Looking at Archives in Art

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Abstract

Studying the depiction of records, documents, books, reading, and writing in art is more than an aesthetic exercise for archivists. The authors examine a selection of British and American portraits and genre paintings, discussing their presentation of records as well as the contexts in which the paintings were created and the importance of the records depicted. Archivists can use this "iconography of archives" to understand contemporary perceptions of records by artists, sitters, and viewers, thereby placing textual records more fully in their historical context.

Introduction

Records, documents, books, and the other "stuff" of archives are now so commonplace that archivists and non-archivists alike have ceased to take much notice of them on their own terms. In contrast to earlier times, when documentary materials were more rare, contemporary life is filled with the products of record-making processes. This familiarity often produces a sense that we know all we need to about the purposes of records, and from the earliest professional writings in North America there has been near unanimity on the question of why archives exist. Beginning with Ernst Posner, archivists have stressed that records come into existence principally to accomplish very practical and immediate purposes. Surveying the origins of recordkeeping in the ancient world, Posner argued that from the very beginnings of writing, records were made to keep track of the mundane details of human life and behavior. Whether in Egypt, Babylon, Athens, or Rome, the impulse to keep track of people, goods, and resources was crucial in bringing into being the records which might one day be gathered and preserved in archives. Another writer stated this same view more succinctly, maintaining that the causes of records creation could be summed up in the phrase "counting and accounting."[1]

[1] Ernst Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972); Trudy Huskamp Peterson, "Counting and Accounting: A Speculation on Change in Recordkeeping Practices," *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982): 131–34.

More recently, many archivists have begun to suspect that there is more to the story. Not only have these writers challenged the historical scholarship on which some of the earlier conclusions are based, but they have also begun to explore the larger—and frankly more interesting—roles that records and documentary processes play in human affairs. Hugh Taylor, for example, first called attention to the double meaning of the word "deed," used to designate both the act of transferring property and the written instrument by which such a transfer was rendered official and its efficacy maintained. The work of medievalist Michael Clanchy and others has demonstrated that the act of making a written record is freighted with all sorts of meanings, especially in societies undergoing the transition from orality to literacy. Anthropologists are exploring the role of documentation in the larger societal projects of remembering and forgetting. As contemporary archivists have begun to read more widely in this interdisciplinary literature and apply its insights, many have come to the conclusion that records and record making have deep cultural meanings and significance.[2]

Those who wish to explore these richer dimensions of the seemingly unexceptional objects which crowd the shelves of archives and libraries will find much to ponder by exploring what might be called the iconography of archives. Studying the ways in which archival records have been portrayed in the visual arts tells us something important about how those records are perceived by artist and viewer alike. Records and documents are seldom the primary objects of an artist's attention, but they appear in surprising numbers in paintings which are ostensibly "about" something else. The observer accustomed to looking for books, manuscripts, and records will find them in large numbers in portraits, still lifes, and genre paintings. The ways in which documentary objects are presented and how they are used in conjunction with other artistic elements may reveal something about what we have come to call the cultural penetration of archives. If the stuff of archives is so routine as to be included in works of art intended to depict other things, archives may indeed possess a deeper subliminal power—perhaps literally so.

We make no claim to expertise in art or art history. In fact, we have chosen to look at art with the archivist's interest in documentary practices, workplaces, and the society's ideas about these things. Portraits and genre paintings have the advantage of being accessible to viewers without the art specialist's knowledge. Anyone can gaze at a portrait and understand it as depicting a person in a setting. The immediacy of the experience comes from the sense of "likeness" to real people, places, and activities for which we, the viewers, more often

[2] Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), esp. ch. 7; Hugh Taylor, "'My Very Act and Deed': Some Reflections on the Role of Textual Records in the Conduct of Human Affairs," *American Archivist* 51 (Fall 1988): 456–69; M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307,* 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Kenneth E. Foote, "To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture," *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990): 378–92; James M. O'Toole, "The Symbolic Significance of Archives," *American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993): 234–55.

than not have no direct experience. However, portraits and conversation pieces are not simply likenesses, although they have that claim upon our interest. Images of people and places in art are uniquely shaped by social and aesthetic ideas interpreted by artists and expressed in their skills of composition, color and modeling.[3]

What we propose to do here is to explore, in a preliminary way, how archives have been represented in British and American painting, especially in portraiture and in the last two centuries. One could, of course, examine a much wider range of artistic output from a longer historical period and from a wider cultural orbit: we urge others to do so. In the hope of initiating broad consideration of this topic, however, we propose to examine a number of examples of the depiction of archives in art. We are interested in whether there is a useful typology by which we might classify these depictions, and what that categorization might tell those interested in archives about the objects of their attention.

The notion of context or, more accurately, of contexts helps situate a work of art within the complexity of its source, execution, and purpose. Many layers of information are bound up in any work.[4] It is important always to keep in mind that paintings by professional artists were most often products of commercial transactions. Portraits, for example, were usually commissioned, either by the sitter, or in some cases by organizations, which hung likenesses of their important officers in principal board rooms. As might be expected, established artists with reputations built on known works attracted the most fashionable clientele and substantial fees. Every artist and every sitter would need to negotiate business details about the portrait, notably its size, price, and general conception. Full-length portraits were more costly than half-sized likenesses or busts and could only be afforded by the wealthy. It was not uncommon for sitters to want copies of their portraits to give to their friends, business associates, or political allies. These were also done by the artist or his studio workers. The aura of originality added a cachet that was as much valued in the past as it is today.

Although the painterly style of artists shaped their depiction of a subject, the settings, props, and poses were chosen for their possible effects and meanings. Portraits were always intended to be hung for attentive gazing. The artist and the sitter would have been cognizant of the unseen viewer in making their selections. In fact, viewers are still active participants in art because their experience of it is personal, molded by the knowledge they bring to the work. Archivists, for example, will look at art with a special knowledge of documents

[3] A good introduction to portrait, genre, and history painting is David Piper "A Commentary on the Development of Portraiture," in *European Portraits 1600–1900 in the Art Institute of Chicago,* edited by Susan Wise (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1978): 9–18 and the entries in the *Dictionary of Art* (New York: Grove's Dictionaries, 1996) on "Portraiture," 25: 273–87; "Genre," 12: 286–96; and "History Painting," 14: 581–89.

[4] A valuable review of the theories and methods of art critics and historians is Laurie Schneider Adams, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996).

and their uses. We argue that experiencing art affords archivists a privileged view of records in the context of contemporary surroundings and artistic aims.[5]

The most common ways for representing archival records in art include the following general categories. Sometimes the book or document depicted is merely a prop, something for the painting's subject to hold, an object with no particular significance. Sometimes, however, the document is a specific kind of prop, one bearing a special connection to the subject as a kind of professional accessory. A portrait might show a minister holding a Bible, for example; that of a merchant might show an account book. More rarely but still often enough, a work of art may include a depiction of a very specific and even identifiable document. There are also a number of depictions of the acts of making records and of reading books or documents. Most unusual, but from our perspective most interesting, are those images in which a record or document is central to the meaning of the painting, a work of art in which the record itself becomes, in effect, a character in the painting. What follows is an exploration of each of these general types.

Records and Documents in Modern British and American Painting

Modern portraiture and genre paintings developed within the context of Renaissance humanism, which focused on man and his activities. Portraits executed from life became more popular in the fifteenth century and thereafter developed into a significant feature of art in Europe and beyond. Genre paintings depicted the life experienced by common people, rather than biblical scenes, mythology, or the events of national history. The trompe l'oeil, for example, was a popular genre painting. These deceived viewers into seeing three dimensions through ultra real representation of objects such as musical instruments, still lifes and vistas framed by a window—all allowed the artist's skill to please by deceiving the eye. *Illustration #1,* by Collyer, (*Fl.* 1700s) an English specialist in the trompe l'oeil, depicts a notice keeper used to hold the *objets trouvés* of a desk—papers waiting to be read or responded to, and various pieces of equipment for writing, including a quill, a quill cutter, sealing wax, and a parchment stretcher. The cameo inset is of the late King Charles I. Miniatures within larger works displayed the artist's skill in portraiture and the

[5] Art has been a rich source of evidence about contemporary decoration and furnishing, dress, landscape, nature, and animals. A delightful example of their use as source is Robin Gibson, *The Face in the Corner: Animals in Portraits from the Collection of the National Portrait Gallery* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1998). Other titles indicative of the breadth of use are Peter Thornton, *Authentic Décor: The Domestic Interior 1620–1920* (New York: Viking, 1984), John Fairley, *The Art of the Horse* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995) and Dora Thornton, *The Scholar in His Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998). Of perhaps special interest to archivists and librarians is Garry Apgar, et al., *The Newspaper in Art* (Spokane, Wash.: New Media Ventures, 1996).

ILLUSTRATION 1. Collyer, *Trompe l'oeil with writing materials.* Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

king, as martyr, was a subject which combined royalist ideas, religious sentiment and *momento mori* themes. The pamphlet pinpoints the date (1698) and the letter identifies the artist. The subjects chosen would be familiar to viewers because the success of the deception was based on knowing the objects in life.

Writing instruments and documents had a number of uses for the artist. They could, for example, be furnishings which helped set the scene. Pieter Breughel's (1564–1638) *Lawyer's Office on Rent Day (Illus. #2)* is a good example of the artist's sense of place, people, and surroundings. The painting, under different titles, is found in several galleries—the subject was popular, reality undoubtedly being part of its apparently wide appeal. Renters press their petitions and notes to the collector; the papers convey busyness. The advocate on his bench is also surrounded by papers. However, he seems wearied by all the activity. The scene is, even today, full of fun. The counting house setting draws us, as archivists, into a style of business of which we have no direct experience. The profusion of documents, in this place and at this time, suggests that literate conventions were more than likely well understood by those who would have been viewing the pictures, whether these people were actually functionally literate or not. Documents and writing were highly visible in society, making them popular choices as props.

Props could serve both practical and artistic purposes, especially in portraits. Letters and envelopes, for example, seamlessly introduce text, perhaps naming the sitter or painter or proclaiming some other special distinction deemed note-

ILLUSTRATION 2. Pieter Brueghel, *Lawyer's Office on Rent Day*. Courtesy of Burghley House Collection Lincolnshire, UK/Bridgeman Art Library.

worthy as part of the composition. They could equally be integral to the artist's concept and thus carefully chosen pieces for the setting. Writing and documents along with books and ledgers would be the natural accessories for writers, engineers, politicians, lawyers, and businessmen. Props could also serve artistic purposes, however, especially as symbols for abstractions which were resistant to pictorial representation, ideas such as learning or administration or commerce. The practical and the artistic could be joined, as seen in the portrait of Thomas Cromwell done by Hans Holbein the Younger on one of his two trips to England to paint for the court. The original is now lost, but this painting, by an unknown artist after Holbein's work of 1534, captures the sitter's wile and hardness in the concentration of the gaze and the clench of the fist.[6] *(Illus. #3)* As a clerk in the service of Cardinal Wolsey, Cromwell forged a justifiable reputation for acute political sense and for prodigious administrative abilities. He was head-hunted by the king, Henry VIII, in whose service Cromwell acquired power as a fixer. He orchestrated Henry's divorce from Katherine of Aragon and handled the dissolution of the religious houses in England, including the accounting of all money, goods, and property that came to the Crown as a result.

The document on the table next to Cromwell's hand is addressed "*To our trusty and right well beloved Councillor Thomas Cromwell, Master of our Jewel House*".

[6] Details of the iconography of Thomas Cromwell, 1st Earl of Essex are in Roy Strong, ed., *Tudor and Jacobean Portraits* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1969), 113–14. NPG #1727 is a copy of unknown date of a portrait in the Frick Collection in New York.

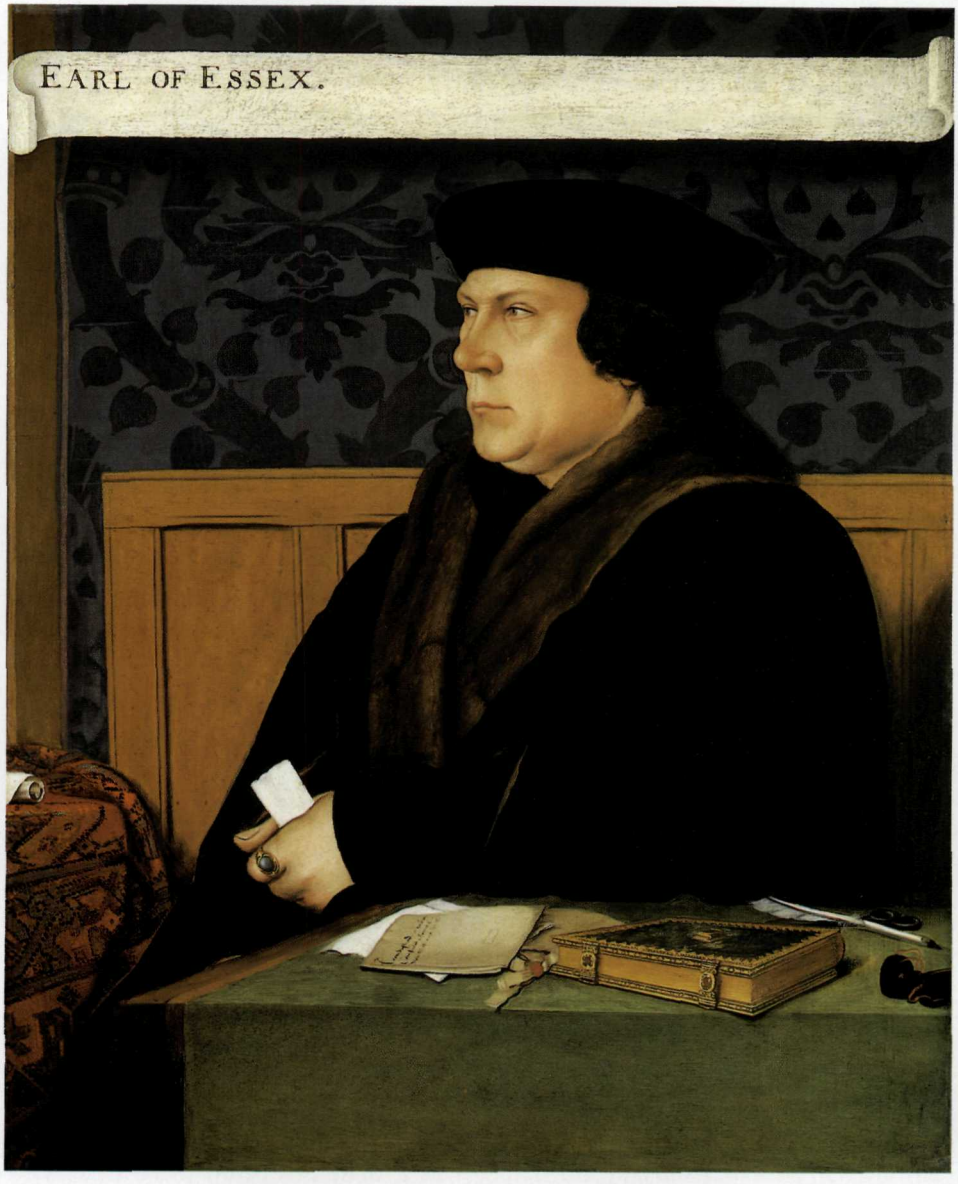

ILLUSTRATION 3. Hans Holbein, *Thomas Cromwell, 1st Earl of Essex.* Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

It identifies the sitter, the date the portrait was done, and the event considered worthy of commemoration. However, beyond satisfying a need to identify and name, the artist's choice of a document along with the tools for writing, all prominent props on the table in this portrait, deliberately draw us to conclusions about the subject and his career. As part of a biography, these special tools identify Cromwell with his occupation as an administrator much in the same way that a sword might identify a soldier. Cromwell exercised authority, not through wealth, family, or arms, but by using records to control the machinery of government in the service of the king.

In American art, records appear as props in portraiture almost from the very beginning. What is thought to be the earliest identifiable self-portrait in the English North American colonies, that of Captain Thomas Smith (painted about 1690), is a highly allegorical depiction of the seaman, merchant, and amateur painter. Echoing the traditional *memento mori* themes of European art, the likeness shows Smith surrounded by the tools of his maritime trade, together with reminders that the things of this world are fleeting in comparison with those of the next. Spread out on a table before him is a document bearing his monogram and a vanity-renouncing quatrain of his own composition. The document in question serves merely as "white space," a kind of balloon in which a caption may be presented to the viewer along with the other artistic elements. Later appearances of records, however, were more subtle, as books and documents associated with the sitter's profession were used to provide context and background. Colonial ministers, for example, were often depicted sitting in their libraries, with their books arrayed behind them. Sometimes, spine titles were legible, identifying editions of the Bible, works of theology, or other clerical tools of the trade. Even when titles were not visible, the books were recognizable enough to be understood in context. Sometimes, too, these library shelves contained several of the small, hand-sewn manuscript volumes in which ministers wrote out their sermons and which they carried into the pulpit with them. In the same way, a lawyer might be depicted in front of shelves full of statute books or a merchant with a run of oversized ledgers for keeping his accounts.[7]

More interesting are those portraits in which very specific books or records, identified in a particular way with the sitter, are depicted. In such cases, the document is not a generic prop, but rather a very focused one, serving to reinforce other elements of the painting in conveying the subject's character or accomplishments. A good example is the Gilbert Stuart portrait of Josiah Quincy. *(Illus. #4)* Stuart (1755–1828) was a British-trained portraitist who specialized in renderings of the political and social leaders of the new American

[7] The self-portrait of Captain Thomas Smith is in the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts. For some European examples of this style, see Eric Ketelaar, "The Archival Image," in Ketelaar, *The Archival Image: Collected Essays* (Hilversum, Netherlands: Verloren, 1997), 115–18. There is an interesting discussion of ministerial portraits and the libraries depicted in them in Kevin J. Hayes, "Portraits of the Mind: Ebenezer Devotion and Ezra Stiles," *New England Quarterly* 70 (December 1997): 616–30.

republic. His most famous image is probably that of George Washington, an unfinished portrait from 1796 which makes Washington appear to be emerging, godlike, from the clouds and which once graced countless elementary school classrooms. Josiah Quincy (1772–1864) was by far a lesser figure, serving as mayor of Boston from 1823 to 1828 before going on to a fifteen-year tenure as president of Harvard College. Known locally as "the Great Mayor," Quincy helped remake the face of the old colonial town, tapping the wealth of the city's merchant class to construct new public buildings and to reclaim land from the harbor for civic improvements. His most enduring physical legacy was the construction along the city's waterfront of three long market buildings which still stand. The middle of the three became known almost immediately as Quincy Market, and it has been in constant commercial use from its completion in 1826 until its reemergence in the 1970s as a gentrified, open-air shopping mall.[8]

Stuart's portrait of the red-haired mayor shows him in a fanciful setting, posed in front of a substantial pillar with the main entrance of the market building, designed along classical Greek lines, in the background off Quincy's left shoulder. On the table in front of him, the mayor is unrolling an architectural drawing of the market project, showing sections of the three buildings. The main structure, in the center, is open and undivided on the inside, save for its central rotunda, while the north and south market buildings are subdivided into a succession of stalls, used for individual tradesmen and warehouse space; these subdivisions are clearly apparent on the drawing, as are some numbers, apparently indicating measured dimensions. The document may or may not have been a real one: architectural plans were far less detailed in the early nineteenth century than they are today, with only the most rudimentary of sketches then sufficing to give builders an idea of what they were to erect. More important for our purposes, this document connects the subject of the portrait to his monument in stone, which is also evident in the image. It is a very specific kind of prop. Statute books or other documents would have been sufficient to characterize a politician in a general sense, but here an identifiable kind of record is used to draw the portrait together and to memorialize Mayor Quincy as he himself probably wanted to be remembered. The document serves as a link between him and the most visible accomplishment of his administration, an accomplishment which his fellow citizens would have immediately recognized.[9]

Sir Thomas Lawrence's (1769–1830) portrait of Robert Jenkinson, 2nd Earl of Liverpool, depicts a grandee, patron, and politician who is confident,

[8] On Quincy and his market, see Lawrence W. Kennedy, *Planning the City Upon a Hill: Boston Since 1630* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 48–50, and Thomas H. O'Connor, *Bibles, Brahmins, and Bosses: A Short History of Boston*, 2d ed. (Boston: Boston Public Library, 1984), 77–82. On Stuart, archivists might be particularly interested in Charles Merrill Mount, *Gilbert Stuart: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1964), but they should also consult Theresa Galvin, "The Boston Case of Charles Merrill Mount: The Archivist's Arch Enemy," *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990): 442–50.

[9] The original portrait is in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. For a discussion of some of the issues involved in the changing nature of architectural records, see the special issue of the *American Archivist* (59 [Spring 1996]) devoted to them.

ILLUSTRATION 4. Gilbert Stuart, *Josiah Quincy*. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reproduced with permission. © 2000 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. All rights reserved.

stylish and powerful. *(Illus. #5)* Liverpool was Prime Minister from 1812 to 1827 and, until the election of Tony Blair in 1998, the youngest person to hold the position. The full-length portrait is larger-than-life and was meant to be hung in a prominent public place. Lawrence's conception is, however, very spare with only a few props supporting the subject. Liverpool holds a pair of gloves in his right hand. His left hand is placed on top of a large rolled parchment document tied in red treasury tape. Artists often relied on props, such as letters or books or walking sticks, to occupy the subject's hands as a popular response to the question, "What should I do with my hands?" These were not easy to represent without suggesting some activity for them.

In this instance, however, both the gloves and the document have other meanings and were carefully chosen for this subject. Gloves, symbols of gentlemanly stature since the Renaissance, are a clear reference to Liverpool's status and breeding. The document, inscribed *National Gallery, New Roy[al] aca[demy]* rests beside an open dispatch box. Both are placed on a crimson cloth—the Latin word for this color being the root for "bureau" in bureaucracy. The document ties Liverpool to the founding of the National Gallery. He was, in actuality, one of the prime movers for the project and his efforts were important to its success. The document draws our attention to the sitter's accomplishment in the context in which it took place. However, it was not a real instrument, although it has the aspect of a parchment charter. Lawrence's props combine the notion of foundation, represented by the charter, with that of government action, represented by the dispatch box for documents, to convey the source of the national collection of art and a place for it to hang for public viewing. The props summarize a series of administrative actions which together established the Gallery, an important event and institution for artist and subject.[10]

Another example of archival and library materials used as identifiable reminders of the sitter's occupation and career comes from a much later painting: the 1962 portrait of T. S. Eliot by Sir Gerald Kelly, which hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. *(Illus. #6)* The painting shows Eliot in the library of his London apartment, slightly annoyed at having been interrupted in the middle of a game of solitaire. The cards are arrayed on the table in front of him, but the viewer's eye is also drawn to the shelves of books behind the poet. This is no vague depiction of a library, showing unidentified books merely to create texture and the suggestion that the sitter was a literary man. Rather, it seems to be an accurate rendering of the books that were actually in place as the portrait was done. Numerous titles are legible, and the close observer even gets a hint of how Eliot shelved them: all the travel books are clustered together, for instance.

[10] NPG #1804 was commissioned by Robert Peel, the Home Secretary in Liverpool's Cabinet. The Gallery was established by a Treasury Minute of 23 March 1824. The money to purchase the core collection for the new gallery was voted as part of the Civil establishment vote in April 1824. See Robert Walker, *Regency Portraits* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1988), 319.

ILLUSTRATION 5. Sir Thomas Lawrence, *Robert Jenkinson, 2nd Earl of Liverpool.* Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

ILLUSTRATION 6. Sir Gerald Kelly, *T.S. Eliot.* Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.

Several books, however, more directly pertinent to Eliot and his work, are also clearly visible, particularly his multivolume edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary,* readily identifiable by the readable spine titles. Bound in their original brown buckram, the volumes are lined up immediately behind Eliot, within ready reach if he turned around in his chair. Moreover, the volumes of this grand compilation of the English language—to which Eliot no doubt had regular recourse—appear on the shelves exactly as they were in life. The viewer can see from the alphabetical subdivisions on the spines that they are in proper order. The first volume (A–B) occupies a space at the end of one shelf, immediately over Eliot's left shoulder; the set then continues on the next shelf, over the poet's right shoulder, with three volumes (C, D–E, and F–G) visible before the rest of the set disappears behind his back. This is exactly how one shelves books, keeping a set together and in order, even while accommodating it to the other books on one's shelves. As such, the portrait shows an actual working library, a faithful representation of what the artist saw as he filled in the background behind the principal object of his attention. What better way to present Eliot than to show him surrounded by the elements of the language of which he was a modern master? Any books might well have served as props here, but by the depiction of these particular books, the artist is able to underline the character and perhaps even the personality of the subject of the painting.

Documents may not always be readable in art because text is difficult to reproduce legibly in paint. More importantly perhaps, artists clearly did not always intend that the documents depicted should be read. A painting, in fact, may only suggest a document, writing or reading. Textuality was simulated by format and color. By the eighteenth century well-developed written cultures had taken root in law, business, and private communication. Each one favored different colors for paper and used distinct document types and formats—indentures, ledgers, and letters being the most obvious. These were sufficiently well known that they could be used as symbols for occupations and the characteristics associated with them. The profusion of documentary types gave a skilled artist a large symbolic shorthand for conveying abstract concepts such as political success or statecraft, business achievement, and social position.

Sir Thomas Lawrence's portrait of the Baring's Bank partners is unusual for its documentary detail.[11] *(Illus. #7)* Francis Baring, M. P. and founder of the family fortunes, appears on the left, hand cupping his ear and head oriented to catch a sound. The pose was characteristic of Baring—he was profoundly deaf. Joseph Farington's diary records that considerable comment was generated by Lawrence's candid depiction. Seated across the table from Baring are his partners, his brother Thomas and his son-in-law, Charles Wall. All three partners are united as joint subjects by a large open ledger on the table which is

[11] The painting was commissioned by Francis Baring and done in the autumn of 1806. See Michael Levey, *Sir Thomas Lawrence* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1979), 47–48. Also see Basil S. Yamey, *Art and Accounting* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989).

ILLUSTRATION 7. Sir Thomas Lawrence, *Baring's Bank Partners.* Private collection.

identified as a record of the Hope Bank, an Amsterdam enterprise which launched the Baring fortunes in finance. Although the volume is rendered sketchily, it is unmistakable as a mercantile ledger. The focus on a book of account was also controversial at the time.[12] Men of recent fortune, it seemed, could be uncomfortable with portraits which placed them amid the mundane means of their success. By contrast, in another portrait, Francis's brother, Sir Thomas Baring, the third Baronet, is depicted in the library of his country home almost totally enveloped in a welter of documents, boxes and standishes. *(Illus. #8)* No one item can be identified but all are recognizable as types. The artist, John Linnell (1792–1882), chose to present Sir Thomas surrounded by the deeds and maps of a landed estate rather than the ledgers of a merchant. The placement and the props establish Baring's status as a gentleman of property.

So long as books and documents remain simply background or subsidiary objects, however, they have only limited use and interest. More telling are those works of art in which these items move to the center of our attention. Depictions of the acts of reading and writing are especially noteworthy. By considering such images, it is also possible to move beyond the world of portraits, a world accessible mainly to those economic, social, and political elites with the resources and the self-possession to commission them. An examination of read-

[12] *The Diary of Joseph Farington,* Kenneth Garlick, Angus Macintyre, Kathryn Cave, eds. 16 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1978–1984), 8:3040–41 (entry for Friday 8 May 1807) and 9:3401 (entry for Friday 17 February 1809).

ILLUSTRATION 8. John Linnell, *Sir Thomas Baring.* Courtesy of Archives, ING Barings.

ing and writing in the scenes of genre painting permits us not only to see these records-related activities as such, but also to broaden our vision of who and what is represented in art. Consider, for example, the painting entitled *The Lord is My Shepherd* by Eastman Johnson (1824–1906). *(Illus. #9)* One of several paintings Johnson made of slaves and recently freed slaves, this small canvas from 1863 may well be the first representation of an African American in the act of reading. The immediate context of the painting would have been understood by those who viewed it at the time it was executed. Contemporaries knew that it had been illegal to teach slaves to read in most southern states before the Civil War. Whatever interest pious masters may have had in teaching their slaves how to read so they could study the Bible was always more than outweighed by the fear that slaves, once literate, might also read all kinds of other things, including abolitionist tracts. Only with emancipation, formally proclaimed in the very year of Johnson's work, could slaves legitimately acquire literacy. The painting thus presented to contemporaries a scene that was new and unusual.[13]

The reading man in *The Lord is My Shepherd* is not identified or named. The very fact that the painting has an allegorical rather than descriptive title indicates that this is not a particular person whom Johnson wants to portray. Rather, this reader is a generic figure, and that indeterminacy is reinforced by the shadows which obscure the details of his face. He sits in a homely cabin, reading intently from a small but thick book. The painting's title invites us to infer that it is a Bible, and the reader is lost in contemplation or prayer. Too literal an interpretation of the title, however, may not be supportable. The well-known phrase is the opening line of the 23rd psalm, and the Book of Psalms occurs about halfway through the Hebrew Bible. Yet this reader has his book open to one of the very first pages: we can see the thickness of the book on the right-hand side, representing the text still to come if one is reading a book straight through from start to finish. If it is a Bible this man is reading, he is in Genesis, not Psalms. It is possible, of course, that the volume is a psalm book only (in which case placement toward the beginning of the volume makes more sense), though a former slave with access to only a few books would probably have sought out a complete Bible rather than just a portion of it. In any case, too close an analysis of the book was probably beyond Johnson's intention. He focuses instead on the intensity with which his subject is reading, seeking the consolations of religion in the world of trouble which slaves and ex-slaves knew with special intensity.[14]

[13] On efforts, not always effective, to suppress slave literacy, see Janet D. Cornelius, *"When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), and Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 239–43. For a general discussion of Johnson, see Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 107–20.

[14] *The Lord is My Shepherd* is in the collections of the National Museum of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. It is similar to another Johnson painting entitled *The Chimney Corner* (also 1863), which is in the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York.

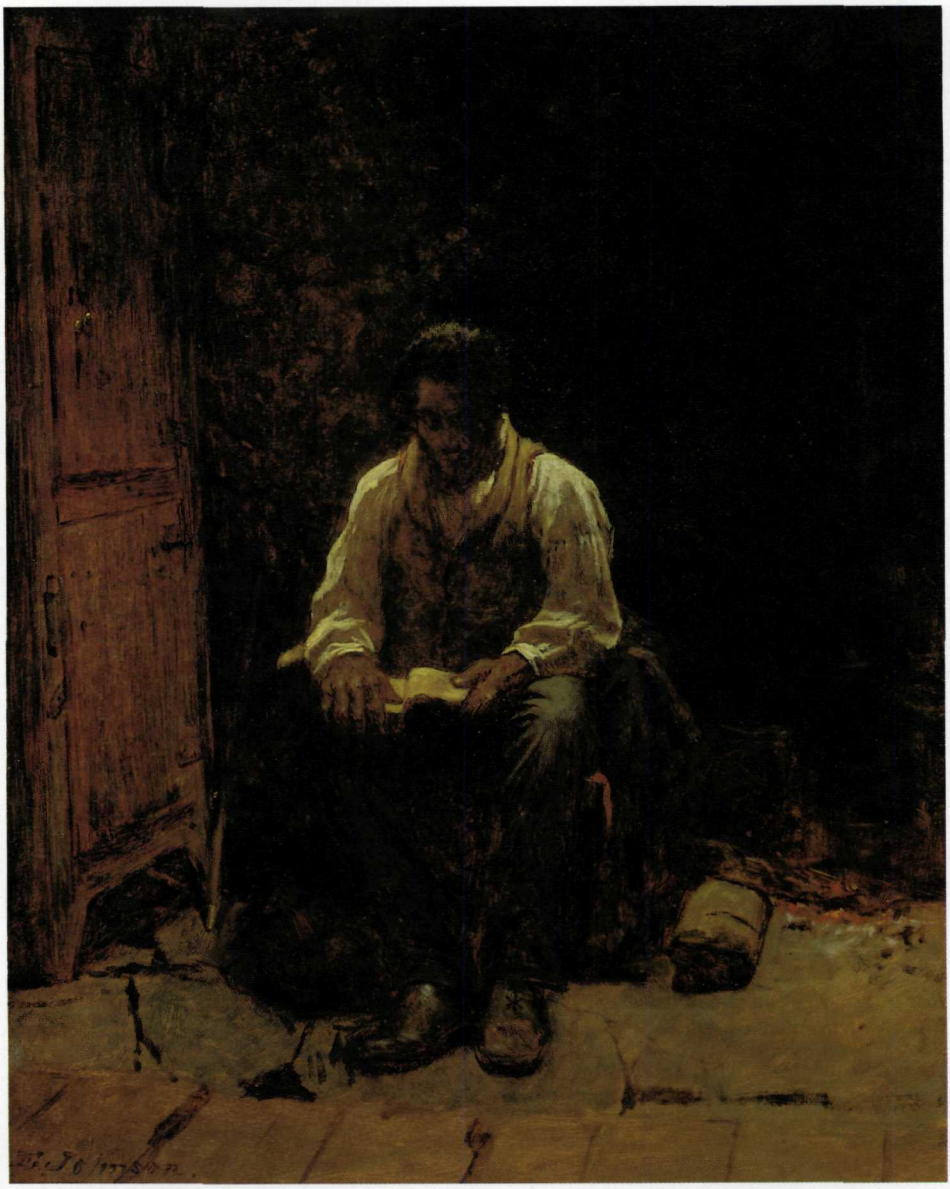

ILLUSTRATION 9. Eastman Johnson, *The Lord is My Shepherd.* Courtesy of National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Frances P. Garvan.

Paintings which depict the act of writing are also worth noting. To be sure, virtually any portrait subject could be presented with pen in hand. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain and America, anyone sufficiently well off to commission a portrait was almost certainly literate, and thus a writing tool would never be out of place. A famous portrait of John Hancock by John Singleton Copley, for instance, shows us not Hancock the politician but Hancock the merchant, with an enormous ledger book propped up in front of him and the young man actually keeping his accounts. Like reading, however, writing is perhaps best represented in genre painting, as in *The Letter* of 1890–1891 by Mary Cassatt (1844–1926). *(Illus. #10)* Cassatt produced many paintings of readers and writers, most of them women. This one shows a young woman in a blue print dress, sitting at a high desk with its writing surface folded down over her lap. A lone sheet of paper lies on it, and the subject seems to be looking down at it as she licks an envelope closed. No writing is visible on either the paper or the envelope; no pen or pencil is apparent; nor has the woman yet put a stamp on the envelope. At first sight, the composition of the painting seems wrong. If the paper on the table is the letter of the title, then the writer is mistakenly sealing the envelope before enclosing what she has written. On a second look, however, we realize that Cassatt has captured the multilayered process of record creation. The sheet of paper on the desk is an incoming letter, which the writer has just answered. Having written her response, she is now sealing it in the envelope before sending it on its way. We get no clue as to the identity of this woman's correspondent nor of the subject of their interchange, but we are catching the process of correspondence in the very middle. By inference and suggestion rather than by direct depiction, we are placed in the midst of the completely recognizable (at least in the 1890s, if less so in the present age of telephones and e-mail) act of letter writing.[15]

An artist's desire to portray a subject in meaningful surroundings and a sitter's wish to commemorate an event or achievement could coincide in the selection of real offices, studies, and props. Their detail may add a visual dimension to records which are now kept out of their original physical context. Group portraits, in particular, consistently give reliable access to contemporary working practices and methods. This privileged entree becomes increasingly important the further we are from the time and place of the work. Lowes Cato Dickinson's (1819–1908) rendering of Gladstone's cabinet meeting in May 1868 *(Illus. #11)* is one example from the many depictions of political groups, clubs, and diplomatic conventions. Dickinson gives a prominent place to writing and records, which seem quite at home in the working scene he depicts. His care with setting shows ministers of state doing the Queen's business, but equally the portrait highlights documents as the allies of men of affairs.

[15] The standard biography of Cassatt is Nancy Hale, *Mary Cassatt* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975). The handsome writing desk was a real one, owned by the artist and presented to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, by the Cassatt family in 1997.

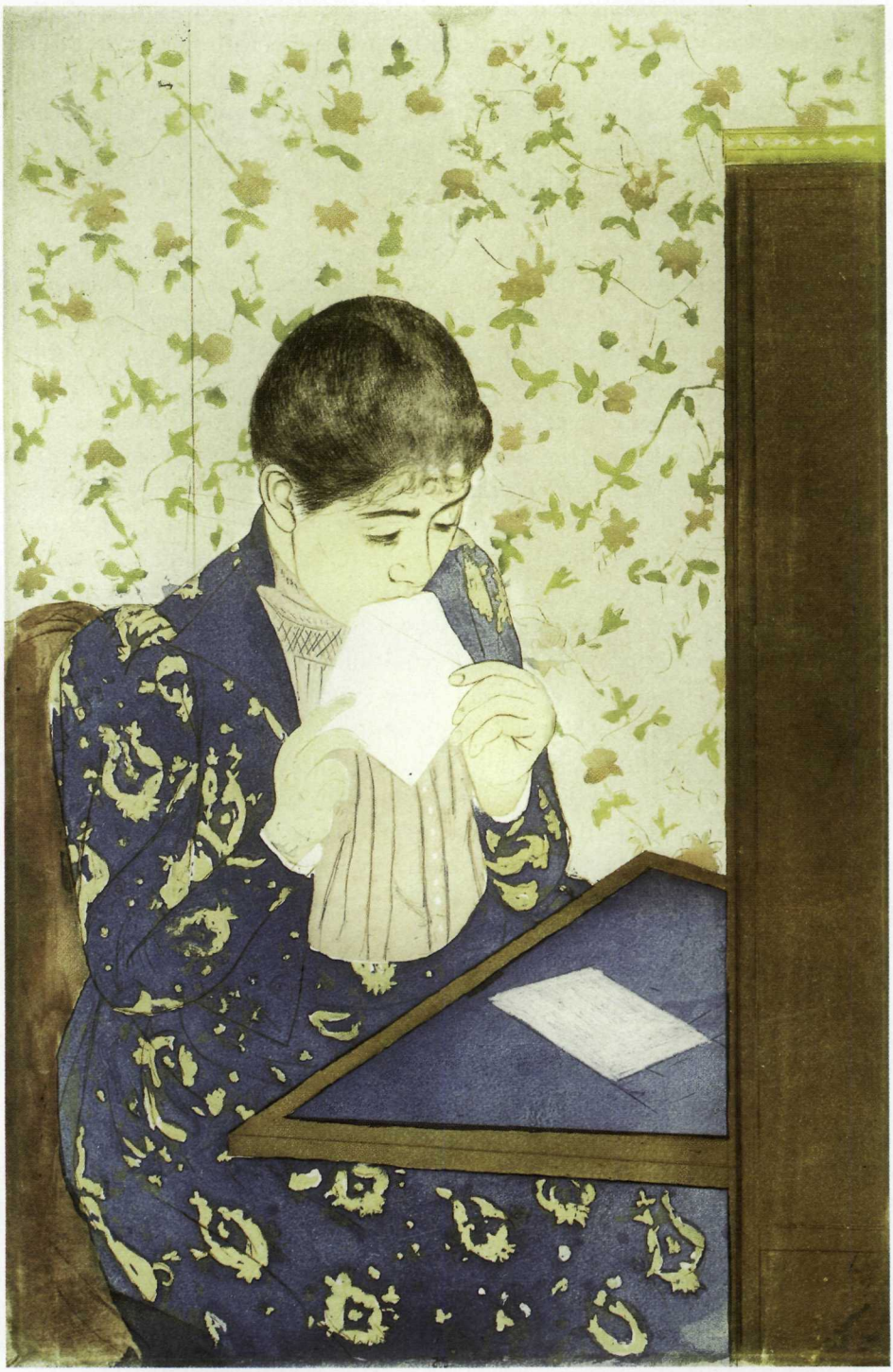

ILLUSTRATION 10. Mary Cassatt, *The Letter*. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Paul J. Sachs, 1916.

ILLUSTRATION 11. Lowes Cato Dickinson, *Gladstone's Cabinet of 1868.* Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

William Orpen's (1878–1931) engaging portrait of David Lloyd George, British Prime Minister and World War I leader, depicts him posed pensively at his desk, perhaps during a reflective pause in the course of dealing with business pressed in the various types of documents strewn about. *(Illus. #12)* In fact Orpen suggests the place, an office or study perhaps, and the moment, perhaps Lloyd George at work, by posing the subject at a desk and among papers which are only suggested in likeness. Our eye is drawn to the man but also to the props, particularly the rigid metal spike, or "file," on the desk to Lloyd George's right. "Files" used to be common objects in offices especially to hold completed papers, drafts, or notes. No one document is fully developed in Orpen's portrait, yet the scene is nonetheless set, the activities suggested, and the means unmistakable. This portrait and our reading of it demonstrates, more clearly than any other, the role of the viewer in establishing meaning.

In the hand of the most skilled artists, props could be powerful metaphors. Hans Holbein's group portrait of Henry VIII and the Barber Surgeons dominates the main hall of the Barber Surgeons Company where it has hung since it was painted around 1540. *(Illus. #13)* The painting is not about persons or a historical event, although each is named. Rather it is about power and its source—whence it emanates and how it is exercised in society. Henry VIII, in full regalia, wields the sword of state in his right hand. He hands the Master of the Company, Thomas Vicary, a document which appears to be a charter. In actuality no charter was issued by Henry to the Barber Surgeons. However, one

ILLUSTRATION 12. Sir William Orpen, *David Lloyd George, 1st Earl Lloyd-George.* Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

was granted by Edward IV in 1462 to incorporate the Company of Barbers, a predecessor of the Barber Surgeons. In 1540, the year of this commission, the Company of Barbers and the Guild of Surgeons were united, not by charter but by Act of Parliament. The artist's image shows the source of union in an office and in a document.

Holbein's portrait subordinates individual human character to the importance of the moment and the majesty of the state. The result is a picture of great impact which glorifies the Tudor monarchy. The document in Henry's hand, like the sword of state, represents power and its manner of working in the world from the sovereign to the subject. Holbein's portrait and its props give concrete expression to abstract concepts of sovereignty, privilege, and power.

Even more interesting are those works of art in which records and documents are more than mere props and assume an even more central position, becoming in effect characters in the work. A master at accomplishing this effect

ILLUSTRATION 13. Hans Holbein, *Henry VIII and the Barber Surgeons.* Courtesy of the Worshipful Company of Barber Surgeons.

was Francis William Edmonds (1806–1863), a self-taught American painter who inherited some of the traditions of the Hudson River School. Edmonds was never quite able to make a living at his art, instead pursuing a career as a banker and a member of the boards of directors of several railroads. This connection to the world of affairs accustomed him to the uses of documents in human transactions, and he often incorporated them into his artistic work. His 1852 *The Speculator,* for instance, shows a real estate sharpy displaying a land development prospectus to an unsophisticated farmer and his wife, urging their investment on the promise that the railroad's coming through will increase the value of their holdings. *(Illus. #14)* The salesman displays a long sheet of paper, resembling a galley proof, which clearly shows the proposed rail line and the houselots subdivided along it. Edmonds would have known that this scene was repeated countless times, as often as not to the advantage of the speculator and the sorrow of the unsuspecting rubes.[16]

Edmonds's *Taking the Census* (1854) presents an even livelier and ultimately richer scene in which manuscripts and books are central. *(Illus. #15)* The artist has brought us into the main room of a farm house that is modest but with some signs of respectability: there is a handsome clock on the mantle, for instance, and books here and there in the room. A census taker stands on the right side, writing down some information in the book he holds. Next to him is

[16] *The Speculator,* also known as *The Real Estate Agent,* is in the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. For a discussion of it, see Maybelle Mann, *Francis William Edmonds* (Washington, D.C.: International Exhibitions Foundation, 1975), 44, and H. Nichols B. Clark, *Francis W. Edmonds: American Master in the Dutch Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 100–2.

ILLUSTRATION 14. Francis William Edmonds, *The Speculator.* Courtesy of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Ruth C. and Kevin McCann in affectionate memory of Dwight David Eisenhower, 34th President of the United States.

his young assistant, carrying another manuscript volume under his arm and holding up an ink well with a second quill pen in it, ready whenever the census taker needs it as he records the information he is gathering. On the other side of the fireplace stands a farmer, in front of his wife, who holds an infant on her lap; the other children in the family are clustered behind their mother on the left, observing the entire scene. One of the children, a boy, has his forefinger to his lips, making a sly shushing, the meaning of which is not immediately obvious. The farmer is counting something out on his fingers, apparently enumerating a portion of his property in response to a question from the census taker. Edmonds has captured a precise moment of record making—indeed, the making of a record with which anyone who has used a manuscript census schedule will be familiar.[17]

In fact, Edmonds has done more than that, portraying not just any moment of records creation but rather the creation of a very specific record:

[17] *Taking the Census,* which is privately owned, is currently on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The painting is discussed in Clark, *Francis W. Edmonds,* 107–9.

ILLUSTRATION 15. Francis William Edmonds, *Taking the Census*. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Lent by Diane Wolf, Daniel Wolf, and Mathew Wolf.

the federal census of 1850. In effect, this painting is a portrait of that census. The Constitution had mandated that a population count be taken every ten years, primarily for the purpose of apportioning representation in Congress. Over time, however, the information gathered by the census grew to include all kinds of data about the American people. The count of 1850 was notable at the time for its detail and completeness, and the information it collected has been useful to historians ever since. It was in 1850, for example, that the most detailed enumeration ever was made of the slave population. Because census takers that year were seeking so much information, many citizens found it intrusive, and for the first time there was widespread resistance to the census and countless examples of poor compliance. Some people were leery of telling the government too much, fearful of increased taxation: if respondents admitted fully to how much property they held, the information might work against them when the tax man followed the census taker. This fear apparently explains the gesture of the son in Edmonds's painting, encouraging his father to keep silent about some of the family's property, which the farmer is counting on his fingers. While what we are witnessing here is a portrayal of the record-making process, it may also show the origins of a new concern for privacy, a deliberate withholding of information from those (even, or perhaps especially, the government) whom the subjects feel should not have it. All this background

would have been familiar to contemporaries who saw Edmonds's work; they would have known, from reading the newspapers if not from actually resisting the census themselves, that this scene had been replicated thousands of times in the recent past. For them, the painting thus had a topicality that is more obscure to us. By reconstructing the story around it, we can recognize a clear instance in which records are critical to the composition and meaning of a painting.[18] We can also see how fully documents had entered public consciousness, accepted here as entirely familiar.

Perhaps the best example of the centrality of documents in an American painting is the John Singleton Copley portrait of Samuel Adams (1722–1803), a work completed about 1772. *(Illus. #16)* Adams is often misremembered by history as a fiery rabble-rouser, but he was in fact an extraordinarily conservative revolutionary. He looked not to a brave new political and social world, but rather to a restoration of earlier times in which, he thought, civic virtue had flourished. Copley's portrait shows him in this seemingly contradictory light. It represents him in the midst of a specific and very well known incident, almost as a snapshot or news photograph might have done a century later. It is March 6, 1770, the day after the Boston Massacre, in which British soldiers had fired into an unruly crowd, killing five. The incident served as the flashpoint for growing opposition to the colonial government, and a hastily called town meeting demanded that the troops be withdrawn immediately. Adams and fourteen other leading citizens were authorized to present this demand to the governor, the hapless Thomas Hutchinson, and it is this confrontation that we see represented in Copley's portrait. In fact, the viewer essentially assumes the role of Governor Hutchinson, face to face with his longtime antagonist.[19]

The scene is a vivid one. Adams is so tense that we can see the bulging veins in his hands. He stands in a darkened room, the light coming from the left to illuminate him, one fist clenched and the other hand dramatically pointing, his unblinking eyes staring straight at us. The only other things visible in the painting are documents. In his tightened right hand, he holds a rolled up sheaf of papers, and these, we can see, are identified as "Instructions of the Town of Boston," the official protest which it is his duty to present. The identification is written across the top of the outside sheet, just as legal documents were sometimes labeled before folding and placement in upright files. The fist rests on an open, manuscript book. Its writing is not legible, but it is intended to represent the journal of the colony's House of Representatives, another locus of opposi-

[18] On the sometimes controversial history of the census, see Margo J. Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), and several of the essays in William Alonso and Paul Starr, eds., *The Politics of Numbers* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987).

[19] The most recent popular biography of Adams is William M. Fowler, Jr., *Samuel Adams: Radical Puritan* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), which goes part of the way toward undoing the earlier view of Adams as simply a radical propagandist. See also Pauline Maier, "Coming to Terms with Samuel Adams," *American Historical Review* 81 (February 1976): 12–37, and James M. O'Toole, "The Historical Interpretations of Samuel Adams," *New England Quarterly* 49 (March 1976): 82–96.

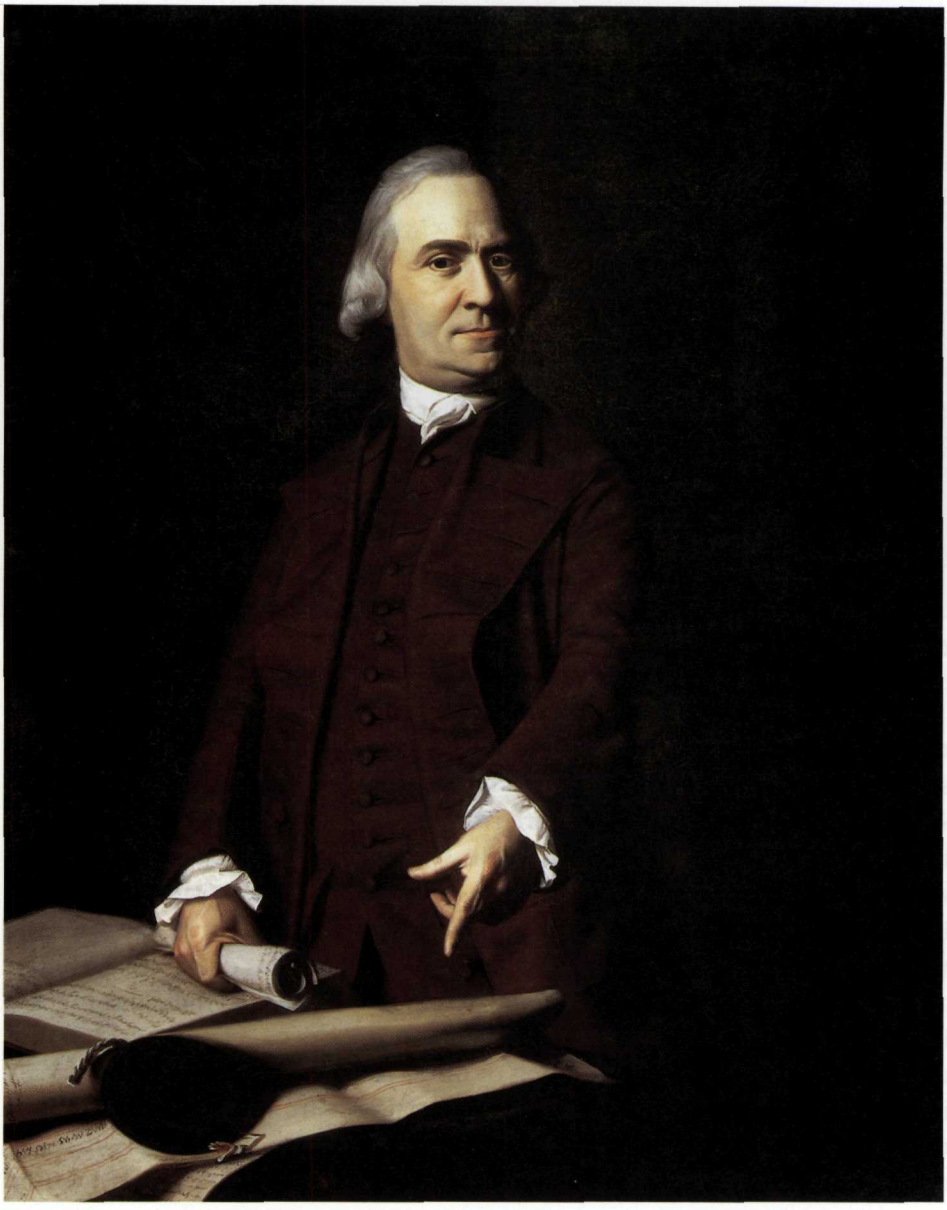

ILLUSTRATION 16. John Singleton Copley, *Samuel Adams.* Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reproduced with permission. © 2000 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. All rights reserved.

tion to the royal administration. Most important is the large document spread out on the table to which Adams is sternly pointing with his left hand. It is the colony's charter, complete with the large wax seal, granted by King William and Queen Mary in 1693. As the foundation of the colony's government and of its citizens' "rights of Englishmen"—the phrase would grow increasingly common as the Revolution neared—it was the ultimate authority to which the aggrieved could appeal.[20] The three documents, each with a distinct meaning and significance, are every bit as much characters in the painting as Adams himself. They specify the incident portrayed, but they also explain Adams's political philosophy. "Here, in these documents," Adams seems to be saying, "is the foundation for our position, the basis for our demand that the oppressive soldiers be removed." Samuel Adams painted without these documents would simply not be the same person. The documents have become entirely integral to the work of art, and the viewer's attention is called to them no less than to the man who points at them. This is perhaps as close as any American painting has ever come to presenting an actual portrait of documents.

Conclusion

What does the study of archives in art give us that is useful beyond personal enjoyment? Artists and archivists may share an interest in the concept of representation but this common ground is narrow compared to the differences which separate them. Each focuses on a different type of reality and uses quite different techniques to represent it. Archivists deal with "information objects," and largely with those that are continuously produced by functions and activities in everyday life. They represent records by description, which is expressed in text and controlled by standards. The portrait artist, by contrast, focuses on a human subject and a unique life. Artists' language and grammar is visual, and their argument—if that term can be used for the meaning of artwork—is largely aesthetic. In fact, artists make conscious use of symbols or other visual keys to convey many meanings which can emerge from the portrait in layers—from the obvious reality it depicts to that which is only accessible through icons or symbols.[21] Artists may suggest by allusion, while archivists aim to be as explicit as possible. There is no room for playful or profound ambiguity in archival representation.

[20] This painting, which is in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is analyzed in Carrie Rebora, et al., *John Singleton Copley in America* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), 275–78. The Massachusetts charter has had an interesting recent history. Long on display in the museum of the State House in Boston, the first page and the seal were stolen in 1984 in a daring daylight robbery. The page was recovered a few months later, and the seal was returned in 1997, long after most local archivists had given it up for permanently lost.

[21] Symbols in art comprise an international language. A good introduction to symbols relevant to archivists is provided by the following essays in Helen E. Roberts, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Comparative Iconography: Themes Depicted in Works of Art* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998): "Logos/word" 1: 525–27; "Labor/trades/occupation" 1: 477–82; "Money" 2: 617–21; "Reading" 2: 767–70 and "Vanity/vanitas" 2: 883–89.

These differences between artist and archivist are significant. Even so, the contrast in their objects, language, and methods has the potential to reveal places we have never seen and notions we may overlook or discount. The totality of context is complex and rarely completely transparent to us. Place and time are a large part of the context for records. These are elusive once they have passed away, and they are difficult to recall through texts. Portraits can help us conceptualize the settings for reading and writing and show, for example, how documentary practices were woven with a physical place. They do this uniquely any time and are, in addition, our only visual source before the invention of the camera. Visual artists have a unique power to transcend the apparently neutral persona of documents as modes of communication and means of administration. They can imbue them with overtones of power, civic achievement, and social position. Portrait representations of documentary practices often have imbedded in them symbols for ideas and metaphors and for concepts that mattered to the artist, the sitter, and their society.

Archivists have a dual personality. On the one hand they are cognizant of the utilitarian role of records in administration and the law. From this perspective they view the meaning of documents as largely fixed by explicit procedure, albeit procedure in a context. On the other hand, they are sensitive to the historical changes in records and the contingent circumstances in which they thrived. From this perspective archivists are uneasy about notions of fixed meanings and welcome the changing insights of historically based scholarship. This side of the archivist's personality seeks to reestablish the many layers of context, emphasizing the impact on records of ideas abroad in society which are frequently not explicit, either in the documents or in their immediate source. The tensions between these views are real, but they are not necessarily irreconcilable; nor are archivists really the professional schizophrenics these different interests suggest.

Both types of interest seem to be less in conflict when the archivist's knowledge is deployed in another discourse. Our brief excursion into portraits and genre paintings, seeking to understand the role of documents in them, demonstrates how bridges can be built between these apparently contending versions of archives. While we could argue that the license of the artist compromises the literal truth of documents in portraits, we maintain instead that their use as symbols and metaphors gives us access to ideas about documents that may not be as clearly transmitted by plain text alone. The portrait artist's integration of people, setting, and ideas may help us to grasp better the cultural context of information artifacts, contributing, on a basic level, to our job of keeping archives through the description, or representation, of legacy records and records systems. Every bit of information about the contemporary settings for documents and writing also enriches the archivist's and user's experience of historical documents today. Enrichment, we argue, is sufficient justification for exploring art; that it also can be practical is a bonus.