



“Nothing, in the whole circle of human vanities, takes stronger hold of the imagination than this affair of having a portrait painted.”

Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Prophetic Pictures,”
Twice Told Tales (1837)

This portrait of James Monroe was part of the original collection donated by the A.W. Mellon Trust. Monroe became the first sitting president of the United States to visit Pittsburgh when he toured the region in 1817. He was featured in the 1834 publication *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*, and the engraver James Herring may have done this copy of Vanderlyn's painting in connection with that work. Currently on display in *Smithsonian's Portraits of Pittsburgh: Works from the National Portrait Gallery*.

James Monroe, c. 1834, by James Herring after a work by John Vanderlyn, oil on canvas.
Smithsonian Institution, National Portrait Gallery, transfer from the National Gallery of Art; gift of the A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, 1942.





Path to the Portrait Gallery

By Leslie Przybylek, Senior Curator

In 1837, the American author Nathaniel Hawthorne envisioned portraiture as an almost mystical creation. In his story “The Prophetic Pictures,” the author recounted the tale of a discerning artist who captured tragic foreboding in the likenesses of the betrothed couple who were his subjects, traits that the sitters themselves could not yet see. His characterization was in keeping with the Latin roots of the word portrait—“portrahere,” to expose or reveal. By the time Hawthorne’s short story collection was published in 1837, the art of portraiture was on the cusp of a profound transformation. Within two years, the new art of the daguerreotype would emerge, the first widely available photographic process, permanently altering the landscape of image-making, especially portraiture. It was not the genre’s first transformation, nor would it be the last.¹

Today we live in a world where a generation has grown up with the ability to take pictures of themselves and their friends with nothing more than the phone in their hand. The act of creating “selfies” generates numbers that boggle the mind. In 2014, it was estimated that people took 93 million selfies each day on Android devices alone.² Selfies may not carry the mystical power of Hawthorne’s prophetic portraits—the selfies’ transitory, informal nature gives them their appeal. But

their sheer abundance allows people to craft an ever-evolving image of themselves, a multi-faceted portrait over time, a persona of who they want viewers to see.³

Both Hawthorne’s “prophetic pictures” and the ubiquitous selfie attest to the complex associations behind the genre of the “portrait”—broadly defined (in western European art tradition), the creation of an image intended to capture a person’s likeness. Misleadingly straightforward at first glance, portraiture carries interwoven layers of meaning with varying degrees of flattery and realism, propaganda and commemoration, shaped by the goals of sitter and artist as well as the expectations of society at large. For a very long time, portraiture remained the province of the moneyed and powerful elite: only those with great wealth, status, and a certain degree of flexible time could afford to have their likeness painted. And portraiture always carried power in numbers. A gallery of portraits in a manor house or exhibition hall spoke to the building blocks of dynasties and nations, an assemblage of celebrated faces sending messages about who mattered in a society and what accomplishments, values, and attainments were deemed worthy of remembrance by the ruling class. Exclusions shaped the message as much as the faces that stared back from portrait-adorned walls.



Through the early 1800s, people commissioned and gave miniature portraits to keep images of loved ones close. This portrait of Pittsburgh's first mayor (1816-1817) was painted while Denny was still serving in the U.S. Army during the Northwest Indian Wars. The date of the painting, 1792, and the identity of the artist, James Peale, brother of Charles Wilson Peale, suggest that Denny had his likeness painted while he was in Philadelphia, where he had traveled in late 1791 to report on the disastrous defeat of General St. Clair's Army in western Ohio. Currently on display in *Smithsonian's Portraits of Pittsburgh: Works from the National Portrait Gallery*.

Ebenezer Denny, 1792, by James Peale, watercolor on ivory.

HHC Collections, gift of Louise E. Denny Barnes, 2017.132.1 a-c.
Photo by Nicole Lauletta.



Although the attribution of this miniature is not certain, the provenance through the Denny family and the style of clothing and hair support the idea that it could depict Nancy Wilkins Denny (daughter of Captain John Wilkins Sr., an early settler of Wilkesburg) who married Ebenezer Denny in 1793. Currently on display in *Smithsonian's Portraits of Pittsburgh: Works from the National Portrait Gallery*.

Nancy Wilkins (or Denny), c. 1790s, by J. Steiner, watercolor on ivory.

HHC Collections, gift of Louise E. Denny Barnes, 2017.132.2 a. Photo by Nicole Lauletta.

Smithsonian's Portraits of Pittsburgh: Works from the National Portrait Gallery

The Heinz History Center ponders the meaning of portraiture and questions of legacy and identity in Western Pennsylvania in the new exhibition, *Smithsonian's Portraits of Pittsburgh: Works from the National Portrait Gallery*. Featuring nearly 60 works on loan from the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., the exhibition provides a Western Pennsylvania focus on that national collection, highlighting the stories of individuals from the National Portrait Gallery's holdings whose lives intersected with the history and culture of this region. (A selection of these images appears earlier in this magazine). There is even a Pittsburgh connection to the story, an important chapter, although it happens late in the timeline of efforts to establish a national gallery of American portraits. But how did we end up with a National Portrait Gallery in the United States in the first place? The idea of an institution created to preserve for posterity the faces of writers, scientists, dancers, and sports

figures was an aberration within the longer history of portraiture as the realm of the elite. Where did the idea come from and when did it become a priority here in the United States?

Portraiture on Pennsylvania's Frontier

The specific model for a national portrait gallery emerged in the 1850s in Great Britain. By then, Americans were not strangers to the idea of gathering a collection of images of historic heroes and celebrated figures, but it took another century before today's institution was established in Washington, D.C. In truth, the journey was longer than that. From Colonial days through the early 1800s, Americans were busy building new farms, businesses, and industries. Few had time to focus on pursuits such as art, which seemed an unnecessary luxury and one that few could afford. Pittsburgh itself was a case in point: portraiture was not foremost on the minds of people coming to create a bustling industrial village on the edge of the nation's frontier. Some probably brought images with them, such as the miniature portrait of a loved one. A few itinerant artists and talented amateurs came through prior to 1800.⁴ Perhaps someone offered their services to capture a likeness, but if so, little trace remains.

Not until the early 1800s did portrait artists attempt to advertise in the growing village at the Point. A house and sign painter, Louis Hueber, announced his skills at cutting "profiles," or silhouettes, on Market Street in 1806.⁵ Silhouettes, also called "shades," could be produced quickly, required no lengthy sittings, and were far more affordable than formal portraits, often costing a "few pennies," according to some scholars.⁶ As one of the first craftsmen to advertise his skills capturing likenesses in Pittsburgh, Hueber's offer of economical silhouettes made perfect sense in the small industrial village. Hueber may have had competition. Sometime around 1806, a New Englander named S.H. Dearborn arrived



This portrait of Pittsburgh physician Dr. William Werneburg and two of his young daughters symbolized the city's growing professional class and German community in the 1840s. According to the donor, the granddaughter of the man depicted in the portrait, Dr. Werneburg arrived in Pittsburgh in 1838 after emigrating to America in 1837. Family lore holds that a German immigrant house painter came to stay with them sometime during the 1840s, and in thanks for their hospitality created an earlier version of this portrait, which was later refined into a more fashionably finished work. Currently on display in the *Special Collections* exhibition.

Dr. William Werneburg and Children, c. 1850, artist unidentified, oil on canvas.
HHC Collections, gift of Anna M. Scarborough, 86.1.5. Photo by Nicole Lauletta.

in Pittsburgh hoping to follow through with his intended profession of being a portrait artist.⁷ Like many early craftsmen, Dearborn made a living piecing together multiple skills in the arts; he was also proficient in music

and theater. Active in the small community's primary social circles, Dearborn may have had enough word of mouth business at first to forego advertising; thus far, the earliest advertisements found for him appear to have

PROFILES,

Accurately and handsomely cut.—Also, *House Painting and Papering, Sign Painting and Oil Gilding*, executed in the most masterly manner, by LOUIS HUEBER, at Mrs. Earl's in Market Street.

Pittsburgh, September 1, 1806.

Louis Hueber's advertisement for "Profiles," or portrait silhouettes of paper, 1806, was among the earliest such ads in Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh Gazette, September 9, 1806.

S. H. DEARBORN'S

PAINTING ROOM,

IS in the apartment formerly occupied by Doctor Stevenson as a Shop, in Second Street, where he will be happy to accommodate those who wish their Portraits or Profiles painted.

Pittsburgh, January 25, 1808.

Artist S.H. Dearborn arrived in Pittsburgh around 1806 hoping to find business as a portrait painter here.

Pittsburgh Gazette, April 5, 1808.

Artist J.T. Turner included an example of his handiwork with this advertisement from 1811.

Pittsburgh Gazette, November 1, 1811.

been in the spring of 1808, when he announced in the weekly *Pittsburgh Gazette* that his "Painting Room" was ready to accommodate visitors.⁸ Alas, Dearborn's stay was brief. By 1810, he headed down the Ohio River to seek further business elsewhere.

Dearborn's pattern was repeated through the 1820s. Portrait painters arrived every few years, generated brief periods of great demand, then departed Pittsburgh to pursue opportunities in other growing "western" communities such as Wheeling, Louisville, and Cincinnati. None of these towns alone could provide enough consistent work for a livelihood, although that did not stop a few enterprising individuals from trying. Pittsburgh even helped give rise to some prominent early portrait artists, such as James Bowman (1793-1842) and James Reid Lambdin (1807-1889), young men who gained their start along the Ohio River but eventually found greater fame elsewhere.

Although most formal portraits in Pittsburgh hung in private homes, there were public forms of "portraiture" to be seen during those early years. Popular heroes of the day adorned local tavern signs, including General Washington and General Butler (the latter a Revolutionary War veteran and important trader at Fort Pitt who was killed in 1791 in the Indian Wars in what is now Ohio; Lawrenceville's Butler Street was also

named for him).⁹ Political campaign materials and ceremonial ribbons featured likenesses, and in rare cases, so did ads in the weekly newspaper.¹⁰ By 1819-20, the city's residents made their acquaintance with the idea of a "portrait gallery" in unexpected form. In August 1819, Pittsburghers were presented with the exciting prospect of visiting Smith & Calloway's "elegant" Wax-Work museum at the corner of Market Street and the Diamond, featuring life-size figures of individuals such as Presidents James Monroe and George Washington, Commodore Stephen Decatur, and, typical of the period, the domestic exemplar of a "Philadelphia Beauty" and her "beautiful children." For good measure, a "Baltimore Beauty" was also included.¹¹ (For those not enticed by the idea of life-size portraits, there was also a "strikingly" depicted image of a Sea Serpent recently spotted in the harbor near Salem, Massachusetts).¹²

Such displays, typically collections that traveled from city to city, were not as strange as they sound: wax-work galleries of figures had been making their way to America's select urban centers—primarily Philadelphia, Charleston, and especially New York City—since the mid-1700s. Although their reputation had declined by the early 1800s with the elite, who regarded painted portraits as more suitably refined, they remained popular with the public and generated great excitement in



J. T. TURNER,


From the State of New-York.

RESPECTFULLY informs the Ladies and Gentlemen of Pittsburgh, that he has opened a Room, for a few weeks, four doors north of Mr. McCullough's Inn, sign of the Golden Keys, in Wood street, where he proposes cutting profiles, painting likenesses, painting and lettering signs, drawing maps, and perspective drawing of machinery, &c. &c. and will, if required, teach the art of drawing and painting.

"This useful, elegant, and extensive art, with all the train of graceful studies coinciding therewith, is even necessary to form the mind of youth for whatever station designed, since nothing informs or corrects our ideas so soon as a true knowledge of symmetry and proportion. Nor is it unimportant. Much of the moral character of individuals, and consequently of the nation, depends upon the amusements which fill up the hours of leisure; instances are very rare of fine taste united to depravity of conduct. A young person, possessed of the resources furnished by this art, has fewer temptations to vice, than one, who after the hours of business or of study, is obliged to look abroad for recreation."

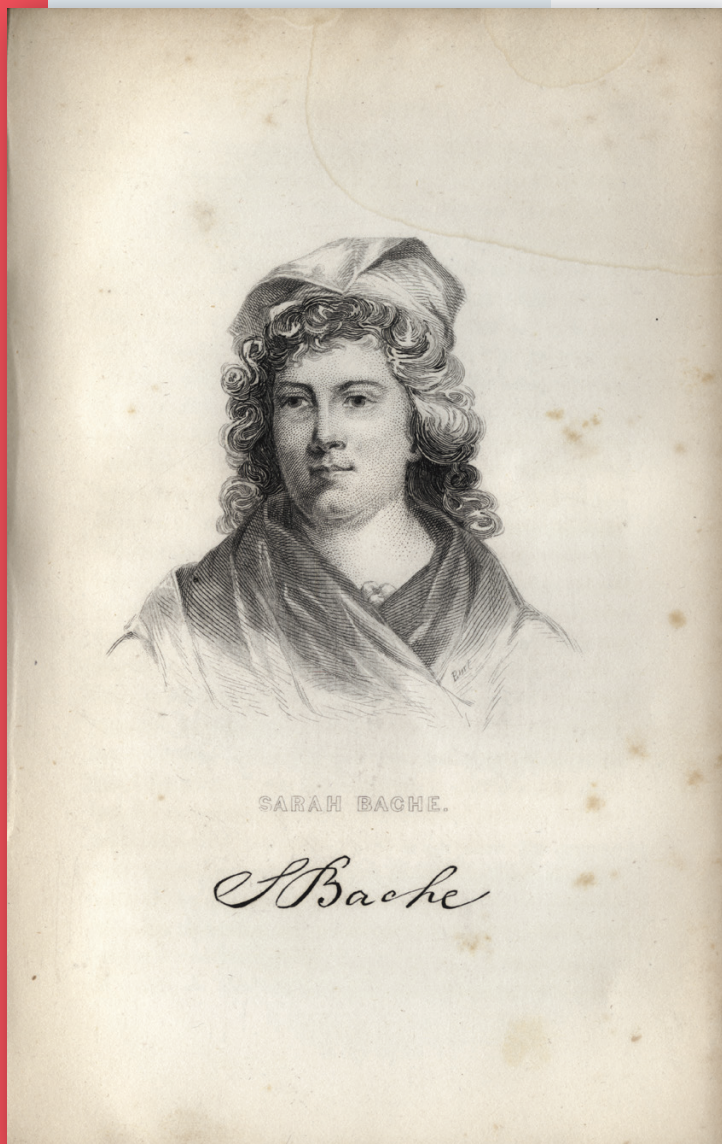
"Unforeseen events may reduce the most affluent to poverty, and a talent for drawing (which formed one of the amusements of happier days) may become a means of subsistence."

October 29, 1811.



Andrew Mellon poses in his apartment in Washington, D.C., 1930s. The work above the mantle became part of the National Gallery of Art Collection. Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gallery Archives.

*Not until the early 1800s
did portrait artists
attempt to advertise in
the growing village at
the Point.*



This portrait of Sarah Franklin Bache, Benjamin Franklin's daughter, appeared in the 1854 edition of Elizabeth Ellet's series, *The Women of the American Revolution*.

HHC Detre L&A, E206.E45.

communities beyond the major urban centers.¹³

The intermittent nature of a professional artistic presence in Pittsburgh mirrored the reality of the larger United States, where the fine arts struggled to gain acceptance well into the 1800s. Cultural observers such as Alexis de Tocqueville believed that the egalitarian and utilitarian nature of the democratic experiment discouraged the cultivation of the fine arts. He believed quantity rather than the quality defined aspects of the market.¹⁴ But to many, portraiture was one of the few forms of fine art that carried a real purpose and thus, was worth the time and commitment to procure. Portraits conferred a level of social attainment; they could symbolize multiple visions of success: material, professional, and domestic.

As soon as Americans could afford them, they wanted one; artists eventually responded by offering options that met different levels of affordability. Portraiture became one of the first of the fine arts to gain a foothold on American shores. Many of the earliest masterpieces of American art were portraits.

By the 1840s, as industry expanded and communities such as Pittsburgh developed their own middle class—foundry owners, physicians, river captains, and bankers—demand for painted likenesses increased. Many portraits in the Heinz History Center collection attest to this, dating to the era of Pittsburgh's expansion during the 1840s and 1850s.

Americans wanted to visibly demonstrate their kinships and accomplishments. Noted one cultural observer writing for a Boston newspaper in 1846:

Perhaps no people in the world have such a taste for portraits as the Americans. Go where you will, you find these memorials of affection hanging against the walls of their dwellings. There is of course every variety of style to be observed in them, from the daub of the itinerant artisan, who paints for his board and lodging, to the noble specimens from the pencils of superior artists.... Our portraits are, to use the language of another, "the immortality of domestic life."¹⁵

Origins of a National Portrait Collection

Through the 1700s, formal portraits remained largely a private expression, a visual record of past kin. Few Americans had access to collections of images save for what adorned the walls of their own homes. This began to change slowly starting in the 1780s, when the momentous events of the American Revolution spurred the belief that history needed to be preserved, and more so, that the qualities and character of the Revolutionary heroes needed to be visually recorded so that their examples could be emulated. Of course, to be emulated by the public, their images needed to be seen by that public. Prints of certain leaders became popular, especially George Washington.

Renowned artist and inventor Charles Wilson Peale, creator of seven life portraits of George Washington and scores of copies of those works, was one of the first to link the private world of the portrait with the consciously public setting of a picture gallery when he opened an extension to his Philadelphia studio around 1782 featuring portraits of the "Revolutionary Patriots" and other significant Americans. While studio displays of an artist's work were a familiar marketing device, Peale's array of Revolutionary heroes carried greater meaning

and proved popular (although not always profitable) in the new nation's leading city. By 1784, Peale opened his famous museum, featuring 44 portraits of "worthy personages" of the Revolution.¹⁶ Unflagging in his attempts to appeal to the public, Peale also utilized wax figures, and once even proposed going beyond painted images to present the embalmed remains of some of the worthy men themselves.¹⁷ He noted:

Altho' perhaps it is not in the power of art, to preserve there [sic] bodies in that high perfection of form, for which the well executed [sic] painting in portrait, and sculpture can produce; yet the *actual remains* of such men as I have just described, must be highly regarded by those, who reverence the memory of such luminaries as but seldom appear.¹⁸

Unsurprisingly, this idea was not well-received. But it underlined the sense of posterity that framed early public displays of likenesses in the United States, transforming a gallery of portraits into a meditation on character, civic virtue, and the world-altering legacy of the American Revolution.

Peale's museum, bolstered by natural history specimens and other curiosities, eventually expanded with branches run by his sons in Baltimore (1814) and New York City (1825). Peale's model even inspired an imitator on the western side of the state. In 1828, Pittsburgh artist James Reid Lambdin returned home and opened his own museum on the corner of Market and Fourth Streets, prompted by his friendship with Rubens Peale, purveyor of the New York City museum. Lambdin's account holds that the new museum was originally supposed to be an official part of the Peale network, but that based on the counsel of others, Lambdin eventually established it as a separate entity.¹⁹ One of the earliest public galleries west of the Allegheny Mountains, Lambdin's museum, like most of its kind, featured diverse curiosities ranging from living white crows to a petrified "mermaid." But it also included a "Gallery of Fine Arts," presenting portraits by well-known



Lafayette's return visit to the United States in 1824 inspired countless portrait images large and small, including commemorative satin ribbons. Portraits of the heroes of the American Revolution became some of the most widely disseminated images in the early Republic, appearing on everything from coffee shop and tavern signs to glassware and textiles.

Tiller's Lafayette Badge, featuring portraits of the Marquis de Lafayette and George Washington, 1824-1825.

HHC Collections, transfer from Carnegie Museum of Natural History. Donated by Mary O'Hara Darlington, 94.51.634. Photo by Nicole Lauletta.



The National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C., 1996, by Carol Highsmith, digital image from film transparency.
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

artists such as Charles Wilson Peale, Gilbert Stuart, Thomas Sully, and, of course, James Reid Lambdin.²⁰

During this period, another type of project also illustrated the growing public interest in profiles of American lives. Published volumes of biographies, complete with written profiles and engraved portrait illustrations of individuals such as the signers of the Declaration of Independence, began emerging in the early 1800s. By 1845, the popularity of such books had become so widespread that the *Yale Literary Magazine* announced, “Biography has become the rage of the day.”²¹ Also seen as a way to preserve and disseminate ideas of character, moral virtue, and exemplars of action to a wider audience, these subscription-based multi-volume publications advertised widely in local communities. For many Pittsburghers, their first contact with the

idea of a “National Portrait Gallery” may have come via advertisements that appeared in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* during the 1830s, announcing available subscriptions for the book series, *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*.²² Partially organized by Pennsylvania portraitist and engraver James B. Longacre and New York portrait artist James Herring, this project, a combination of laudatory profiles and engravings based largely on famous paintings, symbolized the intertwined nature of such commemoration efforts during this period.

The popularity of biographical profiles spurred efforts to add overlooked voices to the American narrative. In 1848, American poet and writer Elizabeth Ellet wrote and published *The Women of the American Revolution*, a multi-volume work that highlighted patriotic women who devoted themselves to the

cause of independence and who could serve as models for future generations.²³ In her introduction to the 1850 edition Ellet wrote: “It is almost impossible now to appreciate the vast influence of woman’s patriotism upon the destinies of the infant republic.”²⁴ Today a copy of this publication can be found in the Detre Library & Archives. While some of the women featured were certainly household names, such as Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren, others were more obscure. How many people recalled the story of Esther de Berdt? (An Englishwoman who married an American and became active in the Independence cause in Philadelphia.) Ellet sought out stories that celebrated women whose patriotism was domestic in nature, for example, ensuring the welfare of an extended family while her husband was away at war. Ironically, the merits of Ellet’s pioneering work also spotlighted

an enduring gap. Even as writers worked to create a more inclusive notion of who belonged in such canons, the contributions of African Americans were still omitted from the narrative.

During this same period, two other key events took place. In this nation, on August 10, 1846, the Smithsonian Institution was founded in Washington, D.C., charged with furthering the “increase and diffusion of knowledge” across the United States. Meanwhile overseas in England, a move was afoot to establish a different institution that would also shape thinking about portraiture in the former colonies. Starting in the late 1840s, efforts began in Great Britain to create a National Portrait Gallery, a collection of images documenting not just kings and queens and other aristocrats, but individuals who had contributed to British history and culture. Although it required three tries, the House of Lords finally approved a proposal in 1856. Part of a larger international trend that increasingly recognized the value and impact of science, technology, and industrial progress, this move in Great Britain paralleled what had been happening on a smaller scale in the United States, where scientific and professional organizations such as the American Philosophical Society and Old State House (later renamed Independence Hall) in Philadelphia or New York’s City Hall commissioned portraits and assembled semi-public collections of luminaries to hang in honor on their gallery walls.²⁵

An Idea Takes Shape

It wasn’t until 1886 that someone recorded the first official expression of support for a “National Portrait Gallery” in the United States, although the Smithsonian had long included portraits among its earliest collections. This came by way of the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS), when a society president and former U.S. congressman suggested that the White House and Capitol building in Washington, D.C., would soon run out of room to display the portraits of U.S. presidents

and other dignitaries.²⁶ The congressman had also seen and been inspired by London’s National Portrait Gallery. By 1910, within the Smithsonian Institution, a “National Portrait Gallery” already existed in name. A citizens’ lobbying group took up this idea in 1919, while the Smithsonian, in another example of military conflict inspiring notions of

“It’s almost impossible now to appreciate the vast influence of woman’s patriotism upon the destinies of the infant republic.”

artistic posterity, endorsed a “National Art Commission” after World War I specifically to commission portraits of the American and Allied leaders. But the institution still had no physical home in Washington, D.C.²⁷

In the 1930s, Pittsburgh entered the story in the form of Andrew Mellon, the wealthy financier and scion of the Mellon family who served as secretary of the treasury for the three successive presidential administrations of Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. Over the years, Mellon had amassed one of the most important art collections in the nation, including more than 20 masterworks from the Soviet Union’s Hermitage Museum. In 1936, he offered part of that collection to the people of the United States, agreeing to use his own money to build a new museum specifically to house and display the works; the resulting institution became the National Gallery of Art. But

within Mellon’s larger gift resided a significant assemblage of American portraits. Records of the Smithsonian show that Mellon specifically envisioned a portrait gallery, comprised of portraits of individuals who had been deceased for a period of time, whose example would promote the understanding of history and patriotism among Americans. Eventually, about 35 of these images became part of the founding collection of the National Portrait Gallery, although it took another three decades before that institution finally appeared.²⁸

Mellon would not live to see that happen. He died in August 1937; his National Gallery opened in 1941, while discussion of another new museum was forestalled by the conflict of World War II. After the war, conversations gradually resumed, and momentum picked up in the late 1950s. Some scholars argue that the timing of the final push to create a National Portrait Gallery during the height of the Cold War was no coincidence. Certainly advocates recognized that displaying a collection celebrating the achievements and impact of great Americans held special value at a time when fostering patriotism and good citizenship were high priorities.²⁹ By the time supporters such as Senator Hubert H. Humphrey took up the cause in 1960, the new museum was effectively seen as a weapon of the Cold War and a much-needed cultural boost in a capital city some felt still lacked a certain level of cultural gravitas:

A National Portrait Gallery will make a major contribution to our national life, will foster patriotism, and educate coming generations in the high ideals which distinguish us as a nation.³⁰

Finally, an act of Congress in 1962 officially established the National Portrait Gallery with a charter to collect and display images of “men and women who have made significant contributions to the history, development, and culture of the people of the United States.”³¹ Finding a home in the landmark Old Patent Office building, which it would inhabit along with a new American



art museum, the National Portrait Gallery opened to the public on October 7, 1968. The new institution was to collect paintings, prints, drawings, sculpture, and engravings, and focus on individuals of cultural importance who had been deceased for at least 10 years.

The opening received notice from media across the nation, including here in Pittsburgh. While the museum was always envisioned as a place where the contributions of Americans from a wide array of fields would be represented, *The Pittsburgh Press* Roto section for October 6, 1968, reflected how many people regarded the new institution in its earliest days, running a multi-page photographic spread on “Presenting the presidents.” For the *Press*, the assemblage of rare presidential portraits (many were on loan) was “the main attraction.”³² The *Canonsburg Daily Notes* was a bit more circumspect, in an editorial later that year it deemed the new gallery “an authentic—although still incomplete—view of the American experience.”³³ From the start, someone was already tracking which Western Pennsylvanians would be among those featured in the new museum’s halls. A brief notice in the *Press* a few days before the October opening noted that at least four “Ex-Pittsburghers” would be included in the debut show: Andrew Mellon, Andrew Carnegie, Albert Gallatin, and Lillian Russell.³⁴ (All appear in the Heinz History Center exhibition.)

Opened during a year of dramatic upheaval across the nation, the new museum was not without controversy. Some applauded it and felt that it redressed a wrong that had been created with the opening of Mellon’s largely European-focused National Gallery of Art. The nation’s capital needed a museum that celebrated true *American* creations. But others saw in it the preservation of an old hierarchy just as social uprisings were demanding new accountability and new thinking around the country. Famed anthropologist and author Margaret Mead, one of three speakers on the opening day program, looked out on the

assembled crowd and noted that there was “something wrong” with the audience. In a majority-black city, the faces before her were all white.³⁵ Questions of inclusion and the search for strategies to broaden the reach of the museum’s collections existed from the start. Five years after the opening in 1973, the gallery mounted “the first national exhibition” detailing the role of African Americans in the American Revolution, a project that the director at the time hoped would “help restore to national memory the fact of black participation in the events that shaped the founding of the country.”³⁶

Likewise, initial restrictions against collecting photographic portraits also elicited criticism. The rule reflected the traditional definition of “fine art” from past eras; many argued that the policy nearly rendered the new institution obsolete. A review in *American Heritage* outlined this dilemma as it related to President Ulysses S. Grant. While the museum had a “rather pedestrian” oil portrait of Grant, the writer argued, were not the most essential likenesses of him the famous Civil War photographs taken by Matthew Brady or Alexander Gardner?³⁷ How could such images be omitted from the halls of a national display? Unsurprisingly, the restrictions against photography—increasingly, the dominant portrait media of the 20th century—did not last. Now, the National Portrait Gallery collects a wide range of media expressions far beyond the bounds of the original charter, including video and installation work.

The practice of waiting until 10 years after someone’s demise also went by the wayside. In an institution charged with collecting images from life, what better time to gather the foremost images documenting someone’s energy, accomplishments, and impact than when they’re still alive? In fact, the 10-year rule was already being circumvented in the 1960s, and for a Western Pennsylvanian no less. A portrait of Rachel Carson (who died in 1964), along with Ernest Hemingway, was

purchased and put on temporary display, then stored away until the 10-year timeframe had expired.³⁸

Today, the National Portrait Gallery maintains a robust schedule of exhibitions and programming that broadens the traditional notions of what a “portrait gallery” was envisioned to be. The images of tech entrepreneurs, composers, and Nobel laureates take their places in a collection that also acquires an image of every U.S. president. Actively seeking to widen the representation of faces on its walls, the institution hosts performance artists, sponsors a triennial national portrait competition—won in 2019 by Hugo Crosthwaite with a video animation based on drawings that features a narrative about a woman living at the Mexican border—and operates a scholarly center, “PORTAL = Portraiture + Analysis,” that seeks to continue raising the profile of portraiture as an increasingly interdisciplinary field of endeavor in the United States.

While such efforts promise to continue transforming the walls of tomorrow’s gallery into a more realistically diverse picture of the nation’s famous faces, it still leaves the challenge of recovering voices and faces from the past. As artist Amy Sherald—whose portraits of African Americans made national headlines when her portrait of Michelle Obama was unveiled at the National Portrait Gallery in 2018—has said, “I’m depicting the many people who existed in history but whose presence was never documented.”³⁹

► **Although Congress established the National Portrait Gallery in 1962, the new museum did not have a permanent home until 1968. In the interim, the gallery was housed in the old Arts & Industries Building until 1967. The portrait of Pocahontas, visible at right, was part of the A.W. Mellon Foundation gift.**

The National Portrait Gallery in the Arts & Industries Building, 1966.

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 361, Box 1, Folder 8.

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY




“Today, the National Portrait Gallery maintains a robust schedule of exhibitions and programming that broadens the traditional notions of what a “portrait gallery” was envisioned to be.”



National Portrait Gallery Director Kim Sajet has widely acknowledged the challenge of this “presence of absence”—the reality that America is not equally represented in the National Portrait Gallery’s current holdings. How do you acknowledge the contributions of people whose status in American history prevented their likenesses from being made or preserved?⁴⁰ Theirs is the unseen presence that haunts the landscape of individuals featured in the exhibition, demanding a greater accounting of questions such as: Who decides what legacies are important in our culture and why? What defines American achievement and how has that definition changed today?

It is a familiar challenge to history museums like the Heinz History Center, where uncovering the lost narratives of Pittsburgh’s historical past is complicated by

disparities in how those stories were recorded and what material artifacts were left behind. The exhibition *Smithsonian’s Portraits of Pittsburgh: Works from the National Portrait Gallery* presents the images of 100 people whose contacts with Western Pennsylvania impacted lives that shaped a nation; people whose faces have become a permanent part of the National Portrait Gallery’s collection. But for each person included in the exhibition, how many others shaped similar stories yet left no name or image behind? Which images and stories remain to be found and added? In each gallery of the exhibition, History Center audiences will be encouraged to think about and engage with this question, to consider the larger picture of a place created by both those who are depicted on the gallery walls and those who are missing.

The pathway that led to the creation of a National Portrait Gallery in the United States was a winding journey shaped by intertwined concerns over impact and legacy, patriotism and propaganda, the changing stature of fine art, emerging notions of professional, popular, and scientific “success,” and questions about how to assemble a visual record of people who shaped the culture of a nation. Perhaps the most definitive aspect of the story is that it was always a narrative in flux, one that shifted depending upon the priorities of the day, challenged at different stages by new voices seeking greater acknowledgment for the contributions of those not recognized. It is a visual narrative that will continue to expand and change, accommodating the prophetic pictures and emerging stories of a national future that has yet to be defined. 

These portraits on display in what is now the Smithsonian American Art Museum were the result of the National Art Commission's effort to create a pictorial record of World War I through images of the leaders of the American and Allied forces. These works eventually become a founding part of the National Portrait Gallery collection.

War Portrait Room on the second floor of the National Gallery of Art, 1924.

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 311, Box 31, Folder 7.

- ¹ The Frenchman Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre invented the daguerreotype in 1839. Once they caught on, daguerreotypes were most popular for capturing portraits. "America's First Look into the Camera: Daguerreotype Portraits and Views, 1839-1862," Collection Connections: Library of Congress, 2019, accessed <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/daguerreotype/history.html>
- ² Richard Brandt, "Google divulges numbers at I/O: 20 billion texts, 93 million selfies and more," Silicon Valley Business Journal, Jun 25, 2014, accessed <https://www.bizjournals.com/sanjose/news/2014/06/25/google-divulges-numbers-at-i-o-20-billion-texts-93.html>
- ³ In the National Portrait Gallery's exhibition "Eye to I: Self-Portraits from 1900 to Today," Chief Curator Brandon Fortune acknowledged the role of the selfie in allowing individuals to construct their own persona, see Pat Padua, "See the Evolution of Selfies in a New Exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery," *dcist.com*, November 2, 2018, accessed <https://dcist.com/story/18/11/02/see-the-evolution-of-selfies-in-a-new-exhibit-at-the-national-portrait-gallery/>.
- ⁴ The earliest known depiction of Pittsburgh was painted by ship captain Lewis Brantz, passing through the region in 1790.
- ⁵ "Profiles," *Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 9, 1806.
- ⁶ Penley Knipe, "Shades of Black and White, American Portrait Silhouettes," in Asma Naeem, *Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now* (Washington, D.C., and Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press for the Smithsonian Institution, 2018): 79.
- ⁷ Fortescue Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country* (Pittsburgh, 1810): 66; Cuming came through Pittsburgh in spring 1807 and reported that Dearborn had arrived "about a year ago." By far the best source on Pittsburgh's early artistic development is Mary Durvilla Hoehl, "The Dawn of Art in Pittsburgh," M.A. thesis (Duquesne University, 1988), 26.
- ⁸ The ads appeared February through May, 1808, see "S. H. Dearborn's Painting Room," *Pittsburgh Gazette*, April 5, 1808; perhaps he was advertising being open for the season after a winter closure. It is possible that he advertised prior to 1808 and those references just have not been found.
- ⁹ A tavern sign on the corner of Wood Street and Diamond Alley, called the "Sign of General Washington," reportedly featured the great man's likeness, see Charles W. Dahlinger, *Pittsburgh, A Sketch of its Early Social Life* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1916): 34. There may have been more than one; James Reid Lambdin recalled seeing a "full-length copy" of Gilbert Stuart's Washington on a coffee house sign in early Pittsburgh, Hoehl, "Dawn," 41-42. Advertisements for a "well-known" tavern under the "Sign of General Butler" appeared in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, May 3, 1800.
- ¹⁰ One rare example appeared in 1811, see, "J. T. Turner" advertisement, *Pittsburgh Gazette*, November 1, 1811.
- ¹¹ Such figures were also labeled under the less place-specific heading of "Maternal Affection."
- ¹² Perhaps the venture was not as profitable as its proprietors had hoped, as the whole thing was offered for sale at the end of the advertisement. See, "Elegant Museum of Wax-Work," *Pittsburgh Gazette*, August 10, 1819; the following January, a museum again appeared at the same location, but now called the "New Museum of Fine Arts," see: "Museum," *Pittsburgh Gazette*, January 7, 1820.
- ¹³ Richard H. Saunders, *American Faces* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2016): 179-181.
- ¹⁴ "De Tocqueville on Democracy and the Arts," *Daedalus* 89, no. 2 (Spring 1960): 404.
- ¹⁵ Cornelia Wellswalters, "Portrait Painting," *Boston Evening Transcript*, May 6, 1846.
- ¹⁶ For a quick survey of Peale's efforts see, Karie Diethorn, "Peale's Philadelphia Museum," The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia, Rutgers University, 2015, accessed <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/peales-philadelphia-museum/>; for a more in-depth treatment of Charles Wilson Peale, see: David R. Brigham, *Public Culture in the Early Republic: Peale's Museum and Its Audience* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995) and David C. Ward, *Charles Wilson Peale: Art and Selfhood in the Early Republic* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2003).
- ¹⁷ Wendy Bellion, *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012): 220; a view of a broadside addressing the idea of presenting an embalmed leader, most notably Benjamin Franklin, can be seen here: Charles Wilson Peale, "Gentleman, I thank you for the honor you do me in the favor of this visit," broadside for the Peale Museum, Philadelphia, 1792; American Philosophical Society, accessed <https://digilib.amphilsoc.org/islandora/object/text:1749#page/1/mode/1up>.
- ¹⁸ Charles Wilson Peale, "Gentleman," 1792.
- ¹⁹ From the "Journals of James Reid Lambdin" as recounted in Hoehl, "Dawn," 82, 85-86. The original "Journals," an unpublished manuscript, reside in the collection of the Pennsylvania and Historical Museum Commission, Division of Archives and Manuscripts, Harrisburg, Pa.
- ²⁰ It was not the oldest, that honor most likely goes to Cincinnati's Western Museum, which opened in 1820. The best overview of Lambdin's Museum is found in Chapter III, Hoehl, "Dawn," 70-103.
- ²¹ As quoted in Scott E. Caspar, *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999): 1.
- ²² See for example, "National Portrait Gallery," *Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 7, 1833.
- ²³ Elizabeth Fries Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution* (New York: Charles Scribner, sixth edition, 1854) This is the edition in the Detre Library & Archives at the Heinz History Center; Caspar, *Constructing*, 136; 306-308; see also Casper, Scott E., "An Uneasy Marriage of Sentiment and Scholarship: Elizabeth F. Ellet and the Domestic Origins of American Women's History," *Journal of Women's History* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1992).
- ²⁴ Elizabeth F. Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution*, Vol I (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1850), 15. Ellet began publishing the work in two volumes in 1848 but found so much material that a third volume was added, and the set reissued in 1850. Multiple editions were published after that.
- ²⁵ Valentijn Byvanck, "Public Portraits and Portrait Publics," *Pennsylvania History* 65, special supplement (1998): 207-208.
- ²⁶ Comments of the Hon. Robert C. Winthrop, recorded in *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Vol 3, Second series (June 1886): 8-9.
- ²⁷ Marcia Pointon, "Imaging Nationalism in the Cold War: The Foundation of the National Portrait Gallery," *Journal of American Studies* 26, no 3 (December 1992): 361. www.jstor.org/stable/27555683; "National Portrait Gallery – Agency History," Smithsonian Institution Archives, August 31, 2002, accessed <http://siarchives.si.edu/research/ah00008npg.html>.
- ²⁸ Pointon, "Imaging Nationalism," 364-365. Not all the Mellon portraits transferred to the new museum.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 365-366.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 370.
- ³¹ "Fact Sheet: National Portrait Gallery," Media Website: Smithsonian News Desk, 2017, accessed: <http://npg.si.edu/about-us/press-release/fact-sheet-national-portrait-gallery-2/>
- ³² "Presenting the Presidents," *The Pittsburgh Press*, October 6, 1968.
- ³³ "New National Gallery," *The Daily Notes* (Canonsburg, Pa.), November 22, 1968.
- ³⁴ "Exhibit to Honor Ex-Pittsburghers," *The Pittsburgh Press*, September 29, 1968.
- ³⁵ Pointon, "Imaging Nationalism," 358.
- ³⁶ "Exhibition is Portrait of Blacks' Role in History," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 4, 1973.
- ³⁷ Richard M. Ketchum, "National Portrait Gallery," *American Heritage* 19 no 5 (August 1968).
- ³⁸ Pointon, "Imaging Nationalism," 371.
- ³⁹ Priscilla Frank, "'Fairytale' Paintings Show a Side of Black Lives History Overlooks," *Huffpost.com*, July 7, 2016, accessed https://www.huffpost.com/entry/artist-paints-portraits-of-magical-blackness-that-history-erased_n_577d4a57e4b09b4c43c1f288.
- ⁴⁰ Peggy McGlone, "Experimentation is key to success for National Portrait Gallery's director," *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2015; Catherine Trifiletti, "More than Meets the Eye," *Washington Life.com*, January 30, 2018 accessed <http://washingtonlife.com/2018/01/30/more-than-meets-the-eyel/>.