



Colonial Williamsburg

EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION

**THE POST-REVOLUTIONARY WAR'S ARTISTIC SCENE REVEALED
IN NEW EXHIBITION SHOWING
THE RICH ARRAY OF PORTRAITURE
TO OPEN AT THE ART MUSEUMS OF COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG
IN MID-NOVEMBER 2017**



This paintings exhibition will include works from both Colonial Williamsburg's decorative arts and folk art collections.

After the Revolutionary War, the number of painters who turned their livelihoods to painting portraits increased dramatically. This was a response to the demand for painted likenesses from an emerging middle class. Previously restricted to the politically and wealthy elite, material goods like portraits became popular among Americans who wanted a lasting visual document of themselves, family members or loved ones. On November 18, 2017, a new, long-term exhibition will open at the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum, one of the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg, which will showcase more than 30 Southern portraits made between 1780 and 1840. ***Artists on the Move: Portraits for a New Nation*** will focus on works from the Chesapeake region of Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C., and those areas to the West and South, places where American settlers migrated after the Revolutionary War. Nearly three-quarters of the portraits on view will be new to visitors; these works are either new accessions to the collections or are newly conserved. Among the portraits are works by notable artists including Charles Willson Peale, Charles Peale Polk, Gilbert Stuart, Thomas Sully and Cephas Thompson. The exhibition will be on view through December 2019.

“These important portraits enhance our core mission and shine a light on aspects of early American society in a manner rarely seen in a single exhibition,” said Mitchell B. Reiss, president and CEO of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. “Through these portraits, guests of our Art Museums will better understand the lives of the subjects, the artists who painted them and their roles in our nation’s enduring story.”

“The Colonial Williamsburg collection is ideally suited for explorations of this kind,” said Ronald L. Hurst, the Carlisle Humelsine chief curator and vice president for collections, conservation, and museums. “The works have been chosen not only for their artistic merits, but for the compelling history they illuminate.”

Several new accessions to the Colonial Williamsburg collections will debut in *Artists on the Move: Portraits for a New Nation*. One such pair of portraits acquired in 2016 is ***Portrait of General Peter Buell Porter***, an oil on panel painted ca. 1818, and ***Portrait of Letitia Breckinridge Porter (Mrs. Peter Buell Porter)***, an oil on canvas painted ca. 1818, both made in Lexington, Kentucky, by Matthew Harris Jouett, considered one of that state's finest artists. Jouett studied with Gilbert Stuart and enjoyed a brief but successful career, to the frustration of his father who had encouraged him to pursue a career in law instead of art. (The elder Mr. Jouett had complained of his son, "I sent Matthew to college to make a gentleman of him, and he has turned out to be nothing but a damned sign painter.") Jouett's sitter, General Porter, served in Congress and later as New York's Secretary of State in 1816 and United States Secretary of State in 1828-29. He married the daughter of John Breckenridge and Mary Hopkins Cabell, Virginians who relocated to Kentucky. The artist painted several versions of this couple. Colonial Williamsburg's new accessions include a panel and an oil on canvas. Together here, they will show two of the artist's different working styles.

According to Laura Pass Barry, Juli Grainger curator of paintings, drawings and sculpture who organized this *Artists on the Move*, "A strength of the show will be the exhibition of works by highly accomplished, academic artists shown alongside portraits by lesser trained painters. The intent is to showcase the rich aesthetic variety of portraits created in this period. Regardless of training, background or skill, these artists were inspired by similar motivations and working towards a similar end—the creation of a personalized likeness—but their results varied incredibly."

For some of the portraits in the Colonial Williamsburg collections, the need for major conservation work has kept them from public view. One such pair of portraits will premiere in *Artists on the Move: Portraits for a New Nation* following significant treatment: ***Portrait of Charles Henry Robertson*** and ***Portrait of Margaret Frances Osborne Robertson (Mrs. Charles Henry Robertson)***, both oil on tulip poplar panels painted between 1825 and 1830 in Charlotte County, Virginia. The portrait subjects are said to have been childhood sweethearts; the paintings were made around the time of their 1828 marriage. Several details make these portraits unusual: first, the full-frontal pose illustrated by Charles is uncommon in an oil portrait of an adult. Next, while window views are commonly seen in nineteenth-century portraits, the Robertsons' are unusual in the large expanses and fine detailing of the interior woodwork that serves as the figures' backdrops. Family tradition claims the Robertsons were depicted at "Pineland," their home in Charlotte County, Virginia. The works were acquired and were in need of care. Flaking paint, discolored varnish, past restoration and a break in one of the panels prompted conservation by the Colonial Williamsburg team.

Portrait of Eliza Jameson by **Thomas Jefferson Wright**, an oil on canvas, is a new, 2017 acquisition that joins two works by the same artist already in the Foundation's collection and shows the breadth and development of the artist's style. This portrait of Elizabeth Jameson (1803-1871) was completed by Wright during his time in Culpeper County, Virginia. Over the course of 1831-1832, Wright is known to have painted at least eight other members of her immediate family, including at least two versions of her parents, William and Elizabeth Major, as well as portraits of five siblings and one nephew. The Major family portraits may be the earliest works by the artist after he received some kind of formal training, possibly in Philadelphia. Wright received a letter of recommendation to Thomas Sully by the Kentucky portrait painter Matthew Harris Jouett (mentioned above). He wrote that Wright, "Visits Phila. With the view to avail himself of the helps, of the academy and the artists in portrait painting...Of his abilities I cannot speak decisively [but] They are reputed promising in this country." The sitter, Elizabeth Thatcher Corbin Jameson, spent her entire life in Culpeper County, Virginia. She married John Jameson II in 1825, and the couple had at least ten children, most of who died as infants or at a young age. Her portrait, taken when she was about 28 years old, depicts the young mother in exuberant fashion and color. Curators believe the paintings were saved from ruin during the Civil War, based on areas of paint cracking consistent with canvases that were intentionally cut from their stretchers and folded.

Another recent accession to be featured in the exhibition is attributed to the renowned artist Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828): ***Portrait of Elizabeth Gilmor***, an oil on canvas painted in Washington, DC (ca. 1803). This

portrait has an interesting story dating back 50 years. In 1967, Mary Mercer Carter Stewart Vivian bequeathed to the Foundation two portraits dated 1788 by Charles Willson Peale. The sitters are Baltimore residents Robert Gilmor, Sr. and his wife, Louisa Airey Gilmor and daughters. One of the daughters depicted in the Peale canvas is ten-year-old Elizabeth Gilmor. Recently, Mrs. Vivian's granddaughter contacted the Foundation about another family portrait. New research has identified the sitter as Elizabeth Gilmor around 1803 shown as a respectable young woman. Even more exciting, the likeness has proved to be the work of Gilbert Stuart, who was then working in both Philadelphia and Washington.

Artists on the Move: Portraits for a New Nation is funded by generous support from The Grainger Foundation of Lake Forest, Illinois.

For anyone interested in American portraiture of the period, whether in the fine or folk art styles, or anyone fascinated by the stories of the elite as well as working class in the day, *Artists on the Move: Portraits for a New Nation* promises to illuminate these people as well as to spotlight the painters who created these works of art.

*Images (left to right): *Portrait of General Peter Buell Porter*, Matthew Harris Jouett, Lexington, Kentucky, ca. 1818, oil on panel, Museum Purchase, 2016-195; *Portrait of Letitia Breckinridge Porter (Mrs. Peter Buell Porter)*, Matthew Harris Jouett, Lexington, Kentucky, ca. 1830, oil on canvas, Museum Purchase, 2016-196; *Portrait of Charles Henry Robertson*, Charlotte County, Virginia, probably 1825-1830, oil on tulip poplar panel, gift of the Boswell family in memory of the subject's great-great-grandson, John Iverson Boswell, 2012.100.2; *Portrait of Margaret Frances Osborne Robertson (Mrs. Charles Henry Robertson)*, Charlotte County, Virginia, probably 1825-1830, oil on tulip poplar panel, gift of the Boswell family in memory of the subject's great-great-grandson, John Iverson Boswell, 2012.100.3; *Portrait of Eliza Jameson*, Thomas Jefferson Wright, Culpeper County, Virginia, 1831, oil on canvas, Museum Purchase, 2017.100.1; *Portrait of Elizabeth Gilmor*, attributed to Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828), Washington, D.C., ca. 1803, oil on canvas, Museum Purchase, The Friends of Colonial Williamsburg Collections Fund, 2015-158.