

The Catalogue of American Portraits

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Often I have found a portrait superior in real instruction to half a dozen written "Biographies," as biographies are written; or rather . . . I have found that the portrait was a small lighted candle by which the biographies could for the first time be read, and some human interpretation be made of them.¹

THE CATALOGUE of American Portraits, a national inventory or union catalogue of portraits of persons significant in American history, is a new resource created in the National Portrait Gallery, itself a new bureau of the Smithsonian Institution.

The natural human desire to behold and preserve one's own likeness, to be surrounded by representations of one's family and friends, and to be able occasionally to view for inspiration the portrait of an esteemed leader or patriot made portraiture one of the earliest popular forms of American art. It is therefore not surprising that, even while our young Republic was fighting for its independence, the need was felt for a national portrait gallery as an adjunct to written history. Artists Charles Willson Peale and John Trumbull both attempted, in different ways, to record for posterity the faces of notables of the Revolutionary War period and to display them in accessible public places. Decades later, in 1857, Congress commissioned the popular portraitist G. P. A. Healy to paint a series of American Presidents, whose pictures were to hang in the White House. In our century, during the decade after the First World War, a national portrait gallery was frequently discussed and seriously proposed as a part of the art collection then developing within the Smithsonian Institution. After the Second World

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¹ This and following quotations are from a letter of Thomas Carlyle to David Laing, May 3, 1854, in *Thomas Carlyle's Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 2:218 (London and New York, 1872).

War a few citizens continued to plan for a portrait gallery, no longer as part of another gallery but as a separate entity within the Smithsonian. The models in mind were the National Portrait Gallery of London and the Scottish National Portrait Gallery of Edinburgh, established in the 19th century.

On April 27, 1962, Congress finally passed an act creating the National Portrait Gallery and prescribing that it should "function as a free public museum for the exhibition and study of portraiture and statuary depicting men and women who have made significant contributions to the history, development, and culture of the people of the United States." To carry out the provisions of the law the gallery will display, in both permanent and temporary exhibitions, portraits of a number of people important in American history. In addition the gallery recognizes as an important part of its responsibility its function as a resource in history and art history for scholars, for other galleries and museums, and for individuals interested in American portraiture. To this end it will acquire many likenesses in various media, which it will not ordinarily exhibit but will hold in a study collection or archive; and it will endeavor to record in the Catalogue of American Portraits all or as many as possible of the portraits of historical figures found throughout the country.

... in all my poor historical investigations it has been, and always is, one of the most primary wants to procure a bodily likeness of the personage inquired after; a good portrait, if such exists; failing that, even an indifferent, if sincere one.

For the purposes of the Catalogue of American Portraits any faithful likeness of an individual is considered a portrait, regardless of medium; and the requirement that a subject be historically significant is broadly construed. For each portrait enrolled in the catalogue, an entry is made, usually in the form of a dossier. It contains a photograph, if available, and as complete information as possible about the sitter, the artist, the history of the portrait, and its present owner and location. For example, the record on the sitter includes his birth and death dates, his occupation(s), and the geographical regions with which he was most closely associated. For the artist, birth and death dates and region(s) are supplied. The portrait is described by medium, dimensions, inscription (if any), and colors and—if no photograph is available—by a word picture of the sitter's pose. The history of the portrait should ideally begin with the date and circumstances under which it was executed and should include a list of successive owners and their addresses, with

dates of transfer, down to the present owner. Added also are a bibliography of works, if any, dealing with the particular portrait; a list of exhibitions in which it appeared; and a cross-reference to replicas, copies, and other reproductions. If photographs are available, the source and if possible the negative number are supplied. The assembled materials are being carefully documented in an effort to maintain a high standard of accuracy. They are filed by sitter and indexed by artist, thus giving two approaches to the available information.

The usefulness of the catalogue to a biographer or a publisher looking for portraits of particular individuals as illustrations is immediately apparent. The reference staff of the gallery also receives frequent requests for information about the location and the availability of reproductions of portraits of favorite heroes or of persons for whom schools and other public buildings are named. Even in its present rudimentary form, the catalogue has been able to respond to this kind of demand.

To make it even more useful, however, automatic data processing equipment and techniques will be employed to index each portrait by artist and his period and region(s), by the sitter's occupation(s) and his period and region(s), by its present owner and location, and by medium. This will enable the Keeper of the Catalogue to store, arrange, rearrange, retrieve, and "print out" information under a number of headings or combinations of headings and to do it swiftly when necessary.

Hence, if another gallery (or the National Portrait Gallery itself) is contemplating an exhibition of the work of John Smibert and wants to know the whereabouts of all portraits of important historical figures by that artist, the computer can print out a list of Smibert portraits in seconds, giving not only the sitter but names and addresses of present owners. Or suppose someone is making a study of Detroit society in the 1890's and wants to know what portraitists were working there and who sat for them. That information can also be obtained, since the region for each sitter and each artist, as well as the period of each portrait and the place and circumstances under which it was painted, are part of the record, when that information is available. Lists of portraits in particular galleries, cities, or States would pose simple tasks for the computer, as would a compilation of all portraits in pastel for a student of art history. Would the writer of a history of medicine in Wisconsin before the Civil War like to know the whereabouts of portraits of prominent doctors practicing there in that period? Or would a stu-

dent of graphics like to know which of Sully's portraits were engraved by H. B. Hart? Once the catalogue is programed for automatic data retrieval, the combinations of the 10 components of its basic data for each portrait will be tremendously expanded.

... every student and reader of history, who strives earnestly to conceive for himself what manner of fact and man this or the other vague historical name can have been, will, as the first and directest indication of all, search eagerly for a portrait, for all the reasonable portraits there are; and never rest till he have made out, if possible, what the man's natural face was like.

The nucleus of the catalogue came largely from the vast records in the Frick Art Reference Library in New York City, and for this initial assistance from that library the Portrait Gallery will be forever in debt. Yet the Catalogue of American Portraits is to be both more and less than the files of the Frick Library. The Frick's interests are not limited to portraits or to American subjects; hence most of its 750,000 recorded works of art fall outside the field of American portraiture. Furthermore, by virtue of its own policy, the Frick files contain few records of portraits executed after 1860. On the other hand, the National Portrait Gallery is interested in portraits of Americans of all periods of our history—and in these alone. Therefore the Catalogue of American Portraits will, within the limited field of American portraiture, go beyond the records of portraits in the Frick Art Reference Library. This will be apparent in several ways. The catalogue will eventually contain information on more portraits, especially from the period after 1860; and, because of its specialized concentration on one art form, it will probably record more extensive information on each portrait than is contained in the Frick files. In addition, like most art galleries and repositories of the raw material of art history, the Frick has filed its records largely by names of artists, whereas the Catalogue of American Portraits, concerned above all with the sitter as a person important in American history, is arranged accordingly. Finally, of course, the Catalogue of American Portraits, with its anticipated automatic data processing facilities and with a reference staff, should be able to provide highly specialized assistance. Occasionally the gallery staff uncovers information not yet in the files of the Frick Library and passes it on to its staff. In this and other ways cooperation between the two institutions continues.

To add to the information acquired from the Frick files, the gallery has made and will continue to make surveys in order to enlarge, enrich, and update its information. It has obtained, for

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instance, the cooperation of galleries and organizations such as the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the American Philosophical Society and such historical monuments as The Hermitage, in Nashville, Tenn. If negatives owned by the repository are available, the gallery has obtained photographs of the portraits; in other cases, it has sent in its own photographer to record portraits. In this way the gallery has received quality photographs and up-to-date records of the portraits in these institutions. In addition, regional surveys are to be undertaken either by members of the gallery staff or by local organizations working with the gallery or by both working together.

Still another approach to the problem of assembling records for the Catalogue of American Portraits is to embark upon a study of the portraiture of a particular sitter, as Charles Coleman Sellers did when he produced *Benjamin Franklin in Portraiture* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1962) or as Alfred L. Bush did in preparing his *Life Portraits of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville, Va., 1962). In this kind of program an attempt is made to discover all portraits executed of the subject, by consulting published biographies and critiques, unpublished papers of the subject and members of his circle, and contemporary newspapers and other original sources in order to note any mention of portraits or sittings for portraits. Working from this beginning, the task is to trace the subsequent history of all portraits, their replicas and copies, engravings made after them, and other reproductions of them, and the present locations of all of these if possible.

Another approach to the study of portraiture involves research on particular portraitists. This also yields data for the catalogue. Only a few painters, such as Thomas Sully, kept any sort of intelligible records. But again, by using the normal procedures of documentary research, much can be learned about those who sat for the artist under study. For example, the National Portrait Gallery has provided some assistance to a researcher who is making a survey of portraits by Daniel Huntington. Like so many scholars in art history, this one began her work at the Frick Art Reference Library, but by further research and by advertising in the many journals for genealogists and local historians, art connoisseurs, and those interested in interior design, she has unearthed a number of other Huntington portraits in private hands. Her photographs of these portraits and her records concerning them will be deposited with the Catalogue of American Portraits when her work is completed.

Needless to say, much research must be done in the normal operation of a gallery, and straw for catalogue bricks is frequently a by-product of investigations into the provenance and authenticity of portraits in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery or of portraits that become available to it for possible acquisition. At the same time, the catalogue is extremely useful to the gallery's own research staff engaged in this kind of inquiry.

In short, any representation, made by a faithful human creature, of that face and figure which he saw with his eyes, and which I can never see with mine, is now valuable to me . . .

In its present form the Catalogue of American Portraits is a promising beginning. It now contains slightly under 10,000 entries, for many of which photographs are yet to be acquired and further research is needed to bring information up to date. Though the parent gallery enjoys all the advantages of being a national institution, it also suffers from the disadvantages that accompany major dependence upon public support. The progress of the gallery's Catalogue of American Portraits, including the size of its staff, will depend on apparently unrelated events on the other side of the world as well as on the climate in Washington, D.C.

The catalogue will never be complete in a literal sense: there will always be new portraits or newly discovered portraits to be entered; there will always be additional facts to be added to the records of portraits already entered. Thus it will always be living and growing in content and value. Present plans, however, call for publication of the Catalogue of American Portraits in book form before too many years have passed. It is expected that the first edition will probably have to be followed rather quickly by a second, for the appearance of the published catalogue in libraries and museums across the land should arouse further interest and bring forth much volunteered information about portraits. This will be welcome and indeed necessary to the success of the catalogue.

Mention of these plans to a number of professional people around the country has always elicited from each an enthusiastically favorable response and warm encouragement. They all see the catalogue as the eventual source of answers to many fundamental questions about American portraits, questions that now remain unanswered and unanswerable.