

Basic Detail Report



Title: Benjamin Colman

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Date: c.1740

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@2905b

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: This portrait of the Boston merchant Benjamin Colman, painted in September 1739, was done as Smibert observed the twentieth anniversary of his Boston painting career. In many ways the portrait affirms his dogged allegiance to a late baroque painting style that placed a premium on a rich dark palette, absolute decorum, and methodical modeling of features. It is for these reasons that Colman's portrait recalls earlier images by Smibert, such as "Henry Collins" (1736; Redwood Library and Atheneum, Newport, R.I.). Colman is shown in a well-established merchant pose and attired in a typical, if stylistically conservative, richly colored frock coat and matching waistcoat. The letter in his hand, inscribed To / Mr Benjn Colman / Mercht / in / Bost [on], was one of the visual conventions of the day through which the artist was able to incorporate an informal label in the portrait. Just after the work was painted, Smibert succumbed to a lengthy illness, which effectively curtailed his activity as a painter. "Benjamin Colman" is one of fewer than a dozen portraits that survive from the last years of Smibert's career. Colman was born in Boston, October 28, 1710, the tenth child of John Colman and Judith Hobby Colman. John Colman was the elder brother of Reverend Dr. Benjamin Colman of the Church in Brattle Square whose portrait Smibert painted in 1734. Benjamin graduated from Harvard in 1727 and ranked among a handful of families at the pinnacle of Boston society.(1) On March 24, 1736, he married Deborah Oulton, daughter of John and Deborah (Legge) Oulton of Marblehead. On October 12, 1738, she died shortly after having given birth to their second child. Within less than a year Colman married Hannah Pemberton, a daughter of James and Hannah (Penhallow) Pemberton. Smibert had painted her portrait (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) in July 1734. Benjamin's portrait was apparently done to commemorate this second marriage. Colman fathered eleven children by his two wives. Like his father, Benjamin was a merchant. In 1741 he formed a partnership with Nathaniel Sparhawk, and five years later they reached the height of their activity and commercial success, when they supplied the uniforms to the Massachusetts troops assaulting Louisbourg and workmen, supplies, and construction material to the forces that remained there. Their financial success, however, was short lived, and by 1758 Colman's firm declared bankruptcy. Colman's death on April 20, 1765, his obituary identified him as "formerly a noted Merchant in this Town."(2) At one point the back of the canvas was inscribed "Henry Davenport was the owner October 1, 1878".(3) This inscription may now be hidden by a lining canvas. Davenport is said also to have owned Smibert's portrait of Hannah Pemberton.(4) RHS Bibliography: Henry Wilder Foote, "John Smibert, Painter" (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950); "The Notebook of John Smibert" (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1969); Richard H. Saunders, "John Smibert: Colonial America's First Portrait Painter" (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). NOTES: 1 . John

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Langdon Sibley and Clifford K. Shipton, "Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University, in Cambridge Massachusetts", 17 vols. (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1873-?), vol. 8, p. 130. 2. Obituary, "Boston Gazette", April 29, 1765. 3. Saunders, "John Smibert", p. 204. 4. Foote, John Smibert, p. 178. Dimensions: 49 3/4 x 39 3/4 in. (126.4 x 101 cm) Frame Dimension: 58 x 47 in. (147.3 x 119.4 cm)