

Portraits as Documents: Historical and Humanistic Reflections

LINDA J. DOCHERTY

A FEW MONTHS BEFORE the United States entered World War II, descendents of the eighteenth-century minister David Hall and his wife, Elizabeth Prescott Hall, offered companion portraits of the couple (cats. 63, 64) to the American Antiquarian Society. In his letter of reply, Librarian Clifford K. Shipton wrote enthusiastically, 'The American Antiquarian Society would be more than just delighted to have the . . . Hall portraits. . . . We regard Colonial portraits as documents, and do our best to encourage the preservation of them.'¹ From a historical perspective, Shipton's eager acceptance is not surprising given the venerability of the sitters and the age of the works themselves. When one looks at the actual portraits, however, their documentary value becomes more difficult to ascertain. Executed in pastel, both images have suffered pigment losses that blur details of the sitters' features and evidence of the unknown painter's hand. As sources of factual information, they provide neither records of physical appearance nor examples of artistic skill.

Questions about what portraits document and how they do so come vividly to the fore at the American Antiquarian Society. Under the 'generous dome' of the main reading room, the faces of some of America's forebears literally surround the study of the past. In this new and comprehensive catalogue of the Society's portrait collection, Lauren B.

The author would like to thank Caroline Sloat and Georgia Barnhill for their research assistance and for their thoughtful conceptualization of this project as a whole.

1. David Hall and Elizabeth Prescott Hall (cats. 63, 64), 190-92.

LINDA J. DOCHERTY is associate professor of art history at Bowdoin College.

Copyright © 2004 by American Antiquarian Society

Hewes meticulously recounts the lives of individual sitters and artists, the origins of their portraits, and the history of the institution in which biographies and images are remembered and preserved. Taken as a whole, this thoughtful piece of scholarship shows how portraits as documents can deepen understanding of both history and humanity. They reveal life to have significance beyond its temporal duration and art to be vulnerable to the vicissitudes of time.

Portraits: Art and Life

The relationship that portraits bear to descriptive truth has long consigned them to inferior status as works of art. In his third discourse on art (1770), Sir Joshua Reynolds told students of London's Royal Academy: 'A mere copier of nature can never produce any thing great; can never raise and enlarge the conceptions, or warm the heart of the spectator.'² For Reynolds great art presented a generalized view of nature, while lower forms of representation focused attention on its specific aspects. Based upon 'invention' (the power to create a mental picture), rather than observation, the former stimulated the imagination of viewers irrespective of time and place. Reynolds believed that a portraitist could elevate his art by eliminating details of appearance and idiosyncrasies of fashion, but the demands of patrons often obviated such a move. 'It is very difficult,' he noted in Discourse IV (1771), 'to ennoble the character of a countenance but at the expense of the likeness, which is what is most generally required.'³

While some of the most admired and intriguing works of Western art are portraits—Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding*, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, Rembrandt's self-portraits, Picasso's *Gertrude Stein*—the synthesis of appearance and idea constitutes the critical measure of their worth. For some art historians a portrait gallery cannot, in principle, be synonymous with an art museum. Other scholars strive to uncover deeper meaning in images that, on the surface, appear essentially descriptive. In America particularly, the historical taste for truthful likeness and

2. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 41.

3. Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, 72.

difficulties of making a living as an artist have made portraiture a preponderant and problematic component of our visual heritage.

American artists have distinguished themselves as portraitists. Names such as Copley, Stuart, Eakins, Sargent, Warhol, and Close immediately come to mind. In explicating their creative achievements, however, scholars have neglected to explore and affirm the documentary value of such work. This value is not aesthetic, although the intrinsic beauty of individual images may make them pleasurable to view. As documents, portraits point to an extrinsic world of human experience, of which the material object is the proof.

The American Antiquarian Society Collection

Although its original mission included collection and preservation of 'curious and valuable productions of Art and Nature,' the American Antiquarian Society never sought to acquire images for their own sake. As Hewes explains in her introductory essay, the portrait collection developed haphazardly and erratically. Its diverse contents reflect the efforts of the Society's leaders, the interests of other collectors, and the pride of American families who sought to give their ancestors a permanent home. Only a handful of portraits were purchased as isolated objects. The majority entered the collection through gifts, bequests, and solicitations, or in conjunction with library resources.

Subject matter always took precedence over artistic quality at the Society, which, by eschewing aesthetic standards, formed a collection of visual range and great historical import. For the institution and its donors portraits also possessed sentimental significance. Hoping to reclaim a picture given to the institution by an earlier generation (cat. 75), descendants of Thaddeus Maccarty wrote in 1878, 'The portrait is of no value as a painting but it is the only likeness of Maccarty which exists and it would be very agreeable to us if it could be returned to our family.'⁴ In an action that would be unthinkable for an art museum, the Society acceded to the request. (The portrait was returned in 1935 along with a collection of Maccarty papers.)

4. Thaddeus Maccarty (cat. 75), 218.

As a repository of portraits, the American Antiquarian Society regarded its documentary criterion as an institutional advantage. In 1920 one member noted: "The great art museums . . . must collect pictures on all subjects and must lay stress on the artistic character of the picture more than on the subject."⁵ Although the Society never established definitive standards for portrait acquisition, it discriminated in forming its collection. Accepting the painting of Timothy Swan (cat. 118), which his great-granddaughter called 'extremely absurd' as a work of art, Librarian Clarence Brigham wrote in 1927, 'We do not accept miscellaneous portraits for our gallery, but we do want the portraits of well-known New Englanders.'⁶ Society founder Isaiah Thomas had sought to 'gather up all the fragments [of the nation's history] so that nothing [would] be lost,'⁷ but his successors treated visual documents more selectively.

The American Antiquarian Society takes justifiable pride in the national scope of its collections, which sets it apart from regional and local historical institutions. Given the process by which portraits were acquired, and the 1876 cut-off date, the individuals whose images it preserves are primarily white and male. The majority of sitters lived in New England; more spent time in England than in the western or southern United States. Historical worthies, colonial Americans, Society leaders, Worcester citizens, and New England families comprise the largest categories of works accessioned before 1960. The Society has since diversified its portrait holdings in terms of gender, race, and class with, for example, William P. Codman's painting of African American barber John Moore, Jr. (cat. 87). Donations of this sort are increasingly exceptional as the demand for minority portraits encourages owners to sell them on the open market. In other important respects, however, the character of the Society's collection is notably democratic. By bringing together individuals of opposing political and religious views, it presents an ideologically complex picture of the history of the United States. Thomas Paine (cat. 92), English advocate of American liberty, and William Paine (cat. 93), American Loyalist and expatriate, appear side-by-side in an alphabetical irony. John Winthrop (cats.

5. Cited in Hewes, "The Most Distinguished Ancient Worthies of Our Country," 22.

6. Timothy Swan (cat. 118), 315.

7. Benjamin Franklin Thomas (cat. 119), 319.

153-55), the venerated governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, is reunited with John Wheelwright (cat. 150), whom Winthrop expelled for his anti-Calvinist views. The institution's first portrait, John Cornish's painting of Charles Paxton (cat. 94), was left behind during the Revolution when the hated surveyor of customs fled to England. By refusing to impose a patriotic litmus test on portrait acquisitions, the American Antiquarian Society has increased the documentary value of its holdings.

The inclusion of portrait copies as a means of preserving likeness and memory further democratizes the collection by expanding artistic representation. Generally disparaged by art museums for their imitative aspect, copies call attention to painters of talent and sensitivity who were marginalized in the profession for other reasons. Women artists figure prominently in the history of the copies. The Society's portrait of inventor and artist Robert Fulton (cat. 55) was painted with iconographic modifications by Elizabeth Emmet after an original by Benjamin West. Emmet's picture, which associates Fulton specifically with the city of New York, was subsequently engraved by William Satchwell Leney and used as a biographical frontispiece. When the Society's beloved librarian Christopher Columbus Baldwin died unexpectedly at the age of thirty-five, Sarah Goodridge's miniature likeness of him (cat. 2) provided the model for a full-scale oil portrait by Chester Harding (cat. 3). The accuracy and vitality that distinguished Goodridge's work made it an ideal source for this commemorative commission.

Throughout its history the American Antiquarian Society has valued verisimilitude in portraits, particularly in images of its leaders. In 1879 Councillor Charles Deane praised Edward L. Custer's representation of Samuel Foster Haven (cat. 65) as a 'counterfeit presentment,' noting that 'it seemed almost as if my friend himself lay concealed within that canvas, as if he might, at any moment, cast it aside, step forward, and take me by the hand.'⁸ Upon completing his portrait of Stephen Salisbury II (cat. 101) in 1878, Daniel Huntington had the sitter invite two friends to verify the likeness. More recently, when Marcus McCorison chose Numael Pulido to paint his portrait (cat. 76), he based his deci-

8. Samuel Foster Haven (cat. 65), 192.

sion on 'attention to detail, softened realism, and high gloss finish.'⁹ The conservatism in taste that continues to inform Society patronage reflects the institution's overarching commitment to documentation.

While not wishing artistic creativity to compete with truthful representation, Society members have sometimes sought to influence the definition of that truth. Exercising close oversight of Frank O. Salisbury's copy of his portrait of Calvin Coolidge (cat. 33), Clarence Brigham wrote in 1934, 'The chin is a little too rounded, perhaps because of the shadow between the chin and the mouth. This, too, makes the lower lip a little too full. . . . The ears, eyes, and upper part of the face are wonderfully well drawn and very characteristic, although it seems to me that the back of the head is a little elongated toward the top.'¹⁰ Sometimes the demeanor rather than the features of the sitter has been a source of dissatisfaction. In 1961 Thomas W. Streeter requested that a new portrait (cat. 113) be painted for the Society by a different artist since the original commission appeared to friends and family as 'too severe.'¹¹ Setting has also sparked discussion as a means of conveying information about a sitter. In response to Georgia Barnhill's comment, 'I guess I will always see him surrounded by books,' Numael Pulido abandoned his plan to paint Marcus McCorison standing before Antiquarian Hall and instead showed him seated at a desk.¹² In so doing, he captured both the physical appearance of the Society's director and librarian and the scholarly nature of his character.

The American Antiquarian Society has always valued portraits as documents for their inspirational power. In 1838 the Council lauded Charles Osgood's memorial portrait of Thomas Lindall Winthrop (cat. 156) 'as a beautiful specimen of art, but more precious as a faithful representation of one whose virtues have secured warm regard, and whose constant munificence has been recognized with respected gratitude.'¹³ For Winthrop's contemporaries, the truth of Osgood's painting was 'more precious' than its beauty, and the subject's character more

9. Marcus Allen McCorison (cat. 76), 221.

10. Calvin Coolidge (cat. 33), 123.

11. Thomas W. Streeter (cat. 113), 303.

12. Marcus Allen McCorison (cat. 76), 221.

13. Thomas Lindall Winthrop (cat. 156), 393.

significant than his appearance. Later viewers would be enticed by Winthrop's alert and kindly visage to learn the history of his virtue and munificence.

Historical Reflections

In a recent essay on the formation of England's National Portrait Gallery, Paul Barlow discusses how portraits, in the Victorian period, were perceived as 'visual primary sources.' Regardless of artistic quality, images made from life possessed historical authority as documents of a direct encounter with the subject. Such 'authentic' portraiture implied 'that the viewer could in imagination stand in the place of the original artist as he had once looked at the sitter, and so travel back in time to the moment when the sitter lived.'¹⁴ Like a religious relic, an original portrait could bring an uncertain and increasingly alienated present into intimate contact with a venerable past.

The Victorian concept of portraiture as a means of gaining access to a subject and his/her time requires qualification. As discussed above, patrons and sitters sometimes influence representation of a sitter, and artists always do. Building on Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of 'occasionality,' Richard Brilliant explains: 'The portrait, as an art work, contains in its own pictorial or sculptural content a deliberate allusion to the original that is not a product of the viewer's interpretations but of the portraitist's intention.'¹⁵ As makers of primary documents, portraitists are subjective witnesses, not reflective surfaces.

Portraits of the same sitter by different artists vividly illustrate the process of mediation that informs even the simplest of representations. The American Antiquarian Society owns two miniatures of Edward Everett, one attributed to Sarah Goodridge c. 1825 (cat. 45), the other to Anson Dickinson c. 1828 (cat. 46). At first glance, these tiny pictures have much in common: both show the sitter bust-length against a neutral background wearing a plain, dark jacket and white cravat. Characterization of the young congressman from Massachusetts differs consider-

14. Paul Barlow, 'Facing the Past and Present: The National Portrait Gallery and the Search for "Authentic" Portraiture,' in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 221.

15. Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), 7.

ably, however. Goodridge paints him frontally, at closer range, with a penetrating gaze that rivets our attention. Dickinson depicts a more introspective individual, turned away from the viewer physically and psychologically. Taken together, these roughly contemporary works exemplify alternative artistic perceptions of a man embarking on a career in public life. James Harvey Young's oratorical image of the mature Everett (cat. 47) demonstrates that Goodridge better prophesied his future.

While portraits aspire to capture the individual essence of a subject, appearance and character change and develop over time. Two paintings of colonial preacher and author Mather Byles, Sr., illustrate the contingency of images that become the basis for enduring visual memory. In 1732, Peter Pelham represented Byles (cat. 21) as a recently ordained minister, wide-eyed but confident. Three decades later, Pelham's stepson, John Singleton Copley, depicted him as a more imposing figure, whose sidelong glance alludes to his famous wit (cat. 22). Pelham's execution has a breadth and softness that bespeaks his English training and the tonal aesthetic of mezzotint, a reproductive medium pioneered in the colonies. Copley's technique, more heavily indebted to graphic sources, is distinguished by sharp lines and strong contrasts of light and shade. In this fortuitous comparison, the style of each artist complements a given period in the sitter's life. Viewed together, the Society's two portraits of the senior Mather Byles suggest, but do not provide, a biographical narrative.

Like the sister arts of painting and poetry, portraiture and biography represent, respectively, bodies in space and actions over time.¹⁶ Portraits cannot compress a life story into a single image, but they can include signs of noteworthy interests, accomplishments, and events. The Society's largest portrait, a full-length image of Robert Bailey Thomas (cat. 135), uses attributes to convey biographical facts whose details must be found in texts. The founder of the *Old Farmer's Almanac* stands beside a telescope with a copy of his popular publication in his hand. The instrument signifies the study of astronomy, which first inspired

16. This distinction was first formulated in the eighteenth century by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 78.

Thomas to 'calculat[e] an almanack';¹⁷ the book testifies to the realization of his ambition. Though this anonymous work lacks technical sophistication (and was probably painted posthumously), it documents, in brief, an occupational history.

Such narrative suggestion is exceptional in the Society's portrait collection. Most works include no attributes at all. As historical documents, these images can lead beyond appearance by stimulating a search for textual information, which may complement or contradict that presented to the eye. Interesting in its own right, biographical evidence acquires concreteness when coupled with visual representation. Richard Wendorf aptly observes, in explicating the similarities between portraiture and biography, 'Perhaps only in the final fusion of [the two] can the complexity and immediacy of character be fully portrayed.'¹⁸

While image and text combine to give knowledge of a sitter, the reception history of a portrait tells much about the validity of a characterization. From the time of its creation in 1818, viewers have regarded Ethan Allen Greenwood's painting of Isaiah Thomas (cat. 123) as the definitive likeness of the American Antiquarian Society's founder. Well-dressed and bewigged, Thomas sits in an upholstered chair, holding a leather-bound book. In the background, a column and curtain (conventions of state portraiture) strengthen the impression of learned dignity. Beyond its gentlemanly aura, the distinguishing aspect of this depiction is the sitter's gesture. With one hand, Thomas marks his place within the volume, with the other, he appears to proffer it to the viewer.

Painted six years after Thomas founded the American Antiquarian Society, Greenwood's first life portrait was not intended for that institution. The artist wanted a likeness of the famous printer and patriot to hang with images of notable Americans in his Gallery of Fine Arts in Boston. Although Thomas did not conceive the idea for the sitting, he clearly approved of the result. He subsequently commissioned Greenwood to paint a second portrait, which came to the Society after his death.¹⁹

17. Robert Bailey Thomas (cat. 135), 346.

18. Richard Wendorf, 'Ut Pictura Biographia: Biography and Portrait Painting as Sister Arts,' in *Articulate Images: The Sister Arts from Hogarth to Tennyson*, ed. Richard Wendorf (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 117.

19. On the spine of the book, the letters 'Antiq' suggest the word 'Antiquarian.' See Dresser, 1969.

As displayed today in the vestibule of Antiquarian Hall, Greenwood's painting of Thomas enjoys a context wholly compatible with its content. Functioning as a stand-in for the sitter, it welcomes visitors and invites them to read and do research. In this thoughtful installation the gulf dividing past and present narrows, calling to mind the Victorian concept of authenticity. Thomas would never be mistaken for a contemporary gentleman, but the historical character documented in his portrait seems vividly alive.

Humanistic Reflections

As documents, portraits appeal to the eye and mind and also to the heart. In his classic study of documentary expression in the 1930s, William Stott distinguishes between historical documents, which inform the intellect, and human documents, which appeal to the emotions. According to Stott, both kinds of documents claim to present a truth, but the understanding they produce is of a different character. Historical documents are often public and official; human documents tend to be highly personal.²⁰

Portraits naturally stimulate feeling in viewers who have a relationship to the sitter; they also elicit sentiment for humanity at large. Images of dignity, loveliness, energy, and intelligence, the common currency of visual representations, often constitute a poignant counterpoint to the narratives of individual lives. Traditionally, even ostensibly descriptive likenesses put a positive face upon the subject; artists highlighted aspects worth remembering or admiring. Biographies explained and amplified visual impressions and, at the same time, revealed their transient character.

Isaiah Thomas exemplifies the fact that public success provides no insurance against private pain. In 1819, a year after Greenwood painted this portrait, Thomas's only son died from injuries he had suffered in an accident, leaving behind a widow and nine children. As a document of the tragedy, the father's diary entries are historical in character. On June 25, he wrote: 'My son died, aged 45 years, occasioned by the wounds he

20. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5-17. Stott identifies a third category, social documentary, which shows conditions that are alterable. See pp. 18-25.

received by a Fall the Evening before.' On June 27, he wrote: 'My son's remains were deposited in my tomb in the North burying ground this morning at 8 o'clock.'²¹

In his objective recounting of facts, Thomas kept his emotions concealed. They surfaced, however, in his relationship to Greenwood's portrait of Isaiah Thomas, Jr. (cat. 122), also painted in 1818, which shows a strong filial resemblance. For Isaiah, Sr., this last likeness of his son became a cherished possession. Until his own death, he kept it in the best bedroom of his Worcester home. The grieving parent's attachment to the portrait exemplifies its power as a human document. Even today, the painted image, coupled with knowledge of the tragedy and the response that it elicited, cannot fail to kindle sympathetic feeling.

Taken together, portraits and biography present an affective, as well as informative, document of human life. They reveal aspirations, achievements, and the arbitrariness of fate. Isaiah Thomas, Jr., was not the only sitter to meet an untimely end. Christopher Columbus Baldwin died in a carriage accident; Mary Maccarty Stiles (cat. 108) was killed by a runaway horse. Disease and poverty also afflicted men and women whose images survive in the Society's collection. At age 45, Mary Maccarty West (cat. 148) was stricken with paralysis for which doctors could find no cure. Winthrop Chandler died destitute and forgotten after struggling for years to make a living as a painter. In companion images of himself and his wife (cats. 27, 28), Chandler's serious gaze and furrowed brow bespeak psychological tension that fine clothing cannot conceal. As art, portraits may be disparaged as products of elitism, yet as documents they point to the vulnerability of all.

The fragility of both life and art is vividly apparent in the American Antiquarian Society's collection. Some of the likenesses most prized as documents of American history survive physically as shadows of their former selves. The seventeenth-century portrait of Congregationalist minister Richard Mather (cat. 82), father of the New England dynasty of clergymen, epitomizes this phenomenon. Long venerated as an historical icon, this painting had been reworked so often by 1804 that William Bentley anticipated in his diary it would 'soon be gone.'²² In 1815

21. Isaiah Thomas, Jr. (cat. 122), 325.

22. Richard Mather (cats. 82-83), 233.

the Mather portrait came to the Society in conjunction with the family library. Since that time it has been carefully preserved, but rarely seen.

As an historical document, the portrait of Richard Mather (like the Hall portraits discussed above) provides no substantive information about the sitter or the artist. As a human document, however, it gives the desire to defy mortality poignantly visible form. The reverence this object still inspires exemplifies a longing to hold on to life, albeit by the slimmest thread. The painting's deteriorated condition testifies to the inexorability with which time passes, leaving individuals and their creations in its wake.

In art museums, painted and sculpted portraits deny the tragic aspect of existence because the objects themselves appear unchanged. Beside an image of perpetual freshness, a text providing information about death and suffering loses weight. At best, such a juxtaposition seems ironic; at worst, complexities and uncertainties of the human condition become unreal. Today's sophisticated efforts to conserve works of art obfuscate the fact that they, like us, have finite lives. Preserved as documents, portraits that cannot be resurrected by technology speak a more fundamental human truth.

However they are interpreted, portraits bring viewers in closer touch with what it means to be a human being. As works of art, they exemplify creative imagination and its enduring power to instruct and delight. As historical documents, portraits provide a record of appearance and promote a search for biographical and historical facts. As human documents, portraits combined with historical information elicit compassion for individuals and appreciation for conditions that we all share.

While portraits may have intrinsic value as aesthetic objects, their documentary worth depends, at least in part, on knowledge gained from texts. The further away a likeness moves from art, the less insight close visual analysis will provide. Descriptive images without symbolic embellishment are particularly vulnerable to being subsumed by extrinsic information. In such instances, portraits serve as textual illustrations rather than objects that merit contemplation on their own.

One cannot deplore this practice without asking why it is essential to preserve portraits for other than aesthetic reasons. The factual argu-

ment alone does not suffice, as it reduces the image as evidence to its most superficial aspects. In the realm of feeling, however, portraits as documents function at a deeper level. They provide visible proof of existential truths that would otherwise remain abstractions. Famous or anonymous in subject, beautiful or banal in execution, pristine or deteriorated in condition, portraits attest to human aspiration and the tenuousness of human life. By spanning the gamut of possibilities, the American Antiquarian Society has created a collection of national importance and universal meaning.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.