

William Willard (1819-1904), c. 1880

self-portrait

oil on canvas

35 1/2 x 30 5/8 (90.17 x 77.79) (framed)

Gift of the Worcester Art Museum, 1947

Weis 146

Hewes number: 152

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; at his death to his attorney Charles Tatman and executor Stephen Salisbury III (cat. 102); in 1905 presented by Salisbury to the donor.

Exhibitions:

1905-47, Worcester Art Museum, exhibited occasionally.

William Willard's father, a Sturbridge, Massachusetts, farmer and blacksmith, sent his son to Worcester to apprentice as a jeweler. After completing that apprenticeship, Willard worked briefly as a hat maker before developing an interest in portrait painting. He moved to Boston and began painting there in 1841, at the age of twenty-two. His uncle Henry Willard (1802-55) was a successful artist in Boston and may have given his young nephew some instruction in oil painting. In 1849 William Willard purchased a moving panorama of the Rhine River valley by Benjamin Champney (1817-1907), which he exhibited for a month in Boston.¹ He became part of the thriving Boston art market, exhibiting his portraits at the Boston Athenaeum in 1853 and 1856.² Willard was also one of the founders of the Massachusetts Academy of Fine Arts and an instructor at the School of Fine Arts in Boston.

Willard left Boston in 1867 and returned to Sturbridge, where he bought the Timothy Newell house, a colonial mansion on a hill overlooking the town, and built a studio on the grounds, where he painted portraits and taught drawing. A friend recalled: 'He did a large amount of work, taught pupils, and entertained innumerable friends and travelers who were interested in the artist and his work. Mr. Willard had been acquainted with many of the famous men of his time and had painted the portraits of a large number. Concerning them all he had choice bits of reminiscence which lent great interest to his own personality.'³ Willard's sitters in this period included neighbors in Sturbridge, the mayor of Worcester, Senator George Frisbie Hoar (cat. 68), and General Charles Devens of the Grand Army Post No. 10 in Worcester.⁴ He

often painted several versions of his best-selling portraits, including those of Abraham Lincoln, Charles Sumner (cat. 115), and Daniel Webster (cat. 142).

Willard sometimes employed the relatively new invention of photography to aid him in his painting of portraits. He usually sketched his sitters and then went with them to the studio of a local photographer, where he would specify the pose and lighting effect he wished to achieve, as described in a contemporary note: 'Mr. Willard's art is not the preparing of the photographic plates nor the use of the camera. He leaves these portions to the work of the photographer in whose studio the pictures are made. It is the artist's work to arrange the subject. He poses him, and then comes the arrangement of the light. This is where Mr. Willard's art comes into play. The subject is placed so that strong light strikes his head from a window seven or eight feet above, the rays pouring over the shoulder bringing out the high-light on the forehead. No other strong light reaches the subject. It is the same light as if the subject were sitting in the artist's studio.'⁵

Willard's self-portrait was among the paintings found in his studio after his death. His attorney Charles Tatman and his executor Stephen Salisbury III (cat. 102) placed more than twenty studio paintings in storage at the Worcester Art Museum in 1904. These were mostly portraits by Willard, including one of his mother and another of his wife. Also found in the studio was a landscape by Thomas Cole (1808-48), as well as a number of copies after old master painters such as Guido Reni (1575-1642) and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-69).⁶

¹ Boston Evening Transcript, May 2, 1849. The author of this article noted that Willard was painting his own panorama, a 'telescopic perspective panorama taken from Bunker Hill as a centre and comprising delightful views of the country around Boston.' There is no evidence that Willard completed this project. Advertisements for the exhibition of the Rhine panorama appear in the paper daily until June 2.

² Robert F. Perkins, Jr., and William J. Gavin, The Boston Athenaeum Art Exhibition Index, 1827-1874 (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1980), 153.

³ Extract from Worcester Magazine (December 1903), typed transcript, William Willard Papers, 1899-1912, AAS Manuscript Collection.

⁴ 'List of Portraits in Various Institutions Painted by William Willard,' c. 1895, AAS Newsclipping File.

⁵ 'An Eminent Painter,' Bangor Commercial Journal (Maine), n.d., AAS Newsclipping File.

⁶ Worcester Art Museum receipt, November 24, 1904, Willard Papers.