



Carlyle House

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The Hesselius Portraits of John Carlyle and His Contemporaries

By Rosemary Maloney

In choosing John Hesselius to paint his portrait John Carlyle was choosing the principal portrait painter in Virginia at that time. By 1765, when he painted John Carlyle, Hesselius was known as a painter of the Virginia gentry and had been so from as early as 1751. Carlyle was acquainted with or probably knew of other Virginia gentlemen who had posed for Hesselius. Among those whom Hesselius painted were Henry Fitzhugh, George Mason, and William Byrd III. The portraits of all these gentlemen and that of John Carlyle were painted in the hand-in-vest pose characteristic of Hesselius's work. These portraits are the subject of this article.

It was common in the 1700s to commission portraits to commemorate a wedding or to portray the wealth and social standing of the sitter. By contrast, John Carlyle had his portrait painted specifically to exchange with his brother, George, in England. In a letter to George, dated August 1, 1766, Carlyle writes that he is pleased that his portrait arrived safely in England.

I was Afraid as Mr Gibsons Vessel meet with an Accident the Picture might also, but as it has got to hand & the painter Approved off I am Satisfyed, as to the Likeness I never thought it very like when it was first finished I believe you woud have liked it better, but I thought he had flatterd me & made him make it Seven Years Older at least, Eversince I had that long Illness In 1755 I have never Recoverd what you Remember Of the Spritliness at the Eyes &c You cannot have more pleasure in Yr Picture then I have in mine & hope you'l Live long & Continue to have yr health & Look Like what yr picture now does.

The original Carlyle portrait hangs in the Scottish home of one of the descendants of George Carlyle's son,



A reproduction of John Carlyle's painting currently hangs in the study of his Alexandria home.

Joseph Dacre Carlyle. The Carlyle House portrait is a 2004 copy by Mary Ellen Howe, of Petersburg, Virginia. Although Carlyle's wife, Sybil West, was alive until 1769, Carlyle apparently did not commission a companion portrait.

Life and Work of Hesselius

John Hesselius (1728-1778) was born in Philadelphia, the son of a Swedish immigrant,

CARLYLE HOUSE

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Colonel Henry Fitzhugh, by John Hesselius, 1751.
Courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society.

guided by Feke’s clarity of color and stylized poses. John Wollaston (c.1736-1769), a painter born and raised in England, came to America in 1749. He painted almost 300 portraits of the gentry of the mid-Atlantic colonies before returning to England. Wollaston’s Virginia subjects include the young Martha Dandridge Custis (later Martha Washington) and her first husband, Daniel Parke Custis, as well as George Washington’s only sister, Betty Washington Lewis, and her husband, Colonel Fielding Lewis, of Fredericksburg, Virginia. By the time Hesselius painted the Carlyle portrait, Wollaston was no longer painting in Virginia. Hesselius adopted Wollaston’s masterful painting of richly rendered clothing.

Three Virginia Gentlemen

The portraits of Henry Fitzhugh (1723-1783) and his wife were painted by Hesselius in Stafford County, Virginia, in 1751. The couple had married in 1746 so these were not wedding portraits but were intended instead to extend the collection of existing Fitzhugh portraits. Hesselius painted at least six signed portraits of the Fitzhughs in 1751 alone. Some were copies of Fitzhugh ancestors and others were portraits from life. His twenty-year association with the Fitzhugh family produced at least thirteen signed portraits. Henry’s portrait, in the collection of the Virginia Historical Society, shows him in a stock Hesselius pose with his hand in his vest. Like

Gustavus Hesselius, also a painter. During his career John Hesselius traveled extensively in Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. Although he may have received training from his father, he was strongly influenced by the artistic works of Robert Feke and John Wollaston. By 1763 Hesselius had settled in Annapolis, where he married a rich widow and became part of the gentry. He died in 1778.

Hesselius painted about 200 portraits over his career, all in oil on canvas. The hand-in-vest pose he often used was a familiar image in 18th-century England. The pose implied that the sitter was “a man of breeding.” In Hesselius’s early portraits this hand is poorly portrayed. The Hesselius scholar Richard K. Doud describes the hand as “a shapeless, swollen mass seemingly lacking anatomical support and solidity.” By 1770 Hesselius was able to portray “a hand that shows some semblance, at least, of belonging to a human being.”

Influence of Feke and Wollaston

Robert Feke (c.1705-c.1752), born in New York, painted primarily in Boston and Philadelphia, where Hesselius may have known him. Hesselius was



D.W. Boudet’s copy of Hesselius’s 1750 original of George Mason of Gunston Hall.



John Carlyle, Henry Fitzhugh achieved the rank of Colonel through service in the Virginia militia.

Certainly John Carlyle knew George Mason (1725-1792), who was also a trustee of the city of Alexandria. In 1750 Hesselius painted the wedding portrait of the 24-year-old George Mason and his wife, with George in the hand-in-vest pose. In 1811, when it appeared that the Hesselius portraits were deteriorating, one of Mason's sons, John Mason, had the French painter Dominic Boudet make three sets of copies of these portraits. One set hangs in Mason's Virginia home, Gunston Hall, in Fairfax County. Shortly after the copies were completed the originals were lost in a fire. An 1837 copy of the Boudet copy was painted specifically for the Virginia Historical Society by Louis M. D. Guillaume.

John Carlyle may have had contact with William Byrd III (1728-1777) through their mutual interest in horse racing and breeding, or possibly through their Virginia militia service. Byrd was the wealthy heir to Westover Plantation, located on the James River in Charles City County, Virginia. Although Byrd inherited a fortune he squandered his inheritance in gambling. In 1777 he took his own life.



Hesselius's portrait of William Byrd III, c. 1750. Courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society.



Robert Feke's portrait of James Bowdoin, 1748. Courtesy of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

Byrd's portrait by Hesselius was painted sometime around 1750 or later. In recognition of Byrd's interest in horse racing and breeding, Hesselius included a horse in the background. Hesselius's debt to Feke is obvious when the Byrd portrait is compared with Feke's 1748 portrait of James Bowdoin II (1726-1790) of Boston, who was later second Governor of Massachusetts. Bowdoin faces left; Byrd faces right. Both are in the hand-in-vest pose with almost identical dress.

Why the Carlyle Portrait Matters

Although the Carlyle portrait is similar to other works by Hesselius, this portrait reveals much about the artist's subject. He appears to be prosperous, intelligent, and a member of the gentry. He is a mature man in his forties which, in the 1700s, meant he could have experienced some illness and family loss. The hand-in-vest pose suggests a British connection. The Carlyle portrait is remarkable, therefore, in that Hesselius successfully depicts those characteristics that we know are indeed features of John Carlyle's life.