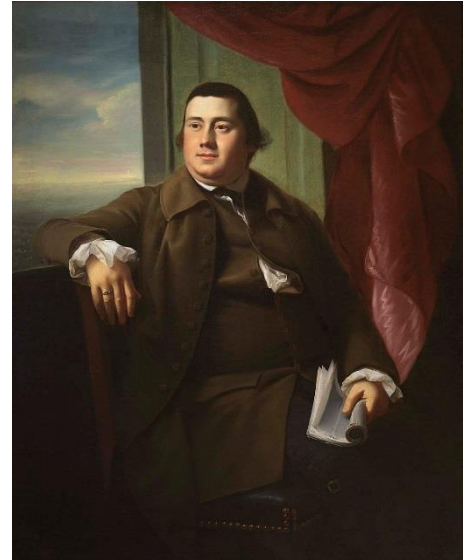


The Role of Portraits in Colonial America

Portraits served an important role in colonial society, whether that society was rural Bethlehem or cosmopolitan Boston. Portraits provided important information about the individual, such as their social and economic status or religious affiliation. Portraits were luxury items, not necessities, and therefore by simply owning a portrait the owner was designated as an individual of means. The placement of the portrait within the home, usually in the entry parlor, would announce the social status of the residents to all who entered the home. These status symbols were often commissioned to celebrate occasions like marriages or the inheritance of an estate. Portrait compositions often included personal possessions which further indicated the sitters' wealth and status, such as the imported vase and exotic tulip. Both of these could only have been purchased by an elite few, acquired through costly importation.



[Robert Hooper](#), 1770-72, John Singleton Copley, Smithsonian American Art Museum

It can also be speculated that the portrait of Mrs. Watson acted as a subtle, yet effective, political statement in view of its historical context. The same year the portrait was painted, 1765, Britain imposed its first direct tax on the colonies, the **Stamp Act**. Taxing its colonies was England's solution to paying the debt incurred during the **French and Indian War** (1756-1763). In protest, political activists organized a non-importation movement which called on colonists to boycott all British goods, giving up all imported luxuries and finery and to thoroughly embrace austerity. The imported English porcelain vase, exotic tulip flower and abundance of expensive silk indicate to the viewer that this is a woman not embracing austerity, but flaunting her many non-native goods. This notion is supported by the fact that the Watson and Oliver families were publicly known to be extremely loyal to the English crown. It was said that "[King] George III had no more able or zealous friends in America than the Olivers."

Mrs. Watson's ostentatious presentation is worlds apart from her demure counterpart, the young Moravian girl. As a community that embraced simple living and rejected material possessions, why then do portraits of Moravian community members exist? The answer lies with the artist, John Valentine Haidt, and the role of art in the Moravian community. Haidt's involvement with the Moravians began in 1746 when he converted to the religion and began working as a preacher in the community. During a period of religious turmoil Haidt, a former goldsmith with formal artistic training, felt that he could better communicate his religious

teachings by painting rather than preaching. Haidt advocated for his new position writing, “I thought, if [the Moravian people] will not preach the martyrdom of God anymore, I will paint it all the more vigorously.” In this new role, Haidt was chosen to relocate to Bethlehem as the official Church painter.

Haidt’s occupation as a painter was considered a religious undertaking. This concept derived from the fact that each member of the community fulfilled a labor which they considered a calling from God. As a result, portraits, or images of faith, were not thought of as records of individuals nor of their worldly accomplishments, unlike the portrait of Mrs. George Watson. Comparable to all aspects of Moravian life, even portraits were considered religious, for they functioned as outward extensions of faith, communicating piety and reverence. It is for this reason that Haidt’s Moravian portraits were considered religious art just as much as his images of Biblical scenes. This also helps to explain why so many of Haidt’s Moravian portraits were never recorded with the name of the individual depicted. That the young girl’s name and identity is unknown to us makes her an all-the-more fitting foil to Mrs. Watson, for she is symbolic of the unpretentiousness and simplicity of her community.

Glossary

French and Indian War: (1756-1763) Also known as the Seven Years’ War, a conflict over territory between English forces and combined French and American Indian forces in North America. England won the war, though the debt incurred from this war caused the escalation of tensions leading to the American Revolution.

Stamp Act of 1765: Law passed by the British Parliament on March 22, 1765; the first direct tax on the colonies, which required all American colonists to pay a tax on every piece of printed paper, which included items such as newspapers, legal documents, and playing cards.