



# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

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### Status Preserved and Defined: The Role of Family Portraiture at the Carlyle House

by Philippe Halbert

Among the most tangible links to the eighteenth century in the Carlyle House collection today are the “3 family pictures” listed between a collection of looking glasses and prints on John Carlyle’s 1780 inventory. Although they were never guests of their American family in Alexandria, William, Rachel, and George Carlyle nonetheless play an important role in our understanding of the life of John Carlyle. In addition to simply providing “faces” to go with the names, their portraits also serve to illustrate the role of family portraiture among the provincial elite. As can be imagined, the ordinary Virginian of the colonial period could not afford to commission a portrait. The collection of three displayed in his fine high Georgian-Palladian home, in addition to his painted in the colonies and sent to Great Britain, demonstrate Carlyle’s aspirations towards gentility and a means by which he meant to convey his status in the New World as well as the Old.

The tradition of portrait-painting in the American colonies had its origins in British practice of the seventeenth century. After nearly a century of grand Baroque narrative painting depicting historical or mythological events, portraiture- both full scale and in miniature- was becoming the favored type of painting by the fourth quarter of the seventeenth century. By the 1720s more informal portraits, often comprising whole families, were becoming the new trend. Called conversation pieces, these genre scenes depicted couples, families, and children in relaxed interior and outdoor settings. The growing rise of portraiture can be seen in the colonies even at this early phase, beginning in New England in the 1660s and 1670s. Early American artists of this period were generally untrained and often painted portraits on the side, spending most of their time painting signs and



*Mr. and Mrs. Atherton by Arthur Devis, oil on canvas, ca. 1743*

whitewashing interior spaces. Because of their “illuminating” work, they were often referred to as limners. Although they did not usually sign their work, many examples of the limner’s trade survive, such as a series of portraits of the émigré Huguenot Jacquelin-Ambler family of Jamestown painted ca. 1722 now on display at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond.

In the provincial Chesapeake colonies of Virginia and Maryland and in Low-Country South Carolina, the emergence of an aristocratic elite of gentlemen planters facilitated the emergence of portraiture. Just as the great houses such as Corotoman, Rosewell, and later the Carlyle House replaced earlier wood-frame clapboard structures

#### CARLYLE HOUSE

*Mary Ruth Coleman, Director*  
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The Mason Children by the Freake Limner, oil on canvas, ca. 1670

that even the gentry called home in the first century of settlement, so too did portraits replace the bare plaster walls of these earlier planters' homes. Despite living in the provinces, the Chesapeake elite maintained its ties with the mother country not only through its dress, architecture, and Anglican faith; the adoption of portraiture as means of expressing gentility also linked it to current trends and fashions in London. Although some planters were able to commission portraits while in Britain or while visiting the Continent, as did William Byrd II of Westover, many others chose to sit for artists in America, as John Hesselius' client John Carlyle chose in 1765.

A favourite artist of the colonial Chesapeake planter class, Hesselius was the son of a Swedish immigrant who worked in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. Born in 1728 in Philadelphia, he was trained by his father, also an artist. The younger Hesselius' style was likely influenced by artist Robert Feke, well known for his portraits of New England, New York, and Philadelphia elite from the 1730s until his death in 1752. In addition to working in Philadelphia, Hesselius often took commissions from Virginia and Maryland clients, and by 1763 he had removed himself to Annapolis where he married Mary Woodward, a wealthy widow. With his wife's connections (her father was a colonel), he moved freely among the planter class. Settling at his "Bellefield" plantation on the Severn River,

Hesselius continued painting until his death in 1778. Having completed over a hundred portraits by the time of death, credit also goes to Hesselius for providing the first artistic instruction to neighbouring artist Charles Willson Peale, well known for his portraits of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and others of the late colonial period and early Republic.

As a solid, secure mercantile class developed in America, by the early eighteenth century the number of professional portraitists was rising. As early as 1709, female artist Henriette de Beaulieu Dering Johnston was supporting herself through small pastel portraits of leading citizens of Charles Towne, South Carolina, and the surrounding Low Country. Artists with formal training were also present in the New World by the first half of the eighteenth century. Robert Smibert in Boston and Charles Bridges in Virginia are known to have had some training in Britain before immigrating to the



Colonel Henry Fitzhugh by John Hesselius, oil on canvas, 1751



Sarah Bataille Fitzhugh by John Hesselius, oil on canvas, 1751

colonies. By the time John Carlyle sat for his portrait by John Hesselius in 1765, the tradition of American portraiture had been established for nearly a century, and the work of artists such as Hesselius, John Wollaston, John Singleton Copley, and Charles Willson Peale attests to the high stage of development in American art in the years leading to independence.

What about the "3 family pictures" and the portrait of John Carlyle displayed in both public and private spaces at the Carlyle House? How can we fit them into the story of early American art?



Unfortunately, their artists and even their dates of completion are unknown. Although the portrait of George Carlyle dates to ca. 1765, when the brothers made their exchange of pictures, the portraits of William and Rachel date somewhere around 1710 and 1720. Despite the holes, using what is known about the history of portraiture and early American art can help us to understand the portraits in their period context. In further investigating the symbolic role of portraiture during this period, we can further interpret the portraits' role among the house's furnishing.

Looking first at the portraits of William and Rachel Carlyle, their importance among the collection of family portraits can on a deeper level be explained in terms of the deferential nature of provincial culture, especially in the southern colonies. Just as the deference of slave to master was integral in maintaining the economic, political, and social order of Virginia, for example, so, too, was the deference of child to parent in developing and shaping the family, an ideal that was strengthened and reinforced by the display of such portraits. A similar interpretation can be applied to George Carlyle's portrait. His younger brother's display of his image, most likely in the parlour, showed the mark of respect attached to George's person as the eldest son and head of the family after his father's death in 1744. Additionally, the presence of his parents' portraits in his house showed John's family pride. Portraits of parents, grandparents, and more distant ancestors served as markers, definitions of family standing and status across multiple generations. Additionally, they served as models of refined deportment, veritable "proof" of their sitters' place in the upper echelons of eighteenth century society.

John Carlyle had the same ambitions when he sent his picture across the Atlantic to his brother. Despite his position as a second son, when John Carlyle came to America he quickly worked in establishing himself as a gentleman, one way being through his collection of family portraits and his commissioning of one of himself to send back to his family. Although it was never displayed in the house, Carlyle's portrait shows him as a model of

the gentry class. Dressed in elegant clothing (some scholars speculate it might be a colonel's uniform) and wig, Carlyle also had himself posed in the noble, erect carriage that marked a gentleman. A far cry from the young merchant's apprentice of less than twenty years before in the 1740s, this was the image of himself that he wished to send back to his family in the Old World and that he had assumed in the New.



The series of Carlyle portraits still convey an air of authority and family pride and were models of genteel and refined behaviour and appearance. As if the fashionable design of the Carlyle House and its furnishings were not enough, the collection of family portraits displayed in the house served to reinforce the taste, sophistication, and pride of the family that lived in it. Through these works on canvas, an idea of who John Carlyle was as a person- a gentleman, self-made, self-composed, and conscious of his roots- can still be observed and appreciated over two hundred years later.

#### Further Reading

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