

Portraits Introduce Restorer to University

Alumni Review Vol 32 (December, 1943): 95-98

A year ago, Dr. Arthur E. Bye came to the University a total stranger. He had been engaged to come to Chapel Hill and restore the oil portraits that hung in the two literary society halls and elsewhere about the campus. Dr. Bye is a professional restorer of oil portraits, being the official restorer of Princeton University and for various museums about the country. His introduction to the University was through the oil portraits which alumni remember so well on the walls of the Di and Phi Society halls and the other portraits here and there about campus. Last fall, a collection of the hundred or more portraits was exhibited in Person Hall Art Gallery and those who saw the exhibit were well pleased with the work, which Dr. Bye did. In his months at Chapel Hill, Dr. Bye became an ardent North Carolinian. He learned much about the history of the University's distinguished alumni and North Carolina's great men as he worked on his technical job. His story, related on these pages, is therefore a fine chapter of University and North Carolina history as well as a critique of the University's valuable collections of oil portraits. Dr. Bye is now at work in Raleigh, restoring portraits owned by the state of North Carolina.

By Arthur E. Bye

The restoration of the portraits at Chapel Hill has been for me a surprising and exhilarating experience; surprising because of the discovery of neglected (if not buried) treasure; -- exhilarating because of the acquaintanceships made with distinguished men who made North Carolina history.

Coming from another part of the country, I can, with little effort, look upon the collection here almost as a Philistine--but an open-minded Philistine, if you please, conscious of my ignorance of your traditions, and willing to learn. In other words, I didn't know Dobbin from Ruffin, nor Murphey from Calvin McNair.

You can imagine, therefore, the thrill, while restoring the fading features of such a man as, shall I say Paul C. Cameron, to learn that he was the only man in the Carolinas to remain wealthy after the War Between the States!

As I grew to know these casualties from the past, torn and wounded, but yet alive, made immortal by the brush of Peale, or Sully, Harding or Garl Browne, I grew to revere them, as men of ennobling influence, whose lives still touch upon our own. And it has been inspiring to me to work in the halls of the historic debating Societies, first in the dialectic Senate, and later in the Philanthropic Assembly, where most of the portraits once hung.

Here, as boys, the men whose portraits I was called upon to restore, once stood upon the rostra, made their first speeches, made history in fact, and thus prepared, went forth to public life. For this is what they did. Was in not in great part due to the training in these societies that such a

man as James Cochran Dobbin was able in the short span of his life of forty-three years, to archive such eminence in his state, that four years before his death, twenty-one years after graduating, he was called by President Pierce to be Secretary of the Navy, and in that short time revived the Navy which was termed the "Rip Van Winkle of our national defenses" and made it a vital force?

It was fitting that their portraits should hang here; impressive that their faces should look down upon the present generation; to work here made me feel like a North Carolinian myself. Yes, gradually I came to learn that Davie, whose portrait was on my operating table, connoted Davie Poplar; Cameron, the main artery of life in Chapel hill, at least of campus; Morehead, the graceful bell tower whose chimes enchanted me the first day of my arrival; and Caldwell, the foundation of the University itself. The names of these one hundred men were on every hand; at chapel I found them in Memorial Hall; when I crossed a street I found them on the curbs; nearly every building I entered seemed to have the name of Swain or Murphey, Hill or Kenan, over the door.

And it was not merely this contact with the personalities of those portrayed which made my work a thrilling experience, but the acquaintanceship I made with some artists I did not know before.

Perhaps North Carolinians themselves do not know how many excellent artists are represented in this collection--some of them of acknowledged eminence, others not, but deserving it. Those known as old masters are Charles Willson Peale, Thomas Sully represented by two portraits; William Dunlap, Chester Harding, Henry Inman, Eastman Johnson and William Garl Browne, this latter artist represented by at least 17 examples, while there are several outstanding portraits of anonymous authorship. Among these latter are the portraits of Thomas Ruffin and Bishop Otey.

I am often asked which do I think is the best portrait in the collection? It is always difficult to answer such a question; when I am asked "who is the greatest artist who ever lived?" I refuse to answer. Even for experts it is a matter of personal interpretation. But in the limited field of the pictures at Chapel Hill, and confining myself to the artists of the past, I do not mind suggesting that the portrait of Eastman Johnson is, perhaps, the best, although the portrait of John C. Calhoun is a close rival.

How do we judge what is good in a picture? I say it is a matter of interpretation. But we look for certain things. Back of every fine picture there is an artist, a man, who has been deeply, profoundly moved by some experience. This experience may be the perception of beauty, or of character, and the grater he himself is a man, and as a craftsman (for both insight and skill are needed), the more powerful are his feelings, the more he is stirred to express himself to others, that others may share the experience which so inflamed him. To put it another way, the artist, no matter what kind, is one who sees what the rest of us do not see, and who wishes to share his visions with us that we may appreciate and understand them. There are mediocre artists who are not so different from the rest of us, who do not have the insight, or do not have much to give us. These we pass by. So I put inspiration first, and craftsmanship second, yet I admire craftsmanship intensely, for without it, the artist has no way of interpreting himself; the more skillful he is, the better, or the clearer, is his interpretation.

In the portrait of James Cochran Dobbin, 1814-1857, we find that keen perception of greatness, that emotion which was stirred by the individuality of the subject. The artist, Eastman Johnson, has made us share with him the experience which moved him so profoundly when he studied the face of that frail lovable man of whom it was said, "He was of great vision and an able executive as well." James Dobbin lives upon the canvas, although pathetically infirm of body, a virile spirit shines out from his face, radiating the fire within. That I can write thus about him is a proof of the skill of the artist, for you see he has made me share his privilege of knowing Dobbin. And that skill is also shown in painting the dying man (for it was painted in 1856 hardly a year before his death) in a fur-trimmed gown and great flowing tie. This was picturesque and I have no doubt it was true to life.

This is one of those rare instances where the impact of a fine spirit upon an equally fine artist produced a work of art.

Eastman Johnson is best known for his genre pictures--That is, scenes of American life, such as "My Old Kentucky Home," "Crack the Whip," "Corn Husking," etc.; but actually he was one of the best interpreters of character as a portraitist America in the 19th Century produced. In my opinion this is Eastman Johnson's masterpiece.

The portrait of John Caldwell Calhoun, 1782-1850, evokes equal enthusiasm. Painted about 1820, it shows the South Carolinian statesman much younger than in most portraits, and more handsome. He also, is alive; his forceful personality and determined, quarrelsome character show in his face. Yet, there is humor, that saving grace, and a joyousness which makes us believe he loved life in and for itself. Technically, too, this is masterly, for there is a third dimension to that massive head, from under that well modeled flesh, and a rare combination of breadth with delicacy of detail as shown in the treatment of the hair. Chester Harding was a prolific portraitist. Like many of the great English painters, he was largely self-taught, and, therefore, truly American.

Other outstanding portraits which I would like to mention are those of Thomas Ruffin, William R. Davie, Rev. Francis L. Hawks, Benjamin Franklin, Dr. Jesse Graves, Abram Rencher, Bishop Otey, Richard M. Pearson, James Mebane and David L. Swain.

Ruffin's portrait is interesting both for the subject and the artist. Thomas Ruffin, who was born in 1787 and died in 1870, was one of the most remarkable men of the state. He was Chief Justice of North Carolina in 1833-52, during which period "he established a reputation, as a jurist. Extending wherever English law is known," ranking John Marshall as an authority on constitutional law. His biographers state he was a man of austere appearance, but of a fiery nature, which he held in restraint. I think you see this in his portrait. It is strange we do not know the artist. He was a good one, for, in spite of certain defects, a little stiffness, and laboriousness of handling, the force of the man's character--his intellect--his robust countenance--is well interpreted. There is life, not only in the eyes, but in the color, the glowing flesh tones, the brilliant white of the cravat. The technique is unusual, not that of any identified artist of the time, so there is here a field of research for someone who wishes to discover other portraits by the same hand, some of which might fortunately be signed.

The profile portrait of William Richardson Davie (1756-1820) was painted by one of the most celebrated artists of our early history. Luckily we have ample evidence that it was from the brush of Charles Willson Peale, enlarged from an engraving by Gilles Louis Cretien (Paris 1800), an impression of which the University also owns. I regard Peale as our first truly great American painter, for he was born here, in Maryland, lived all his life here and died in Philadelphia. While practically all his contemporaries went to England, either to study or to remain and practice, Peale stayed here, and his own art, sound, sincere and unaffected, was characteristic of our temperament.

Davie was a courtly gentleman, an aristocrat, as Peale has represented him to be. It is curious that the portrait, in this respect, seems so representative of the early character of the University. Davie stamped an aristocratic exclusiveness upon it which lasted until the great commoner David Swain opened its doors to the whole people of the state. It is fortunate that the virtual founder of the University, who was also a Colonel in the Revolutionary War, and one of the earliest governors of the state, should be so well represented in the collection.

The portrait of the Rev. Francis I. Hawks (1798-1850) is interesting, historically, because of the correspondence in regard to it, wherein Hawks, writing from Philadelphia, very modestly accepts the honor of being asked to sit for his portrait, and recommends that Inman, of that city, be the painter. Hawks is remembered chiefly as the historian of North Carolina. Henry Inman, as Hawks suggested, was --in fact--one of the best portraitists of his time, and painted many celebrated men--John Marshall, the Chief Justice, for example. But, unfortunately, our portrait was one of the most badly damaged of the collection, having suffered from lack of varnish. Painted thickly, it cracked, and in spite of restoration, cracks still show. However, there is great spirituality in the fact, and in its essential character as a portrait of a lovable man, is well preserved.

The University is fortunate in possessing the panel of Franklin, which is important in portraying that many-sided genius in advanced age, by an artist who knew him in life. William Dunlap was the author of the first history of art in America, a work entitled *A History of the Arts of Design in the U.S.A.* The portrait is dated New York 1826, long after Franklin's death, but it must have been executed from a study which Dunlap had previously made. On a panel, and unframed, it had become badly warped, and somewhat cracked, but not irreparably.

The portrait of Dr. Jesse Graves was painted by himself, when a student in Paris in 1845. In its forceful design, severely correct draughtsmanship and emphasis on line, it shows the influence of the great French classicist Ingres, who was supreme in the art world of Europe at that time. It seems that Graves gave up medicine for art; it is strange that an artist so capable as this portrait represents him to have been should not be better known. He is not mentioned in the encyclopedias of American artists.

I mention the portrait of Abram Rencher because it is signed by an able artist J. M. Stanley, 1857, who is not very well known. There is a great deal of sureness in his brushwork, drawing that shows a thoroughly trained hand, and that quality I always admire, interpretation without slavish imitation.

The portrait of the Rt. Rev, James H. Otey (1800-1863) somewhat fascinates me. In spite of his office, even in spite of the fact that he was first Episcopal Bishop of Tennessee, I cannot help feel that here is a reincarnation of a neo-Celtic Druid. Certainly the artist, whoever he was, and we do not know, was impressed by his wizard-like character; he presented what a true artists should, what he --and felt, not necessarily what Otey's parishioners would like to admire. So let us forget that this man with a thick heavy mouth and serpent-like eyes was a bishop, I regard the portrait as a rather daring work of art. (A portrait of Otey reproduced in Appleton's Biographical Encyclopedia presents him in quite a different aspect.)

I now come to the portrait of Chief Justice Richard m. Pearson, which is attributed but not signed, as by William Garl Browne. It does not seem to be by Browne, but by an equally good painter, whom I wish we knew. Remarkable, it seems to me, is the serious, thoughtful countenance of the eminent judge. There is an easy naturalism in his pose, a breadth and freedom in its execution which suggest a skillful hand.

Before I discuss the portraits by William Garl Browne, I wish to answer a question which I know is being asked by those familiar with the University collection: "Why haven't I placed the portraits of President Polk and his Secretary of the Navy, John Young Mason, by Thomas Sully, among the best?" These are undoubtedly valuable pictures; that the University should have an alumnus to become President of the United States, and another to become Secretary of the Navy as well as Minister to France, is something to be proud of, and their portraits should be prized, while Thomas Sully was one of the most eminent portraitists of the 19th century. But, unfortunately, these are not striking examples of Sully's best style. Sully was at the height of his powers the first twenty years of his career--that is, from about 1807-1827. These were painted in 1847 when Sully had fallen into a facile mannerism, a sort of lethargy, out of which it took a beautiful woman to arouse him. Thus the portraits of Polk and Mason leave us disappointed.

I know, too, that lovers of North Carolina history would like me to mention the portraits of Judge Gaston, The Rev. Elisha Mitchell, and the Hon. William R. King. Historically, like the two just mentioned, these are of great interest, for each one of these men has left his mark upon the State--yes, even upon the country. After Mitchell, the mountain, highest east of the Rockies, was named; King, a Senator from Alabama, was Minister Plenipotentiary to France, and elected Vice President of the United States, an office he never filled because of his sudden death.; Gaston, 1778-1844, was so efficient and popular a judge that the Constitution of the state which allowed only Protestants to hold office, was changed so that he could serve on the Supreme Court of the State. But Judge Gaston's portrait is a poor copy, by Bogle after George Cook; that of Elisha Mitchell is the work of a man more distinguished as an engraver than a portraitist in oil--Nathaniel Jocelyn--and while in many ways charming, lacks the force and grandeur with which the subject should have impressed the artist; while the third, that of King, which is an original by George Cook, by no means approaches the quality of the portrait of President Hooper of Wake Forest painted by the same hand. This latter is really from a technical standpoint, of exquisite quality. Cook who was born in Maryland in 1793 studied abroad, where, as we can see, he acquired a facility with the brush second to none in this country.

I, myself, find several early anonymous portraits delightfully quaint as examples of the so-called "primitive" manner--for example, the portraits of William Miller and John Owen, among the

earliest in the collection. That of Miller has a colonial building with a cupola in the background which some North Carolina historian might identify. (My guess is that it is the Court House at Edenton, the oldest courthouse still standing in North Carolina.) Delightful also is the little portrait of Henry Clay, said to be by an artist named Moehler.

But with the collection of sixteen or seventeen (one is in doubt) by William Garl Browne, we come to the most noteworthy group belonging to the University, in fact--a collection which alone makes North Carolina unique. Up until now William Garl Browne has remained practically unknown. The only one of his works I had come across before coming to Chapel Hill was a portrait in the Union League of Philadelphia. This interested me, but though I did everything possible to trace him, I could learn nothing. Either he was too modest to gain national recognition, or our historians have been too obtuse. Yet, he worked in Virginia, especially in Richmond, and the Carolinas for fifty years, executing over two thousand portraits, nearly one a week--a prodigious feat. He should be ranked high as one of the most skillful artists of his period. He was the Sully of the South. His life and works are being published at the present moment, so I will not attempt to repeat or even to summarize what will soon appear in print, except to note that he was born in England, came to Richmond somewhere around 1840, when he was still young enough to develop into a thoroughly American painter with an individual style, easily recognizable. He painted not only the eminent men of the South--giving the air of distinction, but women and children with elegance and charm. The portrait of Mrs. John S. Henderson of Salisbury, now hanging in the home of her daughter Mrs. Lyman Cotton of Chapel Hill, painted as late as the 1880s, shows him, like Sully, to have preserved in his portraits of women, his colorful style long after it had declined in his portraiture of men.

I believe that his biographer agrees with me that the portrait of James Mebane is his masterpiece. Mebane is of particular interest to North Carolinians as the first President of the Dialectic Society; he later acquired a wide reputation in the politics of the State. Painted in 1850, Mebane's portrait belongs to Browne's early period before he achieved too much facility, and fell under the influence of the academic-ism of the late 19th century. His early work, as shown in this portrait, is rich in color. Browne loved red chairs and curtains, and accessories such as tables, columns, or shelves of books. For he believed, and I think he was right, that to place a man amid his surroundings, as let us say, in the case of a judge--his law library; or in the case of a public official--against the imposing background of a public building, suggested by marble columns, added to his characterization, or, at least, to the interest of the canvas, which was first and foremost with him at the time. These accessories made the canvas decorative.

James Mebane is seated naturally, if carelessly, in his great red chair, seriously thoughtful. The figure is well and evenly lighted, so that the cut of the clothes, even to creases and folds, form a pattern, even though they are black. The garments are not just one plain black area as in so many portraits. Technically the painting has been done somewhat laboriously, conscientiously so; this in itself, as with primitive paintings, is what we admire; but above all, we feel that the artist has grasped the bigness of the man, and expressed something which no camera, or no other agency than paint could do.

The portrait of David Lowry Swain, I feel, is of the same character. Notice how painstakingly and honestly the hands are executed; this is rare in American portraiture, even at the present day.

One of the visitors to my studio, upon seeing this picture for the first time, exclaimed: "How like Lincoln it is!" And President Swain was like Lincoln; he arose from the same background, and remained the plain rugged, honest, thoughtful and deep-seeing man. The famous portrait of Lincoln by Carpenter is like this in many respects.

David Lowry Swain, 1801-1868, was, when elected, the youngest Governor of North Carolina. At the close of his term of office he was made President of this university and remained so for 33 years. During the War Between the States he was adviser to Governors Vance and Worth, and at the end of the war adviser on reconstruction to President Andrew Johnson. It was said that he was so wise in council that he was kept close to men in public life who constantly sought his advice. This sagacity, this integrity, we find in Browne's impressive portrait.

The portraits of William A. Graham, Willie Person Mangum and James Phillips belong to his next period. Graham, whose dates are 1804-1875, was United States Senator, Governor of North Carolina, and Secretary of the Navy under Fillmore; it was he, when Secretary of the Navy, who sent Perry to Japan! Mangum, 1792-1861, was also a United States Senator, a Judge, and honored with the degree of LL.D. from this University. Phillips, who was born in England in 1792, was professor of mathematics at Chapel Hill most of his career, which was ended by his death in 1867.

In these portraits we find men of distinction--jurists, statesmen, churchmen. It is appropriate that they are given dignity, with even an air of grandeur, in their portraits. But we find less sincerity than in the earlier portraits; they are being turned out in a mold. Perhaps the artist felt this himself, or realized the need for a change in style, for subsequently he abandoned to a great extent the accessories of the background, forsook in fact, the decorative and official manner, and substituted for it a greater naturalism. From 1870 on, we find on Browne's canvasses a general grey tonality, with plain backgrounds, against which he emphasizes a lifelikeness, which is at times startling.

Browne by this time had attained such facility that he could dash off portraits as easily as any Frenchman of his day. There is a strong analogy between such portraits as, let us say, Those of Robert R. Bridgers (1881) or John Motley Morehead (1882) or Bartholomew F. Moore, and the work of the Frenchman Fantin-Latour whose portraits are so imitative of reality that one can mistake them for living subjects. The result of this tendency was for Browne to lose that inestimable interpretive quality, we admire in his early work. Many of his later portraits are merely photographic.

I have confined myself in this article to the painters of the past. There are many portraits in the University Collection by living artists, which are interesting chiefly for their subjects. A few, I regret to say, only a few, are, for my point of view, notable for their excellence as works of art. These latter, like the best ones of the past, should be used as examples of the importance of selecting only the most accomplished artists to paint the portraits of those now living, who are today, giving distinction and renown to the University.