaction with his readers is most apparent. Rather than describing Mayhew's personal virtues Church reminds us of what we already know: “Why need we mark that all-discerning Mind, / That shot thro' Science with a Light'nings Speed” in stanza twenty-eight; “Why need we note that Dignity of Soul, / That 'stablish'd Reason's controverted Sway?” in stanza twenty-nine; and “Why need we note his Honesty of Heart, / That every Sentiment with Freedom taught” in stanza thirty-one. As in Copley's portrait of Rev. Ogilvie, we learn here as much about Mayhew— and about portraiture — by what is said as by what is left out; Church does not feel obliged to elaborate these points because he assumes the mention of Mayhew's name is enough to foster recollection of his virtues. Church uses this elegy, this verbal portrait, as a catalyst for the memories and imaginations of his audience; he avoids the particulars of Mayhew's life and allows his readers to supply their own images of brilliance, dignity, and honesty. Without a precise description, Mayhew's personality becomes a generalization. Jonathan Mayhew becomes Goodness itself.

Eighteenth-century portrait makers were not primarily concerned with psychological character studies. Because their works were representational, they focused instead on external, visible qualities, sometimes to an extraordinary degree. Descriptions of physical traits and mannerisms developed markedly in eighteenth-century
biographies. But appearances and manners were expected to fit within prescribed limits, both in life and in portraits, as evidenced by Jonathan Richardson’s advice to portrait painters:

The Figure must not only do what is Proper, and in the most Commodious Manner, but as People of the best Sense and Breeding (their Character being consider’d) would, or should perform such Actions. The painter’s People must be good Actors, they must have learn’d to use a Humane Body well, they must Sit, Walk, Lye, Salute, do everything with Grace. There must be no Awkward, Sheepish or Affected Behaviour, no Strutting, or Silly Pretense to Greatness.

There was, however, fairly wide latitude in the interpretation of “Affected Behaviour,” for in England as well as in America,

Taste was undergoing a profound change. Even among the great . . . a simple, bluff directness became fashionable. Walpole, who as the most powerful statesman of the day amassed enormous wealth . . . and spent it in princely style at his seat at Houghton in Norfolk, liked to play the down-to-earth country squire, munching Norfolk apples in Parliament, and preferred to have himself painted not as a grandee, but as a sportsman in a hunting outfit.

We’ve already learned from William Gordon that portraits were not expected to record more than external appearances. Richardson also gives voice to concerns visible in many aspects of eighteenth-century life. Figures in painted portraits were clearly delineated against backgrounds in much the way that eighteenth-century buildings “maintained their integrities as shapes against surrounding landscapes, sharply differentiated from the grounds about them.” While attention may have focused on externals, there was little patience in the eighteenth century for obvious incongruity. Paul Coffin, a student from Harvard, toured western Massachusetts in 1760 and remarked on the disparity between the internal and external appearances of the houses:

50Stauffer, pp. 519-520.
51Saunders and Miles, p. 11.
53Neil Harris, p. 48.
"‘The Painting and Utensils and Furniture in the Houses,’ Coffin observed, ‘did not equal outward Appearance of their Houses in this part of the Country.’ ”54 Fifty years later, the juxtaposition of stately eighteenth-century portraits with contemporary clutter unsettled Jane Austen:

To the Great House accordingly they went, to sit the full half hour in the old-fashioned square parlor, with a small carpet and shining floor, to which the present daughters of the house were gradually giving the proper air of confusion by a grand pianoforte and a harp, flower-stands and little tables placed in every direction. Oh, could the originals of the portraits against the wainscot, could the gentlemen in brown velvet and the ladies in blue satin have seen what was going on, have been conscious of such an overthrow of all order and neatness! The portraits themselves seemed to be staring in astonishment.55

When even the incisive eye of Jane Austen focuses on the clothing in portraits we must agree (with a nod to Paul Coffin’s architectural observations) that personal physical appearance was the primary concern of both portraitists and their subjects. When botanist John Bartram planned a visit to two Virginia plantations in 1737, “a friend advised him to purchase a new set of clothes, ‘for though I should not esteem thee less, to come to me in what dress thou will — yet these Virginians are a very gentle, well-dressed people — and look, perhaps, more at a man’s outside than his inside.’ ”56

Eighteenth-century newspaper advertisements for runaway servants also focused on clothing, detailing the color and quality of the textiles while vaguely describing hair color and physique.57 In painted portraits, decades-old prints were frequently used as the compositional bases of paintings that depicted sitters in contemporary styles of clothing.58

54Breen.


56Breen.

57Ibid.

58Saunders and Miles, p. 24.
Benjamin Church demonstrated the same concern through poetic metaphor, lamenting that he did not have time to introduce his Jonathan Mayhew elegy “into the World in a better Dress.” Clothing and accessories could serve a dual function in portraits, both establishing or reinforcing a desired persona and grounding the image in a specific place and time. Copley in particular lavished equal attention on the objects in his portraits—the furnishings, drapery, etc.—as on his human subjects. Representation of personal possessions in their portraits was important to eighteenth-century sitters; Reverend Myles Cooper, the President of King’s College in New York, sent his own academic and clerical robes to Boston so that Copley could portray them accurately.\(^{59}\) By “exploring the significant external reality of these people, showing them amidst the symbols of the world in which they live[d],”\(^{60}\) Copley pinned down the images his sitters wanted to project. This focus on external objects rather than on internal personalities creates a beautiful, tactile facade, and presents each subject in his or her own social role.\(^{61}\) As Richardson said, “The painter’s People must be good Actors.”

One of Copley’s earlier portraits, that of the Reverend Edward Holyoke [fig. 3], clearly illustrates these concerns. Dated 1759-1761 and completed when Holyoke was seventy-two, the portrait shows the stout cleric in his twenty-fourth year as President of Harvard University. He is seated in a sixteenth-century Welsh chair which he gave to the University as the “official occasion chair.”\(^{62}\) Through the window on the right we


\(^{60}\)Prown, Copley, p. 70.

\(^{61}\)Ibid.

\(^{62}\)From the files of the Art Museums of Harvard University. The chair, which tips easily, is still used by Harvard’s President at graduations and similar ceremonies; it is difficult to imagine its relatively small seat comfortably accommodating Rev. Holyoke’s weighty (over 235 pounds) bulk. On a personal note, in spite of the countless
[fig. 3]

John Singleton Copley
Portrait of Edward Holyoke (1689-1769)
Oil on canvas
1759-1761
50½ x 40½"
H6

Given to Harvard College by Mrs. Turner and Mrs. Ward, granddaughters of Edward Holyoke, 1829
Courtesy of the Harvard University Portrait Collection
glimpse some of Harvard's buildings. Commissioned by Holyoke and given to Harvard by his descendants in 1829 the portrait was, initially at least, a family piece.

As expected of an ecclesiastical portrait, the format of this work is uncomplicated. But while the painted body of Copley's Rev. Ogilvie could have supported virtually any ministerial head, this portrait is inextricably linked to Edward Holyoke. It shows the cleric not as a general type, but playing a specific role—presumably the role by which he chose to be remembered. Like Ogilvie, Holyoke wears clerical garb and holds a book, but he is seated in a site-specific ceremonial chair. Instead of using a generic set of books and shelves to define the background space, Copley seated his subject by a window which frames some of Harvard's buildings. (This link with the college is especially intriguing; no such buildings survive on the campus today, nor is there conclusive documentation that they ever existed. Were they drawn from life? Or did Copley, like Wolgemut in the fifteenth century, merely intend to suggest the sort of architecture which might reasonably be found in an academic setting?) Unlike Ogilvie, who gestures toward the viewer as though to engage in philosophical debate, Holyoke gazes into space, clearly a man of his office.

Every established artistic form by its nature is the product of countless influences. There is no new art; every created object is grounded in other works, echoes other ideas, mirrors other suggestions. Even countercultural art has meaning because it is opposed to something else. The artist does not view the world with unbiased eyes; he "does not paint what he sees. Rather, he sees what he looks for... In doing so, he is governed unconsciously by what not only he, but other artists before him and around him, and the

inconsistencies, dead ends, loose ends, and tangents which my research exhumed, there were some giddy, electrifying moments that made me smile idiotically and giggle uncontrollably — like when I was allowed to sit in this chair, the very chair Copley painted. What a heartstopper!
people of his time think should be painted. In his portrait of Edward Holyoke, Copley visually confirmed the eighteenth-century preoccupation with an individual's social role. But the depiction of a subject in a fairly one-dimensional role has ancient literary roots as well, in the Bible. "After the account of Christ's parents, birth, and one or two incidents from his boyhood, the New Testament concerns itself solely with his ministry and death, presented largely through anecdotes. In a word, Christ is portrayed in the office of Messiah. Ecclesiastical biographers could hardly help being influenced by the same general outline."64

While it is true that by the mid-eighteenth century American poetry had lost some of its religious intensity, it still exhibited a strong sense of general piety and moralism.65 Jonathan Richardson advised eighteenth-century painters to study and seek inspiration from past masters,66 and writers likewise looked backward for form and content. Many writers in eighteenth-century America shared a belief in the Republic of Letters, in a transnational community existing apart from place and time, embracing in one ecumenical present the writers of Athens, Rome, London, and shortly . . . New Haven and Philadelphia. To break with this community in the name of some 'distinctively American' literature, as Emerson and Whitman demanded later, would be not a cultural necessity but an admission of defeat. . . . America . . . would soon take its place beside the great cultures of the past, but not in distinction from them.67

As discussed earlier, the funeral elegy evolved from religious biography. The most significant American biographical work of the time was, of course, Mather's

65Bowden, p. 180.
66Fairbrother, p. 127.
67Silverman, pp. 230-231.
Magnalia, and it is to this model that we can trace some elements of Benjamin Church's technique. None of Mather's subjects, for example, show any signs of character development or growth; he gives us static images, rather than living beings. Like a portrait painter, Mather unites personal detail with an existing conception of a social role, interweaving realism and typology into an aesthetic whole. Benjamin Church did the same in verse [fig. 4].

Church's elegy to George Whitefield differs noticeably from that to Jonathan Mayhew. The Whitefield elegy is shorter and more focused; there is no sense, as there is in the Mayhew elegy, that this poem was ever intended to be anything but what it claims to be. Whitefield's is a more personalized, less hyperbolic portrait.

Benjamin Church's confidence in his control of the themes and images of this poem is evident from the outset. Instead of apologetic excuses, we are met with an elegant dedication and a laudatory epigraph from Pliny. In spite of this initial praise, however, Church speaks of Whitefield with restraint, and thus delineates a more believable character. He does not deify Whitefield, as he did Jonathan Mayhew; rather, he metaphorically calls him "the Gabriel of mankind"—an appropriate characterization for an itinerant revivalist.

In stanzas three and four Church sketches Whitefield's preaching style. We see "the soft persuasive magic of his voice" counterbalanced by "the vollied thunder of his zeal," and read of a man who approached his faith vigorously and energetically. As the elegy unfolds we learn of Whitefield's missionary enthusiasm and of his poetic method of juxtaposing "virtue, in unsullied white" with "vice pourtray'd, so baneful to the sight" in

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68 Watters, p. 158.

An Elegy to the Memory of that pious and eminent servant of Jesus Christ the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield, Who departed this Life the 30th of September, 1770. Aetatis suae 56.

["We have none his equal in virtue, and will not have any his equal in glory.” Pliny’s Letters]

To the Rev. Mather Byles, D. D.

These Tears sprinkled upon the ashes of his deceased brother, are gratefully inscribed by his affectionate friend, and humble servant, the author.

[1]

Malice be dumb! now sheath thy pointless sting,
Let sick’ning Envy dart her shafts no more,
Let foul Detraction drop her Ebon wing,
And spew her poison on th’ infernal shore.

[2]

But come heav’n’s radiant Offspring! hither throng,
Behold your prophet, your Elijah fled;
Let deep distress now palsy ev’ry tongue,
Whitefield the Gabriel of mankind — is dead.

[3]

Where are his dulcet periods? Where the grace?
The soft persuasive magic of his voice?
That heav’nly harp which rung immortal lays,
And limn’d religion to the sinners choice.

[4]

Where is the vollied thunder of his zeal?
The solemn pathos of the wrestler’s prayer?
That held fierce conflict with the pow’rs of hell,
And thinn’d the dreary regions of despair.

[5]

The ice of Death has quench’d the seraph’s flame;
Mute is the tongue, that charm’d the world before:
The Grave’s strong fetters bind his precious frame,
He speaks, he pleads, he prays, he weeps -- no more.

[6]

He sprung at once, and flung corruption by,
Forsook the warfare, but to catch the prize:
Full on the crown he held his steady eye,
And storm’d the golden portals of the skies.

[7]

Blest visitant! We scarce forgive thy speed,
Scourg’d by surprize, we murmur at the rod,
And rebel fondness fain would interceed,
To tear thee from the bosom of thy God!
[8]
While smiling Angels thine arrival greet,  
And plausive Cherubs shout thy title fair:  
A world in tears shall reach thy glad retreat,  
And snatch one pang, from endless raptures there.

[9]
Forgive the tempest, should our sorrows rave,  
While o'er thy mould'ring dust our heads decline;  
We wish to glut the av'rice of the grave,  
Bid us to die, — 'tis harder to resign.

[10]
Who rear'd yon hallow'd Pile on Georgia's strand,  
And led fair science to the savage soil?  
Sacred to God, the monument shall stand,  
And tutor'd Orphans bless the builder's toil.

[11]
Who compass'd oceans, travers'd every shore,  
The busy herald of his Saviour's love?  
Heaven's swiftest envoy scarce could labour more  
Or raise such levies, to the choirs above.

[12]
Who brav'd the tempest, try'd the various clime,  
Encounter'd dangers, and embrac'd distress?  
To point our view beyond the wreck of time,  
And in that prospect, to instruct, and bless.

[13]
Who rais'd the humble, startled the secure?  
And shook proud rebels, from their gilded car?  
To plaintive Lazars shed the balm of cure,  
And with bold sceptics wag'd successful war.

[14]
Who heir'd from God, sagacity divine,  
To pierce the human heart's remotest cell;  
To drag each fell usurper from his shrine,  
And lash reluctant demons into hell.

[15]
Who cinctur'd virtue, in unsullied white,  
Embos'd with stars, and smiling heav'nly fair?  
Who vice pourtray'd, so baneful to the sight,  
The monster shudder'd at her image there?

[16]
Such Whitefield is thy praise: while here you sleep,  
And deck this shore with consecrated dust;  
O'er thy cold urn shall widow'd virtue weep,  
While pensive Angels guard the darling trust.
O thou, our Father! Pastor! Guide! and Friend!
What richer benison could'st thou bestow?
In prayer for us thy dying heart to rend,
And fall -- still struggling to redeem from woe.

Such heav'n survey'd thee with paternal care,
Swift was the summons, and with joy obey'd;
Immortal pleasures woo'd thy preference there,
And everlasting love sustain'd thy head.

Blest Saint! forever will we claim the tye,
For pious friendship, tho' ally'd to clay,
Is own'd by God, a tenant of the sky,
To blaze and brighten, through eternal day.

Thy rich remains shall shed a sweet perfume,
There shall the worthy drop the pious tear,
And cry, while bending o'er thy hallow'd tomb,
"Lord! may we love thee, like thy Servant here.

Hark! Albion groans, his poor deserted Flock,
When will the blessed wand'rer cease to roam?
How could our bosoms hear the dreadful shock,
Should his dear Jesus take our Master home?

O'er the broad margin of the western deep,
Methinks they beckon their departed Sire;
With fond impatience wait, and gaze and weep,
Till sad and faint, reluctant they retire.

Alas! your Shepherd, will no more return,
The weeping stranger generous aid supplies;
Around his dying pillow, strangers mourn,
With tears fast-falling, strangers seal his eyes.

Along these coasts his reliques shall be sought,
Some grateful hand a Monument shall raise;
Some British bard in elegance of thought,
On sculptur'd marble shall record his praise.

END
[“Tell us in what lands the ‘other’ Whitefield flourishes --
If you are able, reader, will you be worthy of the honor?
For just as lightning from the sky and faster than the east wind
Behold, I wish for the man then to hasten his flight --
Our friend is gone and pours out his soul into the air:
Who in the telling of these things would keep from tears?
And as the Prophet of old ascends to Heaven in a chariot
Blazing through the skies to rejoice in God always --
Together with the Cherubim and Seraphim on high and the saints and
those who are blessed
He delights in his own Universe -- this man we will mourn as having passed away!”]
his sermons. Church touches on Whitefield's evangelistic tour in stanzas eleven and
twelve, and imagines him dying and entering heaven with the same zest and gusto he
evinced in life:

He sprung at once, and flung corruption by,

And storm'd the golden portals of the skies.

Swift was the summons, and with joy obey'd.

We hear that he "with bold sceptics wag'd successful war" (stanza thirteen) and "lash[ed]
reluctant demons into hell" (stanza fourteen). We certainly come away from this elegy
with more a sense of the man than we did from that about Jonathan Mayhew, but even
so, it is not a fully developed character study. Like Mather's biographical descriptions,
this elegy presents us with George Whitefield as he was, not how he came to be that way.

Portraitists employ various techniques to evoke emotional responses from their
audiences. The oil painter, for example, may make his subject's eyes seem to peer
directly at a viewer. Or the moment depicted may be a particularly moving one, as in
Peale's portrait of his wife weeping over their dead child. Benjamin Church exploits the
writer's version of direct address throughout this poem, beginning in stanza two: "Let
deep distress now palsy ev'ry tongue, / Whitefield the Gabriel of mankind — is dead"; in
stanza eight: "A world in tears shall reach thy glad retreat"; in stanza nine:

  o'er thy mould'ring dust our heads decline;
  We wish to glut the av'rice of the grave,
  Bid us to die, — 'tis harder to resign.

He continues through stanza twenty-one and the Latin epilogue:

How could our bosoms hear the dreadful shock,
  Should his dear Jesus take our Master home?

  Our friend is gone and pours out his soul into the air:
  Who in the telling of these things would keep from tears?
  this man we will mourn as having passed away!

Church offsets earthly sorrow at Whitefield's departure with heavenly delight at his
arrival: "smiling Angels thine arrival greet, / And plausible Cherubs shout thy title fair."

The “Elegy to . . . George Whitefield” is perhaps the closest verbal parallel to an eighteenth-century painted portrait that exists. The subject is captured at a particular time, leaving the details of all that came before to the imagination. Like a painter working in chiaroscuro, Church metaphorically balances areas of dark against areas of light, sensations of heat against sensations of cold, movements up against movements down, shaping literary, if not psychological, dimensionality: against “the soft persuasive magic of his voice” is “the vollied thunder of his zeal”; against “seraph’s flame” is “the ice of Death”; against “virtue, in unsullied white” is “vice pourtray’d, so baneful to the sight”; and, against “Who rais’d the humble, startled the secure?” we find “And shook proud rebels, from their gilded car.” We cannot miss the similarity of this oppositional technique to the strong value contrasts of eighteenth-century American paintings:

American artists, far removed from collections of great master paintings and academies of art, received much of their awareness of art, their artistic training as it were, through the medium of black and white prints, especially mezzotints. In these, contrasts of light and dark are inevitably more pronounced than in the more subtly modulated original paintings.70

The merging of the arts is even more obvious in stanza fifteen, when we see clearly how much Whitefield himself depended on visual imagery. Church matches his own technique and his own word choices to his subject with glorious appropriateness, creating a portrait of a maker of portraits. Church is surely as successful in this piece as Whitefield ever was when he “limn’d religion to the sinners choice.”

Although the technique of the “Elegy to . . . George Whitefield” differs markedly from that dedicated to the memory of Jonathan Mayhew, the underlying purpose of commemorating the dead and delineating a role model is the same:

Thy rich remains shall shed a sweet perfume,
There shall the worthy drop the pious tear,

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70Prown and Rose, p. 28.
And cry, while bending o'er thy hallow'd tomb,  
"Lord! may we love thee, like thy Servant here.

Benjamin Church turned the death of the charismatic George Whitefield into an opportunity to create a personalized character sketch with, he undoubtedly hoped, far-reaching influence.

Any artist who enjoys commercial success does so because he or she can produce something others want. The relationship between artist and audience is so symbiotic as to almost defy division; this was particularly true in mercantile eighteenth-century America, when painters were craftsmen and poets were journalists. Although Copley resented the aesthetic ignorance all around him and longed to explore the great picture galleries of Italy, he was reluctant to leave his lucrative business behind. Copley knew exactly what his customers wanted: "He had theories and principles about female attire that were carried out with a scrupulous elaboration, whose effect heightened the charm of the picture. The rose, the jewel in the hair, the string of pearls around the throat, were no accidental arrangement, but according to principles of taste which he thoroughly understood."\(^{71}\)

Taste. We keep coming up against that word, which represents a notion that seems to have preoccupied eighteenth-century social consciousness to an extraordinary degree. We must not overstep the bounds of taste. Joseph Addison's essays in the Spectator hammered home to a large reading public the idea that " 'the Taste is not to conform to the Art, but the Art to the Taste' (Spectator No. 29, 3 April 1711)."\(^{72}\) Tasteful art was publicly acceptable; it was shaped by elegant and refined social pressure.

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\(^{72}\)Denvir, p. 12.
Quick explanations of why portraiture was so popular in early America invariably point to its popularity in the mother country. In fact, one rich English connoisseur refused to buy a Benjamin West that he admired, precisely because there was no public interest in history painting: " 'What could I do if I had it?' " he is said to have complained. " 'You surely would not have me hang up a modern English picture in my house, unless it was a portrait?' "73

" 'Nobody paints as he likes,' writes the French artist Jean Bezaine. 'All a painter can do is to will with all his might the painting his age is capable of.' "74 Taste defined style in the eighteenth century. The style of an era frames a series of expectations within which an artist must perform if he or she is to be commercially or critically successful. In pre-revolutionary America, taste defined style, and style dictated form. External visual influences on portraiture were fairly minimal. Colonists were not terribly "familiar with a wide range and variety of human images."75 The most impressive quantity of visual art was in the burial ground, where the impact of the symbolic image must have been powerful, if only because of the overall lack of visual imagery.76 On the other hand, eighteenth-century American artists worked for a highly literate audience. Verbal description was often the only means to convey a visual image.77 If we consider the eighteenth-century portrait painter as an artist with a more

73Denvir, pp. 21-22.
74Buchwald and Roston, p. 12.
77Neil Harris, p. 47.
literary than visual background, we can understand the attempt of so many portraits to tell stories, to sum up a life with a few symbolic objects. What is so fascinating is that even writers, working in a medium that allowed for explication, depended on the single character sketch to portray men “from the days of the colic to the days of the gout. The age of reason insisted upon simplification; and simplification, destroying the complex individual, was destructive to naturalistic biography.”

Popular literature of the day—spawned by the periodical essays in the Tatler, Rambler, and Idler—“was readable, entertaining, came in small doses, used ordinary language and focused on limited, precise topics, often of a moral nature. Like the conversation piece, it was a small-scale art form.” A life should be captured—whether with brush or pen—in a few strokes. To elaborate further would not be tasteful.

In the eighteenth century the terms “craftsman,” “artisan,” and “artist” were virtually interchangeable, equally applicable to poets and painters. The eighteenth-century funeral elegy truly was a crafted work, often clumsy and unrefined. Poetry was a regular part of eighteenth-century American life; “the weekly ‘Poet’s Corner’ of newspapers in Boston or Charleston never lacked locally written pastorals, drinking songs, and satires. Verse being a popular medium of public discourse, Americans filled broadsides and pamphlets with anonymous poems on issues of the day.”

Because it was such a common category of expression, written by and about all sorts of people, the elegy—just like the painted portrait—conveyed conventional ideas in conventional language. Similarities are even more evident when we compare the techniques

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78 Stauffer, p. 529.
79 Einberg, p. 15.
80 Silverman, p. 47.
81 Draper, p. vii.
employed by each type of portraitist.

To begin a discussion of technique we must begin in the mind of the artist. A portraitist begins with the idea of a portrait as defined by the society around him; specific visual impressions are, in effect, applied to a pre-existing format. Artists record "what they believe they see, are trained to see, or feel they ought to see with whatever technical means they possess." Even then, the artist is subject to the limitations of his medium; "he . . . is strictly tied to the range of tones which his medium will yield." Dryden extensively articulates the social norms of portraiture, directing as he does the vision of portraitists: "In portraits, the painter will not take that side of the face which has some notorious blemish in it; but either draw it in profile . . . or else shadow the more imperfect side. For an ingenious flattery is to be allowed to the professors of both arts [i.e., painting and poetry], so long as the likeness is not destroyed." Dryden also argues that any element of a portrait which does not contribute to the overall effect should be eliminated, but concedes finally that only the poet or painter can judge what must be emphasized and what subdued.

Somewhere in the midst of these goals of portraiture, of course, the pen must touch the page and the brush, the canvas. According to the eighteenth-century anatomist Pieter Camper,

the portrait painters of the present day generally describe an oval upon their panel before the person to be painted sits to be drawn, make a cross in the oval, which they divide into the length of four noses and the breadth of five eyes; and they paint the face according to these divisions to which it must be

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82 Gombrich, p. 73.
83 Fairbanks, p. 454 note.
84 Gombrich, p. 36.
85 Dryden, pp. 125-126.
86 Ibid., pp. 139, 151.
accommodated, let the proportions themselves be ever so much at variance.\textsuperscript{87}

Similarly, the poet worked within a highly artificial framework:

\begin{quote}
The moral . . . is the first business of the poet, as being the groundwork of his instruction. This being formed, he contrives such a design, or fable, as may be most suitable to the moral; after this he begins to think of the persons whom he is to employ in carrying on his design; and gives them the manners which are most proper to their several characters. The thoughts and words are the last parts, which give beauty and coloring to the piece.\textsuperscript{88}
\end{quote}

Elegists often alluded to the Pauline pattern of repentance, vocation, and glorification in their portraits as they strove to render all that was most imitable in the lives of their subjects.\textsuperscript{89} Just as the elegist focused on religious devotion and its consequent pious and selfless acts, so too did the portrait painter look to “the Principle Parts, viz they head and hands. . . . For in Portrait Painting those are they Parts of Most Consiquence, and of Corse ought to be the most distinguished.”\textsuperscript{90}

Artists could not escape the functional roles assigned to portraiture by eighteenth-century consumers. But those purposes could and obviously did vary from case to case, even within the oeuvres of individual artists. No portraitist could attempt to duplicate a singular effect time after time; the distinct personalities of the sitters simply would not allow it. Church and Copley were attuned enough to the times and skilled enough at their craft to modify their stylistic strategies to accommodate particular individuals. Following Alexander Pope’s urging, they had to know what they wanted to say before they could determine an appropriate way to express it:

\begin{quote}
True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{87}Gombrich, p. 171.
\textsuperscript{88}Dryden, pp. 127-128.
\textsuperscript{90}Letters, p. 57.
"Tis not enough no harshness gives offense,
The sound must seem an echo to the sense.91

Friendly and accessible Thomas Cary [fig. 5], for example, is an easy man to like. His mobile expression—the arched eyebrows, the hint of a smile—hovers on change, to grin perhaps, or even to laugh. An amiable young man in comfortable surroundings, clearly at ease with our company, Thomas Cary turns sideways in his chair, as though he might jump up to get us a seat or offer us coffee. He may even nudge us with his elbow and say, “Call me Tom.” We’re already in his home, after all. And for heaven’s sake the man is sitting there in his dressing gown.

Some might argue that such projection is pointless; but Copley presents the Rev. Thomas Cary to us on such an intimate level it would seem insulting to both painter and sitter to pretend otherwise. Neither Copley nor Thomas Cary attempts to hide Cary’s profession; the minister’s collar is clearly visible. Although conveyed casually and informally, the silent lessons of Rev. Cary’s portrait are as sonorous as those of Holyoke’s and Ogilvie’s. In his private life, Cary obviously appreciates the sorts of things that we do: a comfortable chair, a good book, a gorgeous satin robe. But even here, in the inner circle to which only his closest friends would seemingly have access, Cary is aware of what he is. We cannot miss that; Copley gives us an arresting face, and just beneath that smile is the telltale collar. Cary’s fingers are interlaced, as if in relaxed prayer. But Cary is not Ogilvie, the symbolic cleric. He is not Holyoke, surrounded by the achievements of a lifetime. Thomas Cary is a real man, who has chosen to be a servant of God. His youth, expression, and the restrained dynamism of his pose call to the viewer on an emotional level, tempered by intellectual reminders of his social role. Like the New Testament parables, the Rev. Thomas Cary utilizes vernacular symbols to

[fig. 5]

John Singleton Copley
The Rev. Thomas Cary of Newburyport
oil on canvas
1773
50 x 40¼"
57.67

Gift of Mrs. Richard Cary Curtis
Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
tell a tale of Christian service.

Our attitudes shape our perceptions. Expectation creates illusion; without an idea, however vague, of what we might see we could never make sense of the lines, colors, shadows, and shapes which we do see.\textsuperscript{92} When a summer thunderstorm knocks out the electricity in our homes we stumble through familiar rooms in darkness, "as objects imperfectly discerned take forms from the hope or fear of the beholder."\textsuperscript{93} We cannot escape from our own mental set; we can't help but approach portraits with certain expectations. So did eighteenth-century viewers. We must, however, recognize the differences between their expectations and ours and adjust our eyes accordingly. There was no notion of art for art's sake in colonial America; a portrait was more than an attractive face on a wall or a few lines of verse on a broadside. A portrait was a tool, a reference point, a catalyst. An eighteenth-century viewer of a portrait played as active a role in the creative process as either the artist or subject; we, as twentieth-century viewers, must never forget that.

To appreciate eighteenth-century portraiture we must shift our expectations. We must do the work we have long since left to the artist. Contemporary artists share with us their visions: Picasso rearranges parts of an old bicycle and shows us a bull's head; Lichtenstein shows us art in comic books; Oldenburg, in clothespins; Schnabel, in smashed crockery. We will never understand eighteenth-century portraiture if we hang around waiting to be entertained by a presentation of artistic vision. We have to do the thinking; we have to remember that each portrait represented a living person, not an artist's conjuration. By no means am I suggesting that Copley, Church, Peale, and all the others were lacking artistic sensibility; clearly they were able to guide and direct the

\textsuperscript{92}Gombrich, pp. 204, 186.

\textsuperscript{93}Johnson, p. 348.
responses of their audiences. But the act of creating a portrait in the eighteenth century depended on involvement from someone on the other side of the canvas or page. This dependence could even work to the artist's advantage, according to Roger de Piles: "'the spectator's imagination . . . pleases itself in discovering and finishing things which it ascribes to the artist though in fact they proceed only from itself.' "\textsuperscript{94}

Depending on the skill of the artist behind it, a portrait will either catch our attention or not. Our emotional response during those first few seconds will determine whether we'll pause to consider the face before us or move on. If we choose to linger we must encourage our minds to wander, to speculate on the personality, intelligence, and taste of the sitter; and to discover how the artist prompted us to react as we have. Eighteenth-century artists and sitters would have expected no less of us, and were willing to gamble on a favorable response. As Jonathan Richardson wrote in 1715, however, they knew it could go either way: "'Upon the sight of a Portrait, the Character, and Master-Strokes of the History of the Person it represents are apt to flow in upon the Mind, and to be the Subject of Conversation: So that to sit for one's Picture is to have an Abstract of one's Life written, and published, and ourselves thus consign'd over to Honour, or Infamy.' "\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{94}Gombrich, p. 199.

\textsuperscript{95}Saunders and Miles, p. 45.
AFTERWORD

One wintry day, years before I gave any serious thought to portraiture, I wandered Manhattan’s gray streets with a colleague. “If you could have your portrait painted by any artist who ever lived,” she asked, “whom would you choose?”

My criteria for choosing a portraitist would be very different from those exercised by eighteenth-century consumers. Would Copley portray me behind a desk swamped with paperwork, a copy of Dorothy Dudley’s *Museum Registration Methods* at my elbow? Would an elegiac poem about me begin, “There once was a blonde with a Chevy”? What horrifying notions.

Today, while fashion consultants argue over less being more or more being better, celebrities across the country bare the most intimate details of their lives in autobiographical accounts. Provocatively “unauthorized” biographies tell all, usually in the most voluminous fashion. This hemorrhagic impulse exemplifies just one of the cultural differences we have to overcome if we seek involvement with eighteenth-century portraiture. In the eighteenth century a life could be represented by a few lines of a pen, a few strokes of a brush. Details were not spelled out—as we’ve seen, popular poetry was dotted with incomplete and abbreviated words—because of a basic assumption of commonality, an assumption that viewers would understand the references which time has made opaque. Overall simplicity allowed for an exquisite focus on a few key details. The tactile quality of Thomas Cary’s dressing gown and the description of George Whitefield’s preaching style ultimately spring from the same impulse: to record distinctly individual elements of the subject’s life. With a bit of detail here, and a bit more over
there, we the viewers are left to fill in the blanks.

Perhaps it is futile after more than two hundred years to attempt to interact with these portraits. Topical references are lost on us. We rarely enjoy the luxury of looking at portraits in an appropriate physical context. Pigments have altered over time; overzealous conservators have stripped portraits of tonal depth. Such problems will affect interpretation no matter what scholarly approach is taken, forcing the art historian and the literary analyst down the narrow path between reasonable extrapolation and wild conjecture. There is a great deal of comfort in traditional art historical analysis; we know what came before, we can see what came after, all we have to do is figure out how this period bridges the two. The danger of this type of analysis, I believe, is that it encourages us to impose structure and order where frequently there was none; in so doing, we can lose the excitement of simultaneous but conflicting trends and contrary opinions. This approach has become so familiar, however, that it can be rather unsettling to swoop down from a bird's-eye view to a head-on perspective. Our twentieth-century minds make misinterpretation a constant possibility. The key is to concentrate on the process of portraiture, to consider why artists saw what they did and how they make us see the same things. If we allow our minds to wander across the arbitrary barriers we have erected between media we can feel our understanding of eighteenth-century American culture expand as if with a breath. And if we find the signposts the artist has given us and pursue the directions they indicate we can share the perception of another place and time. We can learn to see what they saw.
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