SKETCHES BY TRUMBULL

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Forty-odd years ago three little pencil sketches from the hand of Colonel John Trumbull, sometime aide-de-camp of General Washington, were added to the Museum's collections. They fall within Trumbull's happiest and most productive years when he was at the height of his powers. All three, also, are connected with the theme of the American Revolution, which absorbed this documentary artist for more than half of his fourscore and eight years. An examination of their history and their particular place in his life and work is not without interest.

The series of historical paintings, Trumbull's celebrated "national history," was first suggested to the young painter by his master, the benign Benjamin West. Most of the pictures were begun—that is, the composition determined—in West's studio a decade or more after the events depicted took place. Trumbull had returned to London in 1784 to study a second time with "the father of American painting." There he made the acquaintance of Thomas Jefferson in 1785, visiting him at the Grille de Chailloit in Paris the following year. Jefferson's enlightened encouragement spurred Trumbull on to the work which occupied him intermittently for forty-five years. Filled with his life's mission, he returned to this country in 1789 to gather the necessary historical data. He sought out the chief actors, collecting their "heads" from Concord, New Hampshire, to Charleston, South Carolina; made sketches and painted over a hundred miniatures in oil on mahogany (never water color on ivory); and meticulously studied military accouterments.

The Death of General Mercer at the Battle of Princeton is typical of the series. Trumbull first made a number of preliminary sketches in May, 1786, of the event which occurred in January, 1777. (Five of these are now in the Princeton University Library, one at Yale, and still another in a New York private collection). Portraits and topographical details had to be secured, of necessity, in this country. Consequently, we find the artist sketching, in December, 1790, "the College and Village of Princeton as seen from the Field on which the Battle was fought," to transcribe the notation on a study privately owned in New York. The principal figure in the composition, General Mercer, was long dead. He had been knocked down by the butt end of a musket and bayonetted seven times in the encounter with the red-coated Seventeenth Foot. The conscientious painter therefore proceeded to Fredericksburg, Virginia, in April, 1791, and twice sketched the general's nineteen-year-old son, John. A first and preliminary drawing is now at Fordham University; a more finished one in the Museum is illustrated here. On the back of the latter Trumbull noted that the father had ruddy skin, auburn hair, blue eyes and was "aged 42 or 3" (a mistake, the general was born about 1725 and was fifty-two or fifty-three at the time of his death). Another drawing at Fordham of a younger man shows such a strong Mercer family resemblance that it is probably one of John's three younger brothers. The sketch is designated "Major John André" (in a hand not Trumbull's), but Trumbull never saw André, although there are many
drawings and paintings of the famous British spy erroneously ascribed to him. The visual material Trumbull collected was eventually incorporated into a painting, 25 x 36 inches, which proved too large for the engraver and was left unfinished. It is now at Yale with a second, smaller painting 20 x 30 inches, made to take its place. Years later, in 1831, a large replica, 6 x 9 feet, of this last was painted and acquired the year following the artist's death in 1843 by the Wadsworth Atheneum. The tradition persists that Trumbull carried his paintings about with him and filled in “heads” as opportunity afforded, but obviously he did not work that way.

The sketch of young Mercer, like the other two studies under consideration, remained in the painter’s possession until his death and then passed to Professor Silliman, thence to his son, Benjamin, also a professor of chemistry at Yale, and on to his son, Benjamin the third. The last caused the Silliman collection to be sold at public auction in Philadelphia in 1896 and 1897 (Henkel’s sale nos. 770 and 778). It was purchased at or shortly after that time and presented to the Museum in 1906 by its late president, Robert W. de Forest.

But the story does not stop there. The study for the general, actually that of his son John, has been used many times as a life portrait, from family histories to Washington Irving's *Life of Washington*. Indeed it has become, through constant reproduction, the basis of the standard portrait of the general. This would not have pleased the scrupulously correct and exacting Trumbull.

The irritable artist would have been still more exasperated by another and graver misrepresentation. In the 1890's there appeared in New York a flood of forgeries of his work. The large and impressive exhibition of historical portraits and relics held at the Metropolitan Opera House in May, 1889, celebrating the centennial of Washington's inauguration, had awakened a new interest in likenesses of the founding fathers and Revolutionary heroes. In 1892 Clarence Winthrop Bowen's monumental volume, *The History of the Centennial* . . . added to this and nicely codified information. A factory-like production of spurious
drawings ensued, those of George and Martha
Washington being in greatest abundance. Some
of these forgeries are on paper, others on “deer
skin,” “thick cowhide,” and “drumheads,” both
in ink line and sepia wash. Many are in frames,
the backs of which are covered with contem-
porary newspapers. Most are initialed “J. T.”
and dated, though sometimes injudiciously.
The “Gen. St. Clair drawn on inside of book
cover” recently come to light typifies these fakes.
It is nothing like Trumbull in style, and the
date, 1786, is an impossibility, as the artist was
then in London and his subject in Philadelphia.

In contrast to this weak performance is
Trumbull’s own spirited drawing of General
Arthur St. Clair sketched from life in New York
in August 1790. It was probably intended for
use in the battle of Princeton, or Trenton, as
the general took part in both engagements. It
served too for the engraving by James Barton
Longacre and Henry Bryan Hall. The history
of this, and the third sketch, is the same as the
Mercer.

This last sketch is of the English-born Major
General Horatio Gates, who was responsible
for Trumbull’s promotion from major of
brigade to a full colonelcy (at the age of
twenty!) and under whom he served at Ticon-
deroga. This study was made by the ex-colonel
in New York in December, 1790, and was used,
the head turned in the opposite direction, for
the central figure in the Surrender of Burgoyne
at Saratoga, also begun in West’s studio. The
large and well-known version of this little Yale
picture was one of the four painted in New
York between 1817 and 1824, with life-sized fig-
ures, for the Rotunda of the Capitol. All four
of these pictures, the most prominent monu-
ments to Trumbull’s ambitious scheme, were
carried out when he was in his mid-sixties and
the skill displayed in the little drawings from
life, now in the Museum, had all but vanished.

During the period when these three sketches
were made, just prior to and within the five
crowded years before he left for London a third
time, Trumbull did his best work. One might
also say that in such small-scale renderings his
artistry reached a peak. The utterly charming
miniature portrait of the Italian sculptor Giu-
seppe Ceracchi, painted in Philadelphia in 1792
and reproduced in the March Bulletin, is an
excellent contemporary example of his ability.
In May, 1794, Trumbull, deserting the Muses,
embarked at New York with John Jay on board
the sailing ship Ohio to become a diplomatic
secretary. Though he continued to paint until
his death in 1843 he never recaptured his earlier
inspiration. The Muses smiled no more.

Professor Sizer is now engaged in writing the
life of Colonel Trumbull and compiling a
check-list of his work.