

Basic Detail Report



Title: Gentleman with Attendant

Date: ca. 1785-88

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@283be

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Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: This portrait of an unidentified gentleman and his black servant has been assigned to Ralph Earl on the basis of style. Earl commonly signed and dated his portraits. While this canvas is unsigned, its edges may have been trimmed during lining, which may explain the absence of a signature. (1) William Sawitsky, an early scholar of American art who studied Earl's work in the 1930s and 1940s, first suggested that this portrait was by Earl and related it to the artist's New York period. (2) During his career, which spanned the years before and after the Revolution, Earl modified his portrait style to suit the changing tastes of his subjects--dictated partially by their altered status after the war, as citizens of a new nation, and by the different regions in which he worked, from such urban centers as New York City to rural Connecticut towns. "Gentleman with Attendant" relates stylistically to the society portraits that he painted during his confinement in debtor's prison in New York. There are approximately twenty portraits by Earl from the prison years, 1786 to 1788. For these works, the artist drew upon the lessons he had learned in London, painting distinguished likenesses of his elite subjects. In most instances, the compositions are simple, devoid of decorative details. The artist was likely provided with a room in the prison in which to paint but had to rely on his imagination for props. (3) In "Gentleman with Attendant", Earl presents his distinguished subject in fashionable attire, including a green coat with an elaborately embroidered floral silk vest with gold trim. The gentleman wears his own powdered hair rather than a wig; powder can be seen on the collar of his coat. He is seated in a red brocade armchair, placed against a plain dark background. In contrast, the gentleman's servant (or possibly slave), dressed in a red coat with a white collar, is placed against a light background. (Earl first employed the device of a two-toned wall as background in several of his English portraits. (4)) In this sensitive portrayal, the boy leans deferentially toward his master, extending a card in his left hand. While the gentleman confidently meets the viewer's gaze, the young boy stares faithfully toward him. His mouth is open, revealing his teeth, not a gesture that was appropriate for members of eighteenth-century society. Through these details of gesture and pose, Earl differentiates the social status of his two subjects, adhering to traditional British standards of social hierarchy. The inclusion of a black servant is rare in eighteenth century American portraiture. Other examples include Justus Englehardt Kuhn's "Henry Darnall III as a Child" (ca. 1710; The Maryland Historical Society) and John Hesselius, "Charles Calvert" (1761; Baltimore Museum of Art). As Elizabeth O'Leary has stated, "The portrayal of black servants in American art was built on British traditions of representing slaves as docile attendants, figures who functioned primarily to elevate the importance of white subjects." (5) This is the only known instance in which Earl included a black subject in his work. EMK

Bibliography: William and Susan Sawitsky, "Two Letters from Ralph Earl with Notes on His English Period," "Worcester Art Museum Annual 8" (1960): 8-41; Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, "Ralph Earl as an Itinerant Artist: Pattern of Patronage," in

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Peter Benes, ed., "Itinerancy in New England and New York: Annual Proceedings of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folk Life 1984" (1986): 172-90; Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, "Ralph Earl: Artist-Entrepreneur", Ph.D. diss, Boston University, 1988; Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser et al., "Ralph Earl: The Face of the Young Republic", exhib. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, "By Your Inimitable Hand": Elijah Boardman's Patronage of Ralph Earl, "American Art Journal 23", no. 1 (1991): 4-20. "Gentleman with Attendant (Gentleman with Negro Attendant)", ca. 1785-88 Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in. (78.1 x 65.4 cm) Harriet Russell Stanley Fund (1948.6) Notes: 1. For a discussion of Earl's New York portraits, see Elizabeth Nankin Kornhauser, with Richard L. Bushman, Stephen H. Kornhauser, 2. The painting was lined by Roger Dennis in 1969; see paintings files NBMAA. 3. William and Susan Sawitsky Papers, New-York Historical Society, New York. In his papers Sawitsky discusses this portrait, assigning it a date about 1886; however, he never published it as a work by Earl. 4. For a discussion of Earl's New York portraits, see Elizabeth Nankin Kornhauser, with Richard L. Bushman, Stephen H. Kornha and Aileen Dibeiro, Ralph Earl: The Face of the Young Republic exhib. Cat. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press; and Hartford: Wadsworth Athenaeum, 1991) pp. 30-39 5. Examples include "William Carpenter and Mary Ann Carpenter" (1779; Worcester Art Museum) and "Lady Williams and Child" (1783; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York); see Kornhauser et al., "Ralph Earl", pp. 25, 116-17. 6. Elizabeth L. O'Leary, "At Beck and Call: The Representation of Domestic Servants in Nineteenth-Century American Painting" (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), p.34 Dimensions: 30 3/4 x 25 3/4 in. (78.1 x 65.4 cm) Frame Dimension: 37 x 32 in. (94 x 81.3 cm)