A PORTRAIT BY JOHN MARE

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The Museum has recently acquired for its collection of eighteenth-century American paintings a distinguished portrait of a man painted in 1767 by a New York artist, John Mare. This newly discovered portrait enables us to add one more to the handful of paintings by John Mare that are known to us today.

It was brought to the Museum a few months ago by Jon Nicholas Streep, who had bought it at a small auction house in New York. It was unstretched and unframed and very dirty, but fortunately not badly damaged. There was no clue to the identity of the subject. Now that the painting has been cleaned and repaired it stands forth as the most ambitious work by John Mare yet discovered.

Twenty or thirty years ago our information about the arts in New York in the eighteenth century was scant indeed, but an increasing interest in all things American has led scholars to study more carefully the records of the past. The late Dr. William Sawitzky opened up a whole new field of research on American painting, and others, following his lead, have examined thousands of papers—parish registers, deed books, inventories, letters—for information about the artists and artisans at work in colonial America. Gradually documentary material has been gathered which, added to the objects created by a painter or a craftsman, gives us a more complete understanding not only of the man and his work but also of the world he lived in.

Until a few years ago little was known of John Mare except for his signature on a few portraits. The first published material on his life appeared in the New-York Historical Society Quarterly for October 1951, in an article by Helen Burr Smith consisting of documents she had discovered and a group of twelve portraits, four of them signed, the others attributed to Mare on the basis of style or other evidence.

From Miss Smith's article we learn that Mare was born in New York in 1739, the son of John Mare and Mary Bes. He may have become interested in painting through Benjamin West's mentor, William Williams, who married his sister. When he was twenty he married Ann Morris and went to Albany seeking portrait commissions. His son John was christened there in 1760. In this year he did a portrait of Henry Livingston, painted perhaps at Livingston Manor up the Hudson, his earliest surviving work. In 1765 he was given the freedom of the city of New York as "John Mare Junr." The following year his portrait of King George III, now lost, was bought by the Common Council of New York for City Hall. In 1767 he copied a portrait by Wollaston of Henry Lloyd of Lloyd's Neck for the sitter's son, Dr. James Lloyd of Boston. In this year Mare also painted a portrait of John Keteltas, which was shown in the exhibition of Life in America in this Museum in 1939. The following year he painted John Torrey of Boston, and four years later, in 1772, he went to Albany again and opened a studio there. He had probably returned to New York in 1774, the date of his portrait of Dr. Benjamin Young Prime, the latest of his known works, recently presented to the New-York Historical Society.
No further mention of him has been found except for a land conveyance of 1795, in which he is recorded as the owner, then or formerly, of lot number 39 on Mulberry Street.

John Mare’s work as we know it falls within the short span of fourteen years, from 1760 to 1774, when he was between twenty-one and thirty-five years old. His portraits follow the rather conventional patterns set by Wollaston and others: they are, with the exception of our painting and that of Henry Lloyd, of bust length, on a canvas about thirty by twenty-five inches, and show the sitter in full or three-quarter view, usually with a hand thrust into his waistcoat (although Dr. Prime is holding a book). The portrait of Henry Lloyd, showing him seated against a rather indeterminate background with his right hand on the arm of his chair and his left in the front of his coat, seems to be the artist’s first essay at a three-quarter-length portrait.

All the ingredients of a fashionable portrait are found in our picture of a young man in his best suit of clothes, a crimson drapery behind him and at his side a fine example of the cabinetmaker’s art. As in Mare’s other works, both earlier and later, there is evidence of his reliance on Wollaston. Here it is the pose of the figure with hand on hip, recalling Wollaston’s portraits of Colonel John Tayloe II and Daniel Carroll of Rock Creek. But though the pose is borrowed John Mare has achieved a greater sense of liveliness and ease than in his other portraits.

It is interesting to speculate on the identity of the forthright young man resting his hand on the back of the handsomely carved chair. Could he be a cabinetmaker and wood-carver, perhaps Gilbert Ash? Or might he be Mare himself, painting with sureness the face he knew best and at the same time displaying the product of another skill, fine wood-carving, a means of livelihood between portrait commissions? This is pure conjecture, although the young man appears to be about the age Mare was in 1767, when he so carefully signed his name on the curved back of the chair.

The Museum is fortunate indeed to be able to add this handsome portrait, John Mare’s masterpiece, to its collection of portraits by colonial artists.
Detail of the portrait by John Mare illustrated on the cover. The height of the painting is 48½ inches.