

Voltaire (Francoise Marie Arouet) (1694-1778), 1802

Samuel McIntire (1757-1811)

wood

15 (h) (38.10)

inscribed, on base: 'Voltaire'

Bequest of William Bentley, 1819

Weis 131

Hewes Number: 137

Ex. Coll.: Commissioned by the donor, 1802.

Exhibitions:

1957, 'Samuel McIntire,' Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts.

1969, 'The World of Voltaire,' University of Michigan Museum of Art.

1977, 'Landscape and Faction: Spatial Transformation in William Bentley's Salem,' Essex Institute, no. 19.

Publications:

'The Editor's Attic,' The Magazine Antiques 28 (October 1935): 138.

Fiske Kimball, Mr. Samuel McIntire, Carver: The Architect of Salem (Portland, Me.: Southworth-Anthoensen Press, 1940), 138-39, fig. 363.

Nina Fletcher Little, 'Carved Figures by Samuel McIntire and His Contemporaries,' Essex Institute Historical Collections 93 (April-July 1957): 196, fig. 49.

Like many educated Americans of his time, the Reverend William Bentley (cat. 8), was an admirer of Voltaire, the eighteenth-century French philosophe. Bentley commissioned this bust, for which he paid \$8, in 1802 from Samuel McIntire, the renowned Salem architect, housewright, and woodcarver.¹ It entered the American Antiquarian Society's collections as part of the Bentley bequest in 1819.

Voltaire was born in Paris, but at the age of thirty, after being jailed twice for writing tracts against the government and for dueling, he was exiled to England and spent the next two years socializing with English writers and intellectuals. After he returned to France, he continued to write political tracts and used his sharp wit to create some of the most remarkable plays, poems, and novels of the eighteenth century. A diplomat and advisor to the king of France, he

wrote histories, dramas, scientific books, and novels. Candide, or the Optimist (1759), remains one of his best-known works. His voluminous correspondence with authors, politicians, and a long line of lovers is peppered with commentary on the social hierarchy of Europe, as well as gossip, poetry, and caustic remarks. Bentley's extensive library included several volumes of Voltaire's writings, among them Dictionnaire Philosophique (1764) and a memoir of Louis XV.²

Bentley paid McIntire the same price he had paid four years earlier for a McIntire bust of John Winthrop (cat. 155). The two carvings are of the same scale and have similar bases, suggesting that Bentley and the artist envisioned them as a pair. The Voltaire bust, with its detailed delineations of the subject's face and costume, is more successful as a carving than the somewhat stiff Winthrop and may have been based on an English porcelain bust of the philosopher.³

McIntire made few portrait busts such as those he created for Bentley, but he did carve a portrait of Benjamin Franklin and a profile of George Washington as features on functional objects such as signposts and gates. Other examples of his work include commissions from ship owners to create decorative figureheads and stern boards for their vessels. He also carved furniture and designed architectural elements such as mantle pieces and spindled banisters.⁴

McIntire's death in February 1811 was noted by Bentley in his diary: 'This day Salem is deprived of one of the most ingenious men it had in it. He was descended of a family of Carpenters who had no claims on public favor and was educated at a branch of that business. By attention he soon gained a superiority to all of his occupation and the present Court House, the North and South Meeting houses, and indeed all the improvements of Salem for nearly thirty years have been under his eye. In Sculpture he had no rival in New England and I possess some specimens, which I should not scruple to compare with any I ever saw. To the best of my

abilities I encouraged him in this branch.’⁵

This sculpture was moved with the rest of the AAS collection twice in the nineteenth century, but it was not exhibited and apparently forgotten. Its rediscovery was described in 1935: ‘By a happy chance, an excursion into the dusty corner of one of our storerooms recently brought to light in a heap of broken and discarded plaster casts, a lost and forgotten bust of Voltaire.’⁶ In the 1920s, articles in The Magazine Antiques had stimulated research on McIntire, and the revelation of the Voltaire bust caused some excitement. The magazine’s editor hailed it as ‘Samuel McIntire’s masterwork,’ and wrote: ‘In this Voltaire bust, McIntire has conquered both his early defect of soft incertitude, and his later fault of excessive sharpness, to achieve a masterpiece unsurpassed among examples of American sculpture in wood.’⁷

¹ William Bentley Daybook Accounts, June 3, 1802, William Bentley Papers, 1666-1819, AAS Manuscript Collection. Bentley writes, ‘Paid Macintire for a carved Bust of Voltaire & had receipt. 8.00.’

² William Bentley Library Contents, ‘Works in French,’ Bentley Papers.

³ Fiske Kimball, Mr. Samuel McIntire, Carver, The Architect of Salem (Portland, Me.: Southworth-Anthoensen Press, 1940), 139. In this book, which is the most complete source on McIntire’s work, the author cites a Chelsea Derbyware figure that depicts Voltaire in a slightly different pose, but includes a medallion identical to the one carved on the base of the bust by McIntire.

⁴ Nina Fletcher Little, ‘Carved Figures by Samuel McIntire and His Contemporaries,’ Essex Institute Historical Collections 93 (April-July 1957): 194-97.

⁵ William Bentley Diary, February 6, 1811, Bentley Papers.

⁶ Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 45 (October 1935): 193.

⁷ ‘The Editor’s Attic,’ The Magazine Antiques 28 (October 1935): 139.