

GEORGE CURWIN (1683-1717), 1804
George Ropes, Jr. (1788-1819)
after original by unknown artist
oil on canvas mounted to panel
12 1/8 x 10 (30.80 x 25.40)
signed, at right: 'G. Ropes/f. 1804'
Bequest of William Bentley, 1819
Weis 44
Hewes Number: 37

Ex. Coll.: Commissioned by the donor, 1804.

George Curwin was born in Salem, Massachusetts, the grandson of a prosperous merchant and son of Jonathan Curwin, a judge at the Salem witch trials. The young Curwin attended Harvard College where he reportedly 'spent freely, broke windows and was fined for disorderly conduct.' A friend recalled that the wealthy young Curwin also 'sat up all night drinking Punch and playing at Cards.'¹ Eventually Curwin settled down to his studies and, after graduating in 1701, sought ordination. Failing to secure a desired post, he returned home to Salem and became an assistant to the Reverend Nicholas Noyes (1647-1717) at the First Church. Curwin was ordained in 1714 and served as colleague pastor with the aging Noyes for three years until his death from a 'sudden cold' at age thirty-five.

Curwin moved in elevated social circles in Salem and Boston and was described as a man 'of high reputation, of great philanthropy, of engaging manners & of excellent pulpit Talent.'² During his life, he surrounded himself with fine furniture and silver and indulged in a love of books. His large library, which was sold after his death, included works by Thomas More, Henry Bacon, René Descartes, and Jean Balzac, as well as contemporary works of history and geography.³

This image of Curwin is a copy after an earlier canvas painted by an unknown artist.⁴ In 1798 the Salem minister William Bentley (cat. 8) saw the original hanging in the home of a Curwin descendant and described it in his diary: the 'Rev'd George Curwin is in a gown of wool, with a long band of wide hem, in a high wig having a mild countenance, high forehead but not retreating, blue eye.'⁵ Six years later, Bentley commissioned this copy by the Salem painter

George Ropes, recording in his accounts: 'Paid G. Ropes' Bill for head of Curwin, Salem Minister, the painting by him. He is a dumb boy with Corné. Had receipt. \$4.00.'⁶

Ropes, a member of a prominent Salem family, was born deaf. About 1802 he became a pupil of Michel Felice Corné (1752-1845), a successful artist in Salem whom Bentley occasionally hired to copy portraits (see cats. 42 and 73). In 1802 Bentley noted in his journal that Ropes was a pupil of Corné and added that the young man was 'very successful at painting.'⁷ Ropes, who started out painting signs and carriages, is best known for his detailed views of Salem's harbor, images of ships, and landscapes. This early example of his work may be the only extant portrait he produced.⁸

¹ Sibley's Harvard Graduates, s.v. 'Curwin, George.'

² William Bentley, biographical notes on label applied to the verso of Ropes's portrait of Curwin, AAS.

³ Sibley's Harvard Graduates, s.v. 'Curwin, George.' Curwin's papers, which are preserved at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, contain an inventory of his library.

⁴ The original, now in the collection of the Peabody Essex Museum, is illustrated in The Essex Institute Historical Collections 70 (October 1934): 372, fig. 52.

⁵ William Bentley Diary, March 5, 1798, William Bentley Papers, 1666-1819, AAS Manuscript Collection.

⁶ William Bentley Book Accounts, December 8, 1804, Bentley Papers.

⁷ Bentley Diary, May 17, 1802.

⁸ Examples of works by Ropes may be seen in the collection of the Peabody Essex Museum. For illustrations of his maritime work, see M. V. and Dorothy Brewington, Marine Painting and Drawings in the Peabody Museum (Salem: Peabody Museum, 1968), 271-77.