A SPEECH GIVEN ON THE OCCASION OF THE EXHIBITION COLONIAL & FEDERAL PORTRAITS BY JAMES THOMAS FLEXNER

Portrait of Brigadier General Samuel Waldo by Robert Feke
on Display at the Wildenstein Gallery

A SPEECH

Given on the Occasion of the

EXHIBITION

Colonial & Federal Portraits

BY JAMES THOMAS FLEXNER

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BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART
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INTRODUCTION

THE *exhibition, "Colonial and Federal Portraits at Bowdoin College," at the gallery of Wildenstein and Company, New York City, in September of* 1966 *marked the first time in its* 153*-year history that the collection was seen in its entirety outside of Brunswick, Maine. An event of great significance for the College and for the history of American painting, the importance of the exhibition was emphasized by the publication of an exhaustive catalogue of the collection, written by Marvin S. Sadik and supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation, and by the inaugural speech of the dean of historians of American painting, James Thomas Flexner. As a writer and lecturer on American art, Mr. Flexner hardly needs an introduction. It should be added, however, that his numerous books—from* America's Old Masters, *published in* 1939, *through* American Painting: That Wilder Image, *published in* 1962*—have established themselves not only as history but also as literature, an enviable distinction in this Age of the Specialist.*

We have thought it fitting to commemorate the exhibition by the publication of Mr. Flexner's speech. Although a year —and more—has since passed, his comments are as pertinent now as then. They will remind those who attended of a delightful occasion, and they will give to those friends of Bowdoin and its collections who were unable to attend an opportunity to learn of Mr. Flexner's insights. The speech celebrates

the quality and importance of Bowdoin's heritage. In doing so, it reaffirms Bowdoin's desire to meet the challenges of maintaining one of the leading small college museums in the nation.

RICHARD V. WEST
Curator

WHEN I was invited to speak on this occasion, it seemed clear to me in very general terms what ought to be said. The occasion being the visit to my native city of one of the very old American art collections, a collection that goes back to important eighteenth-century beginnings in American art, my theme should obviously be Bowdoin's connection with the long span of aesthetic creation in America. But how to make the point was another matter.

I am sure that you have all agreed to deliver speeches at one time or another, and thus you are familiar with the psychological steps that follow. You write the date down in your engagement book and observe with a certain relief that your notation is pages and pages ahead of the part of the book in which you are writing your current engagements. The speech is clearly scheduled for some future time that may never come. In any case, months lie ahead, so why worry?

But the months pass, and one night you wake up unhappily from a dream in which you were back at college and suddenly faced with taking a final examination for a course you had forgotten you had enrolled in. After a few minutes of wakefulness the reference finally comes clear: That speech: it is now only a few weeks away. Panic!

I am old enough in the verbal game to feel confident

that if you can only get started, you can continue and finish a speech—but how was I to get started? A Harvard man, how was I to speak to Bowdoin graduates about treasures they have always cherished?

My panic concerning this speech sailed in over the darkened fields of West Cornwall, Connecticut, where I spend the summers. We have learned in West Cornwall to rely for everything on the general store, but I did not expect Yutzler's Country Store to come to my rescue in this dilemma. However, it did by supplying me with a copy of the *New York Times*.

There was an article headed: "Art Chiefs Study Their Jobs Here; 38 Administrators Attend a Culture Game Seminar." The story explained that New York University was holding a seminar for administrators of community art councils and centers, "one of the newest specialties," as the paper pointed out, "in a specialized age." William R. Taylor, identified as Professor of American History at the University of Wisconsin, had been imported to give the fledgling art administrators a historical background. "It was a gloomy view," the *Times* reported. "He spoke of the way Americans have sustained hostility to the arts over a good part of their history."

Professor Taylor's gloomy view is refuted by this exhibition that we shall all visit as soon as I am happily silent and this dinner is adjourned.

That it does supply a refutation is to my mind one of the very important contributions of the Bowdoin Col-

lege Museum of Art. It is not one of the largest collections in the United States, although in one major particular—as I shall point out in a moment—it is incontrovertibly the greatest. However, it is an important collection that goes far back in the history of American culture, back beyond the founding of Bowdoin College itself, back before the American Revolution and the birth of the United States. The collection has grown charmingly, naturally, and effectively with the growth of America to this moment, more than two centuries after a happy beginning in our culture which—as I shall again point out—is exemplified in the collection itself. And, gathering here tonight, we can feel confident that the collection will continue to grow far into the lifetime of our descendants, to be an inspiration to them as it should be to us.

I have quoted with some asperity the gloomy view of Professor Taylor that Americans have almost always been hostile to art. The statement, although far from correct, is of considerable cultural significance because it has so often been made, not only in the present day but also down through the generations to the very beginnings of self-conscious American culture. The statement is usually accompanied by the contention that this opposition to art has recently evaporated. To use the term most commonly employed, American art has finally "come of age." Every generation contends that it has at long last seen American culture come of age.

We hear the contention today. There has just been a

cultural explosion. For the first time, Americans have become concerned with culture; for the first time, American painters have reached a stature that makes them admired abroad. It has been utterly forgotten that at the time of the American Revolution we sent painters to England who led in the evolution of European art and were admired across the European continent. And almost all the subsequent glories of American art are almost unknown to our self-appointed aesthetes. Convinced that in their own generation our art is belatedly coming of age despite a continuing American hostility to art, the average cultured American refuses even to look at what has been done before in his own world.

This perpetual wail is in itself a demonstration of America's lack of hostility to art, of eagerness even if it takes a frustrated form. Why it has taken this form is a matter too complicated for us to consider this evening although I might point out that it is a strange phenomenon. The inhabitants of most nations gain a sense of self-satisfaction from boasting, often to an exaggerated extent, of the cultural traditions they exemplify. Aesthetically minded Americans, however, too often get their sense of satisfaction by insisting that they personally are more cultured than their nation and their neighbors; that they are, indeed, aesthetic missionaries bringing artistic light to a people up to that moment benighted.

This is a free country, and every man has a right to play, without criticism, every harmless cultural game

he pleases. But this cultural game has not been harmless. It has, indeed, done much to encourage such aesthetic weaknesses as the attitude deplores.

The tendency of every generation to start over again, as if there had never previously been any American art, has been to aesthetic creation on these shores a major handicap. We need only compare our cultural attitudes to those of the French to realize what a great disservice we are doing to ourselves. A Frenchman emerges from the cradle in the belief that he inhabits clime which is Arcadia itself, the natural habitat of art. If he recalls a school of French painting not currently admired—like those overinflated nineteenth-century figure pieces which he derisively dismisses as "*style pompier*"—if he comes on such a school, he pushes it aside as untypical of the French. What is most typical of France is what is most beautiful. This attitude encourages Frenchmen to make and keep France beautiful.

On the contrary, the attitude of American cultural snobs encourages ugliness in America. The student of our Wisconsin professor, being told—with however many crocodile tears—that Americans have always been hostile to art, that they live, willy-nilly in an aesthetic jungle, is not encouraged to go out and do something about the ribbon building and the filling stations that destroy the beauty of our countryside. It is hard to get him interested in preserving the great architectural achievements of the American past—he has been assured that they are not worth preserving. I was told

only the other day that the French quarter of New Orleans is about to be overtopped by a two-story highway that will send trucks roaring through the air between the old houses and the Mississippi. There are some immediate economic advantages. Why not give in to them when one is assured that America never had any culture worth bothering about?

The collection we are going to visit this evening is a visible argument for the age of American culture. It goes back indeed to the very event that was, until recently, believed to mark the beginnings of the fine arts in America.

Modern researches have carried the history of American painting back to the 1660's and even exhumed some really beautiful pictures painted on these shores in the seventeenth century. However, it was once thought that the opening impetus was given to American painting by the arrival in New England during 1729 of a well-known and accomplished painter from old England, John Smibert. Even if we can now carry American painting further back, Smibert's arrival remains a key development. After a brilliant start in the seventeenth century, New England painting had lagged, particularly behind that of New York where there was in the 1720's a powerful school which I named, some years ago, the Patroon Painters. Smibert's influence revivified New England painting, making it the most powerful school on the continent, a leadership it held into the nineteenth century.

Smibert's contributions to American art were indeed double: he was a painter himself and an importer of European models for painters. Both of these directions are represented in the Bowdoin collections.

We shall find in the exhibition we shall visit in a moment two portraits by Smibert. They are sensitive, sober, unflamboyant. Evidence exists that Smibert left a successful career in England for the American colonies because of the perpetual pressure there was on him in an aristocratic society to paint glittering, flattering images. Amusingly enough, he encountered a similar pressure in Boston, where a successful merchant rather liked to be painted as if he were a lord. But in New England it was a pressure that could often be evaded—and he did successfully evade it in the two portraits which Bowdoin owns. Although prose rather than poetry, the pictures are technically accomplished works presenting a solid base for the development of a democratic portrait art.

More exciting to the modern imagination is the studio Smibert established in Boston which can be considered the first museum of European art on this continent. It remained more or less intact for many years after Smibert's death in 1751, becoming an adjunct to a paint shop kept by his nephew.

Let us imagine ourselves in the shoes of a young saddler from Maryland who had some ambitions to be a painter and whom the tides of life had landed in 1765 on the streets of Boston. The young man's name is Charles Willson Peale; he is to become one of the lead-

ing painters in America—and he will eventually write an autobiography. He tells us that he happened in Boston on a color shop which "had some figures with ornamental signs upon it. . . . Becoming a little acquainted with the owner of the shop, he told me that a relation of his had been a painter, and said he would give me a feast. Leading me upstairs, he introduced me into a painter's room, an appropriate apartment lined with green cloth or baize, where there were a number of pictures unfinished."* There were also copies of European masterpieces, old master drawings, and many prints.

Peale stared about him thunderstruck, for he had never known that the world of art was as rich as this. He stammered for a moment before he succeeded in asking the color dealer what had been the name of his wonderful uncle. Smibert, the man replied, John Smibert. Peale then mourned that Smibert was dead, and wondered whether any painters still lived who could equal him. The dealer told him about a man who resided down the street, a man called Copley.

That Copley was kind to Peale when he called, showed the young saddler his work, and lent him a painting to copy, is less germane to our subject than that many an American painter, including Copley himself, found inspiration in the Smibert collection of European art which Peale considered such a "feast." Today, some dishes from that feast are almost certainly in Bowdoin's

* I have translated Peale's autobiographical statement from the third person to the first person.

possession and a few may well await your tasting around the corner.

There is a cloud of evidence, which Mr. Sadik has in his catalogue of Colonial and Federal Portraits analyzed with an admirable conservatism, that when the Smibert collection was sold, parts of it were bought by James Bowdoin III and bequeathed by him to the college that bears his father's name. At the head of the list according to eighteenth-century ideas was a copy of Poussin's *The Continence of Scipio*, a canvas described and praised in many documents of the time. Two other copies of European masterpieces in Bowdoin's possession also seem to have come from Smibert's studio. Today we take copies less seriously than did the eighteenth century—we have other ways of becoming familiar with the great art of the past—and thus Smibert's copies did not make the trip down from Maine to New York.

However, examples from Bowdoin's fine collection of old master drawings did make the trip. You will notice that many of them, and some of the very best, came to Bowdoin College in 1811 through the bequest of James Bowdoin III. That this benefactor bought drawings from Smibert's collection is made clear by inscriptions on some of them. Exactly how many came from the source we do not know. It is agreeable to imagine that the great drawing by Breughel, which is the star of the collection, passed under Peale's eyes way back in 1765 when the young saddler yearned for art. In any case, the presence of this drawing and many others in

the Bowdoin collection as part of that first gift reveals that they have been cherished on these shores for more than 150 years.

Smibert had an American pupil—or, perhaps, I should say an American follower—who was a more charming painter than he, and was, indeed, our greatest artist of the first half of the eighteenth century. This artist's name was, as you know, Robert Feke, and of his best work Bowdoin owns a disproportionate share: five canvases out of the very small remaining *oeuvre* of an artist whose mature career lasted less than a decade. Most museums—the Metropolitan and the National Gallery are examples—do not own a great Feke. Bowdoin owns—I repeat—five including his most elaborate picture and only full-length, *General Samuel Waldo.*

When most under Smibert's influence, Feke painted as his master liked to do, shrewd character studies, but when he hit his mature stride he preferred—as the Bowdoin portraits show—a more lyrical view.

Looked at from the standards of the Old World, where class evolution was slow, so slow, the Colonial aristocrats were characters in a fairy tale. Cinderella rode down the streets of Boston in her pumpkin carriage, but she did not have to fear the chimes of midnight; her horses would never change back to mice. Sitting behind a ledger heavy with the records of prosperity, Dick Whittington knew that he had been his own puss in boots. Out of a frowning coast and a dark

forest had come a pot of gold; the rainbow's end rested permanently on New York. Wealth, position, grace, ample living; these were the gifts of America. How could you be crabbed and sad; you had to sing.

Feke's Bowdoin pictures are lyrical in mood, naïve in conception, simple in technique, bright in color (although some of the flesh tones seem to have faded). To these attributes, Feke added plasticity. He went further than any previous American-born painter into the third dimension, giving shape in addition to outline, adding weight to flat forms. He did this in a very simple manner. His men's figures are stylized into cones; his women's into a contrast between a few tight and expansive forms.

After 1750, the drift toward the Declaration of Independence expressed itself in portraiture by a rise to dominance of a prime concern with personal idiosyncrasy which had always been present as an undertone in American art. Significantly, once Feke had struck his elegant stride, low church ministers no longer sat to him. In a few decades these men of God were to be called by Tory orators "the black regiment," for they incited the Colonists to Civil War. Now they expressed, perhaps unconsciously, their disapproval of Colonial aristocratic dependence by shunning the accomplished Feke and leading their congregations to a humble man of the people who painted houses as well as portraits. His name was Joseph Badger and Bowdoin owns an excellent pickle-faced portrait from his brush.

I must confess that I have now begun to dip into a lecture on American Colonial painting in general that I have given on many other occasions. That I can do this so easily is an indication that the Bowdoin collection exemplifies extremely well the development of American portraiture in what was its great era: from Smibert through Stuart. You have a first-class Copley and a whole galaxy of Stuarts. Sully is well represented and Rembrandt Peale. But now that I am mentioning names, the realization comes over me that what is being exhibited in New York is only a small part of the holdings of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. I have just been working on a book about Winslow Homer and know that, through the activity of Professor Philip Beam and Marvin Sadik, you have just acquired the memorabilia from his Prout's Neck studio to add to fine pictures you already own. And, of course, if I allowed my feet to stray from my own path of American art, I would find myself confronted with a whole series of vistas where the Bowdoin collections shine. In the meanwhile, the pictures wait, and the moment has surely come for me to sit down. Congratulations and thank you.