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FOUR PORTRAITS BY JAMES SHARPLES

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After spending two years as assistant curator of the City Art Museum of St. Louis and one divided between digging with the Princeton Expedition for the Excavation of Antioch and teaching at Princeton, Professor Biebel came to Rutgers in 1938 as head of the Department of Art. He is the author of various articles and of one monograph, The Mosaics of Gerasa.

THE early years of the American Republic are marked by the emergence of a new type of artist. In addition to the aristocratic tradition of Copley, West, and Stuart, there arose a demand for less expensive portraits that would be within reach of the average citizen. To meet this demand came the "traveling" artist, carrying all his equipment with him, and usually his family as well. His work called for accurate observation, speed of execution and a faithful resemblance in the completed work. Such artists worked usually in pencil, crayon, or chalk rather than the heavier and more tedious oil technique, turning out in a few hours a profile or full-face view, according to a fixed scale of prices. Viewed today, these portraits impress us by their directness of purpose and simplicity, with none of the striving for effect or pretense that characterizes the work of later portrait artists in America. Of necessity small and unassuming, they reflect, in their humble material and wide-spread production, the democratic spirit of our country's founders.

Many of the artists who profited from this increased demand for portraiture were of foreign birth and training. Native American artists either concerned themselves with the more lucrative painting in oils or set off for England to gain further



COLONEL JOHN NEILSON

prestige with their successes abroad. Among the foreigners who were not unwilling to accept the humbler commissions and adventurous life which became the lot of the "traveling" artist, were the Englishmen, John Jarvis and James Sharples, and the Frenchman, St. Memin.

Best known of these itinerant artists, both because of his high artistic ability as well as his extensive work, is James Sharples. A group of four portraits by Sharples was included in the recent bequest of James Neilson, '66, to Rutgers University. They include portraits of George Washington, John Voorhees, Colonel John Neilson, and his wife, Catherine Voorhees Neilson. Uniform in size,¹ they are all portraits in profile, executed on the soft, grayish-tan paper, slightly rough in texture, which characterizes the work of Sharples. The Washington portrait,² most famous of Sharples' subjects, alone has color added to the composition, the background in brilliant Prussian blue, shading off into lighter tones, contrasting with the white powdered wig, its queue bound with a large, black bow, and touches of flesh color in the cheeks and lips. Traces of powder from the wig are clearly discernible on the black coat. In all of these characteristics it resembles closely the other examples of this same subject by Sharples.³ This portrait is also more elaborately framed than the others, its larger moldings being decorated with several rows of simple beading. The three other portraits are executed in tones of black and white chalk. Occasionally, the preliminary drawing, in pencil or crayon, is clearly visible, as, for example, in the band surrounding the cap of Mrs. Neilson. These portraits differ from that of Washington in having a distinct oval line surrounding the figure which is not followed by their present rectangular frames; whether they were originally intended to be placed in oval frames is difficult to say. They seem to be extremely natural in pose, with little effort on the part of the artist to flatter or improve any physical characteristics. In fact, Sharples seems to have observed a strict realism. Colonel Neilson's rather prominent nose and a small mole are represented with unflinching severity. Younger than her husband, Mrs. Neilson must have been considered above

¹ Approximately 9½" x 7".

² Published by George P. Schmidt, *Journal of Rutgers University Library*, II, 2, 1939, p. 34.

³ Katherine McCook Knox, *The Sharples, Their Portraits of Washington and His Contemporaries*, New Haven, 1930, pp. 68-69, ill. No. 36.



CATHERINE VOORHEES NEILSON

the average of her contemporaries in good looks if we are to believe the reports of General Washington during his stay at Morristown, where "the General's chair at table was always placed between Lady Washington's and Mrs. Neilson's no matter who was present, because the General liked pretty women."⁴

James Sharples was born in England and came to America with his family in 1794. Although he worked in oil in England, no portraits by him in this technique are known to have been painted in this country. His experiences here, all faithfully recorded by his wife Ellen in her diary, give an excellent picture of the life of the "traveling" artist. After an unfortunate experience in Connecticut, where his small daughter Rolinda narrowly escaped death in a public coach when the horses were frightened and ran away, he constructed an enclosed carriage, large enough to contain his wife, his three children, his drawing materials and himself. Since his activities in England had gone beyond painting to include "mechanical pursuits" having to do with "steam carriages," some of which resulted in recorded patents, we may be sure that his interest and care in building this traveling studio were not those of an amateur. This vehicle became the home of the Sharples family and in it they traveled through New England and the South, executing commissions wherever they could be found, and occasionally stopping off long enough to rent a shop and enter into the life of the community. In addition to providing a safe means of transportation, it is not unlikely that the spectacular appearance of the carriage as it passed through the countryside created a certain amount of desirable publicity for the artist and his family. This, together with Sharples' actual technique in getting work, show that his mechanical and artistic abilities were joined to a shrewd business sense. His method is described for us by William Dunlap, a native artist of Perth Amboy, as follows:

He visited all the cities and towns of the United States, carrying letters to persons distinguished, either military, civil, or literary, with a request to paint their portraits for his collection. This being granted, and the portrait finished in about two hours, the likeness generally induced an order

⁴ Margaret Armstrong, *Five Generations*, New York, 1930, p. 145.

for a copy, and brought as sitters all who saw it. His price for the profile was \$15; and for the full face (never so good) \$20.⁵

This system had the further merit of providing the artist with a collection of originals that could be used at any future time for additional copies without need of the sitter. In the case of Sharples' more distinguished patrons, such as Washington, Hamilton, and Jefferson, these additional copies became the basis of a substantial income for the Sharples household. The business of making the copies also presented an opportunity for other members of the family to make themselves useful. It is described, with delightful candor, by Ellen Sharples as follows:

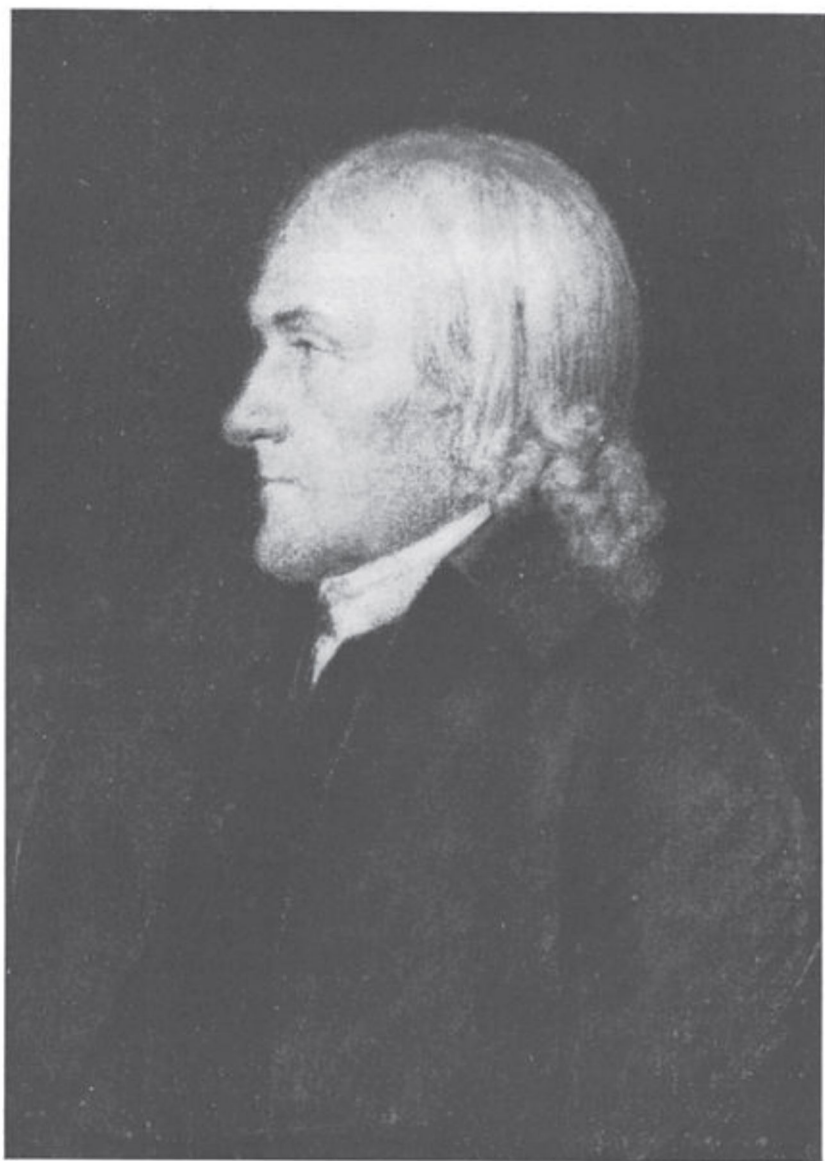
The continual fluctuation of the funds and other property in which our money had been invested, the uncertainty in mechanical pursuits in which Mr. S. delighted—all had an influence in deciding me, soon after our arrival in Philadelphia where Congress then assembled, to make my drawing which had been learnt and practiced as an ornamental art for amusement, available to a useful purpose. Mr. S. was generally engaged drawing in crayons the portraits of the most distinguished Americans, foreign Ministers and other distinguished visitants from Europe. Copies were frequently required; these I undertook and was so far successful as to have as many commissions as I could execute; they were thought equal to the originals, price the same: we lived in good style associating in first society.⁶

Eventually, all the members of the family were drawn into this part of the work, so that, in later years, it is almost impossible to distinguish the work of James, the father, from that of his wife, Ellen, or Felix and James, Jr., his sons. The belief, never proved, that James Sharples used a mechanical aid, such as the pantograph or physiotrace, in drawing his portraits, makes this duplicating process by others in his family and the resulting confusion, seem more plausible. Even these activities, however, fail to mark the limits of this resourceful family. We learn from a letter of Mrs. James Hillhouse to her daughter Mary, who was staying with the Sharples in Philadelphia, that Mrs. Sharples was instructing Mary in drawing and in French, as well as advising her "in manners and in choice of clothes."⁷

⁵ William Dunlap, *History of Rise and Progress of Arts of Design in United States* (1834), 2nd edition, Boston, 1918, II, p. 205.

⁶ Knox, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁷ Knox, *op. cit.*, p. 15.



JOHN VORHEES

There seem, literally, to have been no fields of culture left untouched by the "traveling" artist and his family.

Although New Brunswick is mentioned several times in Mrs. Sharples' diary, there is no reference to our group of portraits. Those of Colonel John Neilson, Mrs. Catherine Voorhees Neilson, and her father, John Voorhees, so far as can be determined, are the work of James Sharples, Senior, and exist only in these examples. The late Mr. James Neilson stated that the portraits of his ancestors were done from life by Sharples in New Brunswick, at the same time as Sharples' portraits of Anthony Walton White (also a native of New Brunswick), and his family, and that the likeness of Washington was the work of Sharples; it was acquired from the artist by Colonel John Neilson.⁸ It is only natural that Colonel Neilson, having ordered his own family portraits, would wish to acquire as well the portrait of his friend, General Washington. Taking into account the more than thirty known examples of the Washington portrait, however, and the self-confessed copying, we cannot be sure that it is entirely by the hand of James Sharples. Close comparison with the others reveals a certain stiff quality in the figure of Washington, not present in them, and suggests that it may be the work of some other member of the family.

It has not been possible to determine the exact date of Colonel Neilson's family portraits. Mr. James Neilson's statement that they were done at the same time as those by Sharples of Anthony Walton White and his family, provides no assistance, since nothing further is known concerning these portraits. Lacking definite evidence, the closest date that can be assigned to them is somewhere between 1794, when Sharples came to America, and 1801, the latter being the year in which the Sharples family returned to England. The usual date assigned to the original of the Washington portrait is 1796, which, assuming that it was acquired with the others, would further restrict the possible date of execution to the five-year period from 1796 to 1801. Both Colonel Neilson and General White were living in New Brunswick at this time, Colonel Neilson engaged in his shipping business and General White living at the home of his sister-in-law on Livingston Avenue. Un-

⁸ Written statement of Mr. Alexander S. Graham to Rutgers University Library, December 10, 1938.

doubtedly the portraits were taken during one of the numerous trips of the Sharples between New York and Philadelphia. An entry in Mrs. Sharples' diary during the second visit of the family to America, which lasted from 1809 to James Sharples' death in 1811, records the making of a copy of General White's portrait in New York in 1810,⁹ but any possibility that our group of portraits might have been made at this time is removed by the fact that John Voorhees died in 1802 and General White in 1803.

In spite of their methods of mass production, the Sharples represent an important and valuable contribution to the development of artistic consciousness in America. Their work, at its best, reflects a sincere effort to meet the needs of the time and resulted in portraits which vastly surpass in merit much of American portraiture that has been done since. That it was founded upon a real sense of artistic values, cannot be doubted when looking at the Neilson family portraits. Added confirmation, though not on the same level, is furnished by the following comment of Ellen Sharples, describing a visit to New Brunswick: "We reached Brunswick just in time to dress and drink tea at Mrs. White's . . . who gave us a very cordial reception. Mr. Evans returned with us to the Inn, where we saw a party of young persons dancing, the ladies dressed very fine but not with taste."¹⁰ The distinction which she makes may seem trifling, but in artistic matters it is all-important, and it was this "taste" which the "traveling" artist and his family contributed to our general cultural development. It was sadly forgotten by the second half of the century.

⁹ Knox, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

¹⁰ Knox, *op. cit.*, p. 41.