

## Painting and Frame

### Lenett Fellow completes an interdisciplinary study of a Colonial portrait

By Katherine Alcauskas

*Editor's Note—As this year's Judith M. Lenett Memorial Fellow, Katherine Alcauskas had the opportunity to conserve an American painting and its original frame at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center. The Lenett Fellowship in Art Conservation is awarded each year to a student enrolled in the Williams College/Clark Art Institute Graduate Program in the History of Art. Past Fellows have conserved paintings by such artists as Jackson Pollock and Sanford Gifford, but this was the first time that both a painting and its original frame were treated together, forming a truly interdisciplinary project. Ms. Alcauskas is a second-year student in the Williams program. The following is adapted from a public lecture she delivered on her project May 7.*

**W**ORKING with my interest in 18th-century art, WACC director Thomas Branchick arranged a project with Tammi Groft, Deputy Director of Collections and Exhibitions at the Albany Institute of History and Art, Albany, New York, to work on a 1763 portrait of Jeremias van Rensselaer.<sup>1</sup> The artwork was recently gifted to AIHA, and both painting and frame were in need of conservation.

Not much is known of the sitter, aside from basic biographical information gleaned from family records.<sup>2</sup> He was born at Fort Crailo in 1738, married Judith Bayard in New York City on July 3, 1760 and died on February 5/6, 1764 in Charleston, South Carolina. The portrait was painted just months before his early death.<sup>3</sup> The young man's head and upper torso, oriented at a slight angle to the viewer, are depicted against a graduated tonal background.

The canvas on which the portrait is painted measures 30 by 25 inches, a standard size at the time that was referred to as "three-quarter length," easily acquired pre-cut and pre-primed. As was typical, the artist covered the canvas with a ground layer over which he applied oil paint and a varnish. When the painting entered the lab, there was clear evidence of cupped cleavage, an action that occurs to the paint as the ground layer becomes unstable over time, and which eventually leads to paint loss. Indeed, when examining the painting under ultraviolet light, the presence of overpaint, paint added during a past restoration on top of the original layer, was discovered in a large swatch on the sitter's face. This was worrying,



Opposite page: Lenett Fellow Katherine Alcauskas works on Thomas McIlworth's 1763 portrait of Jeremias van Rensselaer. Right: Removal of overpaint from a previous treatment restored the artist's original nuances around the mouth, eyes and hairline.

as it suggested that perhaps the paint layer in this area had sustained major flaking or damage at some point in the past and that not much of the original portraitist's work survived. Before beginning treatment on the artwork, we first had to consolidate the tenting and flaking paint and ground layer with Beva, a synthetic thermoplastic adhesive. Upon stabilizing the paint layer, we were able to begin conserving the painting.

The portrait was painted by an itinerant Scottish artist named Thomas McIlworth.<sup>4</sup> His grandfather, William Mosman, was one of the great portrait painters of 18th-century Scotland. McIlworth's technique suggests he had some academic training, perhaps under his grandfather. In 1757, he emigrated to New York City, where he worked for five years, advertising his services in newspapers such as the *New York Mercury* and the *New-York Gazette*. There, he painted portraits of the Reverend Samuel Johnson, first president of Kings College, and members of the influential Stuyvesant family, among others. In 1762, he left the city to travel through the Hudson and Mohawk Valleys, painting prominent landowners. McIlworth moved to Montreal in 1767 seeking further commissions, where he is thought to have died two or three years later. McIlworth's known oeuvre amounts to 46 paintings, although the locations of a handful of these are unknown.

As demonstrated by this portrait, McIlworth typically painted the head and torso of his sitters turned at an angle against a tonal background. Many contain rounded spandrels in the upper two or all four corners, which is a convention adopted from portrait mezzotints. The artist's style

is defined by rosy cheeks, distinctive almond-shaped eyes, high foreheads and cherubic smiles. Although certain aspects identified the Albany painting as by McIlworth's hand, when it arrived at the Center it lacked the presence of many of his other works; the colors were nearly monochromatic, and the sitter seemed rather uninspired. The most likely culprit for the darkening of the paint layer, which may have decreased the painting's tonal contrast and muddled the colors, was a layer of accumulated grime atop a yellowed varnish. Varnish is applied to paintings both to protect the paint layer and saturate it, adding a sense of depth. Over time, however, varnishes tend to yellow. Working with Tom Branchick, I removed the varnish, along with the overpaint detected earlier, with swabs soaked in a xylene solution.

When the overpaint was removed, we discovered that, luckily, the sitter's face had not been damaged; instead, during a previous restoration, small losses of paint had been addressed by overlaying the whole face with paint, rather than filling each loss individually, which is more painstaking. Perhaps the restorer lacked the skill or time required to fill the tiny areas, or perhaps the repainting of the face was an aesthetic decision that reflected trends in contemporary portraiture. Indeed, the entire corner of the mouth was altered, covering the sitter's beatific smile and replacing it with a gruff, down-turned scowl. In addition to the alteration to his mouth, the sitter's hair was also changed. When the modifications of previous generations had been removed, elements of the



original painting were revealed. To fully finish the process, the small losses had to be corrected. We inpainted them to match the surrounding area and added a final layer of varnish, returning the painting to its original appearance.

The painting's frame was carved from a soft wood, most likely pine. Over the wood, a layer of gesso was laid to prepare a smooth surface, followed by a dark yellow oil size, gold leaf, and finally, varnish. When the frame entered the wooden objects lab, the original gilding was covered by multiple layers of bronze paint, which had corroded over time and become brown. Ideally, a conservator would want to remove the layers of bronze paint to expose the gilding beneath. In the case of this frame, however, the gesso layer, and thus the gilding, was extremely fragile. If we had tried to remove the bronze paint completely, we would have risked losing the unstable gilding and gesso layers, an act that would have been irreversible and would have destroyed an original surface. Conservators today make every effort to ensure that any alterations they carry out can be reversible at a future date without detriment to the original artwork. Thus, in the end, it was determined that the bronze paint would be removed only to a certain extent, leaving a thin layer atop the gilding. This was done using a gelatinous multi-chemical mixture applied to the frame in small sections, then carefully agitated and removed with



Thomas McIlworth, *Jeremias van Rensselaer*, 1673: The restored painting and frame.

Courtesy Albany Institute of History and Art.

xylene, followed by acetone.

The frame is rococo in style. The sight edge is carved with a leaf-and-dart pattern surrounded by a sand bar, which lends texture to the frame. The rails are decorated with scrolling foliage punctuated by flower heads. The area surrounding the foliage, atop the ogee curve, is marked by circular punchwork. The corners and centers of the rails are emphasized by cast rosettes and acanthus volutes that arch away from the rails. Due to this movement away from the rails, the frame is called “pierced.” C-scrolls further enclose the corners and centers, also accentuated with pointed punchwork. The corners culminate in scallop shells. The outside profile is a shallow cove that ends in a stylized flower-head back edge.

Most of the rosettes were crude replacements that needed to be restored. After determining which were the best preserved, we created a mould of one, from which we cast six additional rosettes. In addition, many of the pieces of original carving around the frame’s perimeter had broken off and rather crudely repaired. These were removed and replaced with small wood blocks that wooden-objects department head Hugh Glover carved to match the original decoration. A layer of gold paint was applied to the mended areas and some slight tone differentiations on the overall frame were corrected.

The frame’s ornate style, adept carving, and intricate gilding technique all suggested it was English in origin, as did the style of its mitered corners joined with tapered and dovetailed splines, and its composition of softwood. At the time, clients typically did not frame artwork themselves, but rather, paid the artist for both painting and frame. Research revealed that McIlworth bought both his canvases and frames from Samuel Deall, a British merchant who was active in New York City. Deall imported sundry goods from England that were assembled and shipped by his brother William and brother-in-law Edward Paul’s company in London.

Samuel Deall’s account books are housed at the New York Historical Society. They record the myriad products that the merchant sold to the New York community—primarily clothing and related paraphernalia such as gloves and muffs, dry goods including spices and seeds, as well as such items as jewelry, scales and weights, shaving brushes, umbrellas and writing paper. Thomas McIlworth’s account with the merchant began in May 1760 and lasted until October 1765. Records show that Deall supplied McIlworth with picture canvases and frames.

The frame on the McIlworth painting matches another in the Albany Institute’s collection on a portrait of a wealthy British woman painted by Thomas Gainsborough in 1759.<sup>5</sup> After further research into the frame makers that Gainsborough frequented, and visual comparison with frames of identified carvers, I felt confident identifying our two frames as originating from the Gosset family workshop in London. Elements common to both McIlworth’s frame and other recorded examples from this workshop are a sight edge carved in a basic pattern, followed by a sand bar, straight rails often ornamented with flower heads and foliage, and pierced corners and centers often differentiated by textured gilding and featuring C-scrolls, rosettes, and stylized shells.

Matthew Gosset (1683–1744), descendant of a Huguenot refugee, owned a workshop in Berwick Street in Soho.<sup>6</sup> This was an area of London heavily inhabited by Huguenot craftsmen.<sup>7</sup> Together with his nephews Jacob (1703–1788), Gideon (1707–1785) and Isaac (1713–1799), Matthew produced carved frames in addition to wax models. He also created custom frames for artists such as Gainsborough, Allan Ramsay and William Hoare. The workshop most likely produced frames for general sale and export as well.

The painting and frame will be on view in an exhibition titled *Framing Colonial Albany*, at the Clark Art Institute through July 6. The exhibit, as well as this article and my public lecture, mark the culmination of a fascinating and rewarding experience in conservation, one that will surely be beneficial to my planned career as an art curator. ■

1. Thomas McIlworth, *Jeremias van Rensselaer*, 1763, oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in., Albany Institute of History and Art (#2007.020).

2. As reported in Ona Curran, *Thomas McIlworth: Colonial New York Portrait Painter* (Esperance, NY: Art Books Press, 2007), 64.

3. A portrait of Jeremias van Rensselaer’s cousin Stephen van Rensselaer II, painted by the same artist presumably around the same time, is associated with a receipt in the van Rensselaer papers dated October 17, 1763.

4. Biographical information on Thomas McIlworth gathered from Curran, Thomas McIlworth; Susan Sawitzky, “Thomas McIlworth,” *New York Historical Society Quarterly* (April 1951); Peter Hastings Falk, ed., *Who Was Who in American Art* (Madison, CT: Sound View Press, 1999), 2129.

5. Thomas Gainsborough, *Barbara, Lady Mostyn*, 1759, oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in., Albany Institute of History and Art (#1947.78.1).

6. Jacob Simon, “Frame Studies II: Allan Ramsay and Picture Frames,” *The Burlington Magazine* 139.1096 (July 1994), 454; Tessa Murdoch, “Courtiers and Classics: The Gosset Family,” *Country Life* 178 (May 9, 1985), 1282.

7. Simon, “Frame Studies II: Allan Ramsay and Picture Frames,” 454.