Southern Monuments: Charles Carroll and William James Hubard

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The Museum recently acquired for its collection of American paintings a portrait of Charles Carroll of Carrollton (1737-1832), painted by William James Hubard (1807-1862). This portrait brings before us two historic figures who provide the utmost in contrast: Charles Carroll stands as the very epitome of the enlightened eighteenth-century gentleman, while Hubard could well represent the very epitome of the nineteenth-century romantic—emotional, intense, artistic, and visionary. Carroll is the better known of the two since for many years he enjoyed national fame, whereas Hubard is best remembered in Richmond where he died fighting for the Confederacy.

The Carroll portrait is of small scale—what used to be known as “cabinet size”—done in oil on a mahogany panel approximately 18 x 14 inches. Hubard painted it in Baltimore about 1830, when his career as a portrait artist had only just begun and when Carroll’s long life was drawing to a close. Like many artists of his time, Hubard sought to establish his reputation by doing a series of portraits of political figures. His portraits of Jackson, Calhoun, Clay, and Marshall have survived, and to this group we may relate the Museum’s new painting. Compared to the others, the Carroll portrait appears to be one of the most pleasing of the series; perhaps it is the most interesting picture Hubard ever painted. The likeness is excellent and the figure of the fragile old gentleman is expertly placed in its atmospheric setting.

There is no lack of portraits of Charles Carroll, since he was painted by many of the leading artists of his day. The Carroll family collection originally contained at least eight portraits of him by various hands—Sir Joshua Reynolds, Benjamin West, Gilbert Stuart, Charles Willson Peale, Thomas Sully, Chester Harding, Charles Bird King, as well as Hubard. Ours is probably the last painted from life: Carroll had reached the great age of ninety-four. Although it has been known and recorded for many years, it has been generally overlooked in recent decades and may actually have been lost for a while.

Until very recently this picture was in the large collection of Carroll family portraits inherited by Charles Carroll MacTavish and kept for the past forty years at his house in Rome. None of the collection was lent to the exhibition of Charles Carroll memorabilia at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1937, celebrating the second centennial of his birth. Consequently our painting has not been seen in America for many years. In 1889 it was shown in the great New York exhibition of American painting at the centennial celebration of George Washington’s inauguration. From 1893 to 1912 it was on loan at the Maryland Historical Society. Presumably it had previously been kept at the Carroll family estate, Doughoregan Manor, or in one of the family houses in Baltimore.

At the time of Carroll’s death in 1832, a lithograph reproduction of the portrait was issued by Endicott and Swett, who apparently hoped to sell the print on the strength of the elderly aristocrat’s then nationwide fame as the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence. In the 1880s the Hubard portrait was reproduced in Scharf’s History of Maryland and again in his History of Western Maryland.

Carroll was born in Annapolis in 1737. When he was eleven years old he was sent to Europe to attend the Collège de Saint Omer in French Flanders. Thence he went to the French Jesuit...
college in Rheims, on to Louis-le-Grand in Paris, then to Bourges to study civil law. His extensive education was rounded off by several years in England devoted to the study of the common law. He had been abroad for sixteen years when, in 1764, he returned to Maryland as owner of the family plantation at Carrollton and sole heir of his father's vast holdings—seventy or eighty thousand acres of farm and timber land—in Maryland and Pennsylvania.

William James Hubard, Self-portrait. Owned by Mrs. Walter Hubard, Richmond

At the time of the Revolution, Carroll was one of the few men of great wealth who sided with the Americans. Under British law members of the Carroll family, as Roman Catholics, were not allowed to hold office in the colonial government; thus they felt they had good reason to risk everything they owned in the hope of winning political and religious freedom under a new government. Until recently Carroll has been known chiefly for the very prominent role he assumed in both state and national affairs during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, as a Revolutionary leader in Maryland, a delegate to the Continental Congress, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, United States Senator and State Senator. Modern historians, however, claim importance for him in quite another direction. Perhaps his most revolutionary act was his decision in the 1760s to sow his vast plantations to wheat rather than tobacco, which, though it received a bounty in the British market, kept the grower in perpetual debt to British merchants, and was rapidly exhausting the soil of Maryland, causing a progressive migration westward. Not only did he change his own crop, he also lent money to many other Maryland farmers to enable them to follow his example, so that by 1780 wheat had become the main crop of the section. The Ellicotts, whom he induced to extend their Pennsylvania milling operations into Maryland, eventually became general merchants as well as millers. By 1790 they were sending quantities of flour to Europe and importing many goods useful to the American farmers. Thus Carroll's agricultural program furthered the development of roads and of the port of Baltimore.

When the Federalists went out of power in 1800, Carroll retired to private life. His virtues and his possessions had earned him the unofficial status of the most aristocratic American of his time. One of the best contemporary descriptions of him is that given by John Bernard, the actor, in his Retrospections of America 1797-1811. "From the refinement of his manners," wrote Bernard, "a stranger would have surmised that he had passed all his days in the salons of Paris. He had all that suavity and softness, in combination with dignity, which bespeak the perfection of good taste. This attested the character of his society. Ease may be natural to a man, but elegance—the union of propriety with ease—must be acquired . . . . But Mr. Carroll possessed higher qualities than mere external polish. He had a heart that colored all his thoughts and deeds with the truest hues of humanity. No man was fonder of doing a good action, and, certainly, none could do it with a better grace."

By outliving most if not all his contemporaries, Carroll became a sort of national monument. After the death of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams on July 4, 1826, he was the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence. As a venerable relic of the past, a last link with the heroes of the Revolution, he had to suffer the ceremonial visits of committees presenting medals, with endless speeches, and the effusions of lady poetesses, among them Lydia Sigourney.
Charles Carroll of Carrollton, by William James Hubard. Rogers Fund, 1956
In Philip Hone’s Diary there are accounts of the author’s visits to Baltimore and his meetings with Carroll in 1830 and 1832. Our portrait of Carroll was probably being painted just about this time. In any case the observations of Hone form a complement to the painting, as they reflect the general attitude of respect and homage then prevailing toward the old gentleman. In 1830 Hone wrote: “I paid this morning a visit which I have long been wishing for to the venerable Charles Carroll, the only surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence. He will be 94 years of age next September. His faculties are very little impaired, except his sight, which within the last few months has failed a little and deprived him of the pleasure of reading at all times, which he has heretofore enjoyed. He is gay, cheerful, polite, and talkative. He described to me his manner of living. He takes a cold bath every morning in the summer, plunging headlong into it; rides on horseback from eight to twelve miles; drinks water at dinner; has never drunk spirituous liquors at any period of his life, but drinks a glass or two of Madeira wine every day, and sometimes champagne and claret; takes as much exercises as possible; goes to bed at nine o’clock, and rises before day.”

Two years later Hone found that “Mr. Carroll was cheerful and talkative and enjoyed himself very much until nine o’clock, when according to his uniform practice he took the arm of Mr. McTavish and left the room. I feel while in the presence of this venerable man as if I were permitted to converse with one of the patriarchs... he presents a beautiful example of the close of a well-spent life, serene, cheerful and happy; prepared, it would seem, to ‘take his rest, with all his country’s honors blest’... Would to God we had such a race of men in high places at this eventful period of our country’s affairs. But Providence took care of us in their days, and as the Scottish ballad says, ‘It aye will again.’ ”

Carroll had already enjoyed his retirement from national politics for several years by the time Hubard was born in 1807 in Shropshire. The boy’s native talents first manifested themselves when as a child he began cutting silhouettes. His remarkable skill was exploited by a traveling showman named Smith, who exhibited Master Hubard and his work, which was known as the Hubard Gallery, in various English cities. In 1824 the entrepreneur brought Hubard to the United States. The Museum has perhaps a dozen silhouettes from his hand, and several others bearing the Hubard Gallery stamp which may or may not be of his cutting.

Silhouette of Franklin Pierce, by Hubard. Bequest of Mary Martin, 1938

As young Hubard matured he became interested in painting and finally broke away from Smith, who left him, apparently, in difficult financial circumstances and with a feeling that he had been outrageously exploited. Tradition claims that both Gilbert Stuart and Thomas Sully gave the young artist advice. In 1829 he exhibited a portrait at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and his career as a professional portrait painter was begun. By 1830-31 he was painting in Baltimore, where many of his works remain. About this time also he made his first
appearance in Virginia, where he painted portraits in Williamsburg and Surry County and at several of the great plantations along the James River, and finally settled in Gloucester. There he quickly became popular both for his work and for his social graces, but doubts of his acceptability assailed him when he became the suitor of Maria Mason Tabb, daughter of one of the leading local families. While they were still secretly engaged he wrote her that “Few would wish a child to marry a poor unknown and I am too sensible of this fact to place myself in a situation to wound the most vulnerable of my feelings. Their quantum of pride is a drop in the ocean to mine. My misfortunes have made me painfully morbid and if I could be driven to derangement I should be mad upon that theme.”

The couple were married in 1838 and went at once to Europe where Hubard studied in France and Italy. He is thought to have been an intimate of Hiram Powers and Horatio Greenough in Florence. In 1841 he returned to Richmond and engaged a studio as a professional portrait painter. There he soon became acquainted with the Valentine family, founders of the Valentine Museum in Richmond, and for many years both father and son were his close friends and patrons.

In the early 1850s Hubard became obsessed with the idea that the marble Houdon portrait statue of Washington in the Virginia State Capitol might be destroyed in some disaster such as the fire in Raleigh in 1831 which had destroyed the Canova statue of Washington. He felt that preservation of the Houdon statue was especially important because it was a reliable likeness taken, when the subject was in the prime of life, by an eminent sculptor; because it was the first such tribute paid to Washington; and because of the likelihood of damage to the marble from atmospheric effects. In 1853 the Virginia legislature granted him a seven-years’ exclusive license to produce copies of the statue. From then until the outbreak of the Civil War a major portion both of Hubard’s energies and of his funds was poured into his patriotic project. He made two plaster casts of the statue and established a foundry to cast them in bronze. Six bronze copies had been completed by 1860, but to the disappointment of Hubard’s high hopes, only three had been sold. Long after his death one of the others was bought by the City of New York, with pennies donated by school children, and it stands now in the courtyard of the American Wing of this Museum.

When Virginia seceded in April 1861 Hubard, as the owner of one of the few bronze foundries in the Confederacy, began to cast cannon and make other munitions for the Southern army. In 1862, while he was experimenting with an explosive powder he had invented, there was an accidental detonation which injured him so severely that he died two days later.

Hubard seems to have been a man of moody and puzzling temperament, but one who was quite capable of social gaiety and who inspired deep affection in those who knew him well. His painted self-portrait shows a tragic and noble face emerging from the engulfing shadows with a haunted and somber air that inevitably recalls the brooding heroes of Edgar Allan Poe. Upon his death his wife wrote to her sister, “It would have been better to have taken my worthless useless life, than his, who was so eminently useful, so calculated to adorn society, so good, so gifted, so pure and lovely.” His great friend Mann Valentine, writing three years before Hubard’s death and with no thought of publication, said of him: “He has many strongly marked traits, those of his mind are bold thought, vivid imagination, strong will, with early bad training of all .... He certainly has a deep intimate knowledge of the work of the human heart and mind, good and evil—he is a painter of character, a writer of character, and his profound knowledge of all the workings of the heart has often surprised me. He is familiar with all the shades of sensibility, thought, and feeling, and can give the most delicate touches of pen and pencil—fancy—that I have ever known in any individual with whom I have been personally intimate, and yet he has never produced anything that has given him a position in art or letters—he has acquired richly a high position but there seems to have been something wanting.”

Certainly Hubard was a man of many talents, a man of creative imagination, yet there seems to have been some curious fault in his nature that condemned him to excel in a variety of fields without being wholly successful in any.