

John Winthrop (1587/8-1649), c. 1630/1691

Anonymous

oil on canvas (transferred from panel<sup>1</sup>)

35 x 28 3/4 (88.900 x 73.0250)

Bequest of William Winthrop, 1830

Weis 147

Hewes number: 153

Ex. Coll.: possibly owned by the sitter's grandson Adam Winthrop (1647-1700), owned by his son Adam Winthrop (1676-1743), to his son John Winthrop (1714-1779), to his son the donor.

Exhibitions:

1930, "One Hundred Colonial Portraits," Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

1935, "XVIIth Century Painting in New England," Worcester Art Museum.

1971, "Early American Paintings from the Worcester Art Museum and the American Antiquarian Society," Worcester Art Museum.

1977, "Wellsprings of a Nation," Worcester Art Museum.

Publications:

Charles K. Bolton, The Founders: Portraits of Persons Born Abroad 2 (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1919): 521.

Louisa Dresser, XVIIth Century Painting in New England (Worcester: Worcester Art Museum, 1935): 156.

The Winthrop Papers (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1947): frontispiece

Louisa Dresser, "Portraits in Boston," Journal of the Archives of American Art 6, nos. 3, 4 (July-October 1966): 17.

Louisa Dresser, "Portraits Owned by the American Antiquarian Society," The Magazine Antiques 95 (November 1969): 718.

Rodger D. Parker, Wellsprings of a Nation (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1977): 19-20.

John Winthrop was born in Suffolk, England. In 1602 he graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge, where he studied law. Nearly twenty-five years later, he was instrumental in organizing the Massachusetts Bay Colony and, although he had never seen the American continent, was elected the colony's first governor in 1629. Winthrop sailed for America in 1630, accompanied by a fleet with nearly seven hundred settlers who built their new homes in the area

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<sup>1</sup> In 1908 the Boston restorer, Hermann Dudley Murphy, transferred the painting from a panel to canvas. See Murphy's receipt of April 21, 1908, which states: "To removing from oak panel, lining, cleaning and repairing various holes, cracks, etc. in a portrait of Gov. Winthrop. \$40." American Antiquarian Society archives.

which would become Boston. By the end of the year over two thousand immigrants were living in six settlements along the coast. Winthrop presided as governor over the region until 1633 and, in the course of his residency in the Salem/Boston area, was appointed governor three more times before his death in 1649. A historian noted, "Through his guidance Massachusetts stood for a positive democracy, strong and clear-cut, more influential and more enduring than the radical and lax administration of Rhode Island or the theocratic and class-ridden government of Connecticut. In the end his traditions came to dominate all New England."<sup>2</sup>

Winthrop kept journals from 1630 to 1649 in which he recorded the legal and religious issues surrounding the management of the colony. Published in 1790 as A Journal of the Transactions and Occurrences in the Settlement of Massachusetts and the other New England Colonies from the Year 1630-1644, the journals are important documents of the earliest days of New England settlement by Europeans. Winthrop was also an author, publishing his A Short Story of the Rise, Reign, and Ruin of the Antinomians, Familists & Libertines in 1644 which explained his participation in the expulsion of Anne Hutchinson (c.1591-1643) and John Wheelwright (cat. #150) from the colony for nonconformity in 1637. Copies of Winthrop's writings, including the early publication of his journals, can be found in the imprint collection of the American Antiquarian Society.<sup>3</sup>

Both the identity of the artist of this portrait and the date it was painted have been the subject of debate by historians, family members, and art historians since the eighteenth century. The portrait arrived at the American Antiquarian Society in 1830, five years after the death of the donor William Winthrop, a direct descendant of the sitter. In the Society's book of donations the entry for July 3, 1830, is written in the hand of Isaiah Thomas, Sr. (cat. #123) and repeats the family's understanding of the provenance of this portrait: "A likeness of John Winthrop, First Governor of Massachusetts. A halflikeness as large as Life. Taken in his Life time and preserved

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<sup>2</sup> Charles K. Bolton, The Founders: Portraits of Persons Born Abroad 2 (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1919): 520.

<sup>3</sup> For additional biographical information on John Winthrop see Richard S. Dunn, Puritans and Yankees, The Winthrop Dynasty of New England (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962). Some of Winthrop's papers are preserved in the Winthrop Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society Manuscript Collection.

in the Winthrop Family until this Time."<sup>4</sup> The receipt of the gift was enthusiastically noted in the Society's Proceedings, "The portrait of the earliest and worthiest of the Governors of Massachusetts, the venerable John Winthrop, whose memory is more cherished and grows greener and brighter as the pen of the antiquarian more illustrates his good works...has been received and placed with the other memorials of the great and good."<sup>5</sup> The donor, William Winthrop, had been elected to membership in the American Antiquarian Society in 1813 and was the last surviving member of his branch of the Winthrop family.

At the time of its donation, the portrait was thought to be the work of a follower of Anthony Van Dyke (1599-1641) and was believed to have been painted from life in England around 1630. Several other portraits of Winthrop exist in the Boston area and, in 1846, historians began to ponder the possibility that copies of the earliest images were made and disseminated in the region.<sup>6</sup> The Society's Librarian Samuel Foster Haven supported the assertion that the Society had been given a life portrait. At the time, a Winthrop portrait owned by the Massachusetts State House was considered by the family and most historians to be the only life portrait of the governor extant.<sup>7</sup> The State House canvas is today considered to be a c. 1770 copy after a life portrait of Winthrop which hung in the hall but was destroyed by fire before 1750.

In 1919 the art historian Charles K. Bolton, while researching early portraits, discovered a document on which he based the theory that the American Antiquarian Society's portrait was painted in 1691 from a very early miniature of the governor. Bolton cited an October 31, 1691 letter from Wait Winthrop in Boston to Fitz-John Winthrop in England: "If you could by a very carefull hand send the litle picture of my grandfather, put carefully up in som litle box, here is

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<sup>4</sup> American Antiquarian Society Book of Donations, vol. 2, July 3, 1830, unpagued.

<sup>5</sup> Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society (October 1830): 237.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Foster Haven, "The Portrait of Winthrop," Boston Courier, September 17, 1846. For a list of the various identified copies see Bolton, 653-57.

<sup>7</sup> The original painting was probably destroyed by a fire in 1711 or 1747. The 1770 copy is illustrated in Art in the Massachusetts State House (Boston: Massachusetts Art Commission, 1986): 55.

one would copy it for my cousin Adam.”<sup>8</sup> The English miniature shows the head and shoulders of the sitter but does not include hands.

The fact that the hands in the Society’s portrait are so skillfully rendered led the art historians Louisa Dresser and Alan Burroughs to question Bolton’s theory. In 1935, they examined the portrait visually and with x-rays and concluded that, based on the high quality of the brushwork on the hands and costume details, that the Society’s portrait was probably of European origin and of a mid-seventeenth century date.<sup>9</sup> This evaluation remains unchallenged. This debate notwithstanding, the portrait is an outstanding example of seventeenth-century portraiture and, because of its condition, is considered today to be the "strongest and best likeness extant" of Governor John Winthrop.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bolton, Portraits of the Founders, 653, illus. 517. Since this book was published, the miniature has passed into the collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society. The letter also mentions the State House portrait, saying, “the grate one here had some damage in the townhouse, esppecially in one of the eyes.”

<sup>9</sup> Louisa Dresser, XVIIth Century Painting in New England (Worcester: Worcester Art Museum, 1935): 157-59, 177.

<sup>10</sup> Bolton, 653.