

Monsieur Robert Was Here

Lenett Fellow traces an eighteenth-century artist from outcast of the French Revolution to prominent Hudson Valley portraitist

By Bree Lehman

Each academic year, the Judith M. Lenett Memorial Fellowship is awarded to a second-year student in the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art. The fellowship, which is jointly administered by Williams, the Williamstown Art Conservation Center, and The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, allows recipients to explore issues of conservation in the field of American art. Working closely with WACC staff, each fellow spends two semesters researching and conserving an American art object. This year's Lenett Fellow, Bree Lehman, focused on a pair of eighteenth-century oil portraits from Wilderstein Historic Site in Rhinebeck, New York. With guidance from Thomas Branchick, Director and Chief Conservator of Paintings, Sandra Webber, Conservator of Paintings, and Hugh Glover, Chief Conservator of Furniture and Wood Objects, the project culminated in a public lecture and exhibition at the Williams College Museum of Art. Ms. Lehman will pursue her Ph.D. in art history at the City University of New York in the fall.

In October of 1795, Philip Jeremiah Schuyler sent a letter from his home in Rhinebeck, New York, to his brother-in-law Stephen Van Rensselaer in Albany. He wrote:

Dear Sir,
I have with me an unfortunate French gentleman who has been driven from his country by the late abominable persecutions. He is a man of family and was of fortune; for his amusement having learned the art of portrait painting, is now unhappily obliged to pursue it as a profession. He has taken some pictures for me with great success, and extremely reasonable, his price being only 30 dollars. I think his likenesses and paintings not much if any inferior to Mr. Steward.¹ I can recommend him to my friends as a decent, modest, young man. He will go up [to Albany] if he can procure four or five engaged pictures—possibly they may be had in yours and my father's family—be so kind as to propose it to them, and give your patronage to the thing. Should you think fit to employ him...I will discharge Mr.

Robert...Let me receive your answer, that the man may not be detained.
Yours with Respect and Esteem,
Philip J. Schuyler²

This letter is one of few documents that record the émigré portraitist known as “Monsieur Robert.”³ Robert reportedly came to the United States in the last years of the eighteenth century to escape the violent turmoil of the French Revolution. Once here, he parlayed his former gentlemanly education in the arts into a career as a portrait painter.⁴

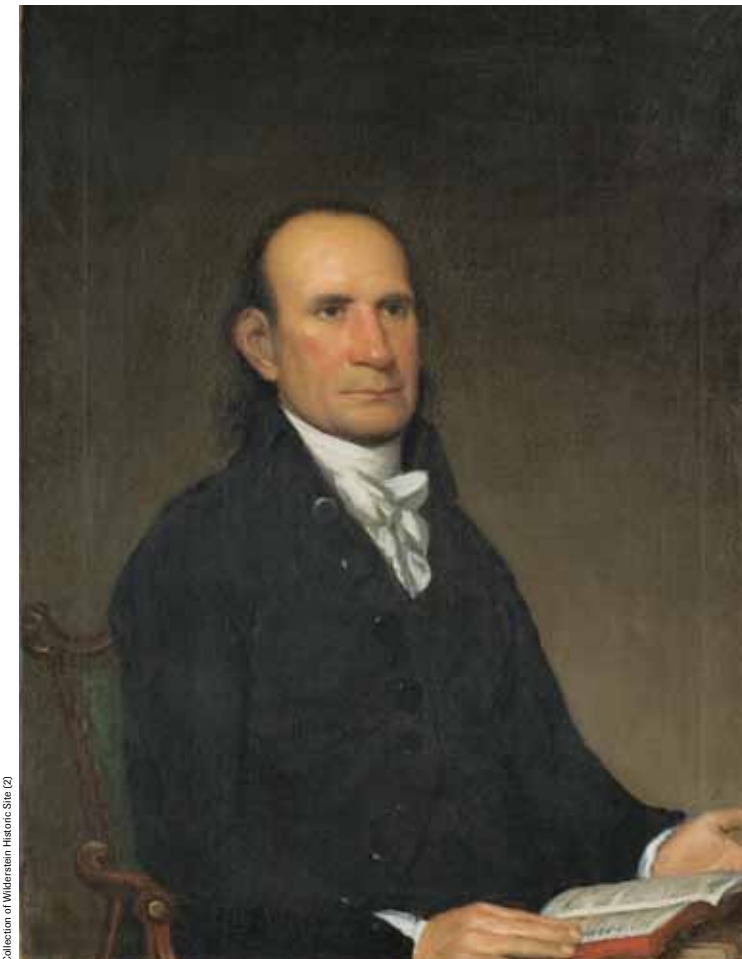
While our knowledge of Monsieur Robert himself remains limited, a number of portraits thought to be by his hand have come to light in recent years. These depict members of a socially prominent Hudson River Valley family and were likely completed in Rhinebeck, New York, around 1795. Wilderstein Historic Site, the estate of the Suckley family, also in Rhinebeck, has the largest known holdings of Monsieur Robert's work with four oil paintings and two pastels.⁵

During my time as Lenett Fellow, I have focused on Wilderstein's pendant oil portraits of Robert Sands and his wife Phebe Carman Rutsen Sands. These portraits are the last of Wilderstein's works by Robert to undergo treatment at WACC.

Monsieur Robert's portraits of Robert and Phebe Sands were given to Wilderstein in 2000 by the couple's great-great-grandson. This donor also gave two pastel portraits by Robert depicting Sarah Rutsen Schuyler, Phebe Sands's younger daughter from her first marriage, and Sarah's husband, Philip J. Schuyler, whose letter is transcribed above. The pastels are similar to Robert's oil portraits of the Schuylers, now at Schuyler Mansion in Albany, New York. The artist's portrait of Catherine Rutsen Suckley, Phebe's elder daughter from her first marriage and Sarah Schuyler's

sister, is the fifth work by Robert in Wilderstein's collection.⁶ Lastly, his portrait of Alida Livingston Rutsen Van Rensselaer, Phebe Sands's mother-in-law from her first marriage and grandmother to her daughters, was painted when the sitter was 80 years of age. Alida Van Rensselaer's portrait is the only work by Robert in Wilderstein's collection that is signed. While the portrait may have been completed in Rhinebeck, it is also possible that the painter traveled north to work at Mrs. Van Rensselaer's home in Claverack.⁷ These last two portraits, depicting Catherine Suckley and Alida Van Rensselaer, have been at Wilderstein since they were left to Catherine's son Thomas Holy Suckley in 1875.

Apart from the portraits already mentioned, there are three others commonly thought to be by Monsieur Robert: *Catherine*



Collection of Wilderstein Historic Site (2)

Pendant oil portraits by “Monsieur Robert” discussed in the article: *Robert Sands* (1745-1825) and *Phebe Carman Rutsen Sands* (1747-1819), c. 1795.



Lenett Fellow Bree Lehman inspects the portrait of Phebe Sands with Wilderstein curator Duane Watson, center, and advisor William Clutz.

Van Rensselaer Schuyler (1781–1857) at Schuyler Mansion, *Margaret Livingston Livingston (1738–1809)* at the Columbia County Historical Society in Kinderhook, and a copy of Gilbert Stuart’s portrait of Chancellor Robert R. Livingston, now in the Museum of the City of New York.

As Philip Schuyler noted in his letter to Stephen Van Rensselaer, it is Stuart whose work provides the most relevant American counterpoint to Robert. The artists shared a keen eye for individual likeness, a talent for rendering translucent, rosy skin tones, and a penchant for applying paint in thin, wash-like layers. Robert’s work is sometimes mistaken for that of the American painter John Vanderlyn, but Vanderlyn’s style is generally too starkly drawn and modeled for these comparisons to bear much weight.⁸

Although we do not know the true nature or extent of Robert’s artistic education, Ellen Miles, recently named Curator Emeritus at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery, notes that Robert’s “sensitive depictions suggest

a trained artist. His copy of Stuart’s portrait of Robert Livingston is evidence of his ability to mimic the portrait styles of sophisticated painters trained in England or in France.”⁹ Robert’s portraits of Robert and Phebe Sands are also particularly compelling evocations of his abilities in these respects.

Robert Sands’s portrait characterizes him as a straightforward, dignified man whose seriousness of purpose and steadfast demeanor has brought him to his current station in life. Sands’s elegant Chippendale chair and judicious style of dress display his affluence without sacrificing an air of restraint. Sands was born on Long Island and was the third son among eight siblings. He came to Rhinebeck in the early years of his life and married widow Phebe Carman Rutsen in 1779. Shortly after their marriage, he took over operations for her inherited mills and properties. With his step-son-in-law, Philip J. Schuyler, he eventually expanded the family’s enterprise to include docks and storehouses along the Hudson River, as well

as forms of transportation for passengers and goods headed downstream.¹⁰ Sands, who was a lawyer by training, was elected to the New York State Senate in 1796.¹¹

Around the same time that Monsieur Robert painted his portrait, Robert Sands built a new house on Landsman’s Kill, just east of Rhinebeck. Philip and Sarah Schuyler also built their own house directly adjacent to the Sandses’. A descendant of these individuals writing in 1876 noted that the two houses were among the largest between Poughkeepsie and Red Hook.¹²

Given this roughly contemporaneous series of events, Robert’s portrait of Robert Sands takes on additional meaning. As a skilled entrepreneur with a number of flourishing local businesses, a candidate for the New York State Senate, an owner of one of the most impressive homes in the area, and a father with two step-daughters and five children of his own, Sands likely wanted to record and commemorate this successful and (ostensibly) happy period in his life.

Like her husband’s portrait by Robert, Phebe Sands’s likeness also exudes dignity and gravity. As a woman of property, a widow during the Revolutionary War, and a mother to seven children, Mrs. Sands occupied a privileged and respected place within her larger extended family. In a photograph dating to the 1930s or 1940s, her portrait presides over the house that Robert Sands had built nearly a century and a half earlier. The Sandses’ portraits, which were removed from the home along with other original contents, fortunately escaped the fire that destroyed the Sands House in 1999.¹³

Although Monsieur Robert’s portraits of Robert and Phebe Sands certainly fared well in this respect, they nevertheless have a number of condition issues that required careful conservation over the past several months. Mrs. Sands’s portrait was in some ways the more fragile of the two. It seems clear the pair were painted as pendants, but as indicated by the photograph from

Sands House, they were also exhibited separately during part of their history. This, along with differences in each portrait’s canvas quality and preparation, which I will discuss further, might account for some of the disparities in their conditions.

One of the first discoveries I made when the portraits arrived at WACC was that neither had been conserved previously or even varnished. Examination with ultraviolet light revealed no trace of the yellow-green haze that indicates aged natural resin varnish, or the more bluish haze that suggests a synthetic resin. To confirm that the portraits were indeed unvarnished, tiny samples were collected from various points on the painted surface. The samples were then embedded in a polyester-resin matrix that was polished to allow for viewing in cross-section. They were finally treated with a succession of fluorescent indicators and viewed microscopically under different illumination conditions. Each of these tests confirmed that the paintings were indeed unvarnished.

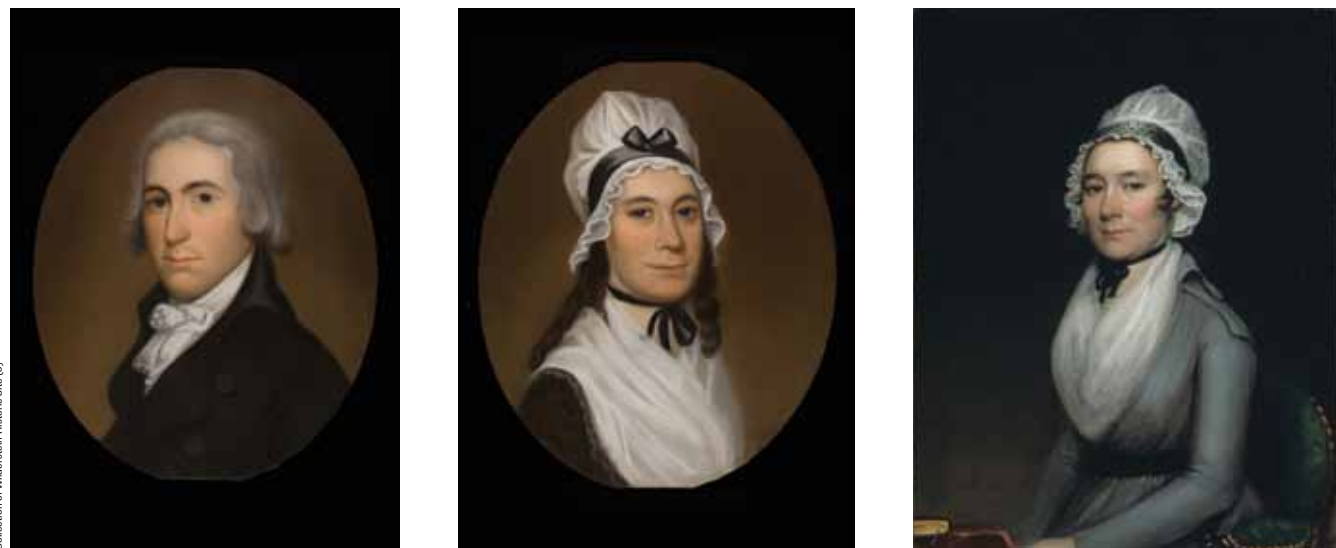
I then proceeded to remove the canvases from their frames and vacuum many decades’ worth of dust from their surfaces. Along the lower edge of Phebe Sands’s portrait, just under the arm of her chair, an enterprising mud wasp had built a nest in the space between the canvas and the frame’s rabbet. I removed this using a scalpel and rolled cotton swabs.

In examining the two canvases without their frames, it quickly became obvious that their quality and preparation were very different. The portrait of Robert Sands is executed on what appears to be a commercially prepared linen canvas with a thread count of thirty-four threads per square inch and a very even weave. The canvas is primed with a cream-colored coat of paint that has seeped through to the reverse in limited areas. The edges of the canvas are evenly cut, and there is no cusping present.

Mrs. Sands’s canvas, on the other hand, while also made of linen, is darker and rougher than that of her husband’s. It has a



View into the Sands House dining room, showing the portrait of Phebe Sands, c. 1930s or 1940s.



A gallery of portraits by Monsieur Robert. From left, *Philip Jeremiah Schuyler* and *Sarah Rutsen Schuyler*, pastel on paper, c. 1795, and *Catherine Rutsen Suckley*, oil on canvas, c. 1795.

higher thread count at fifty threads per square inch, but a much more uneven weave. It was primed with a charcoal-gray ground layer, evidently applied with some degree of force. Much of this priming color pushed through the gaps in the canvas' weave and collected in large areas on the reverse. Unlike the canvas Robert used for the portrait of Mr. Sands, the tacking edges here are unevenly cut, and there is an excess of fabric along the picture's lower edge. Finally, there is substantial cusping present. All of these characteristics suggest that, while the canvas used for Mr. Sands's portrait was probably commercially prepared, Robert himself prepared the canvas for Mrs. Sands's portrait.

When the time came to clean the portraits, it took several trials to identify the appropriate solution for lifting the ground-in dirt and grime layer without disturbing the fragile, unvarnished surfaces. I began cleaning the portrait of Robert Sands with 0.5 percent citrate solution (pH 8.0). This, however, began to cause slight blanching in the paint layer. When I switched to 1.4 percent citrate solution (pH 6.5) and then to a Pluronic surfactant (pH 5.9), the blanching continued. In the end, to avoid any permanent disturbance to the paint layer, I abandoned the use of all surfactants and opted to use deionized water. After I had removed the surface grime from both portraits, I used a scalpel to remove numerous flyspecks and other accretions.

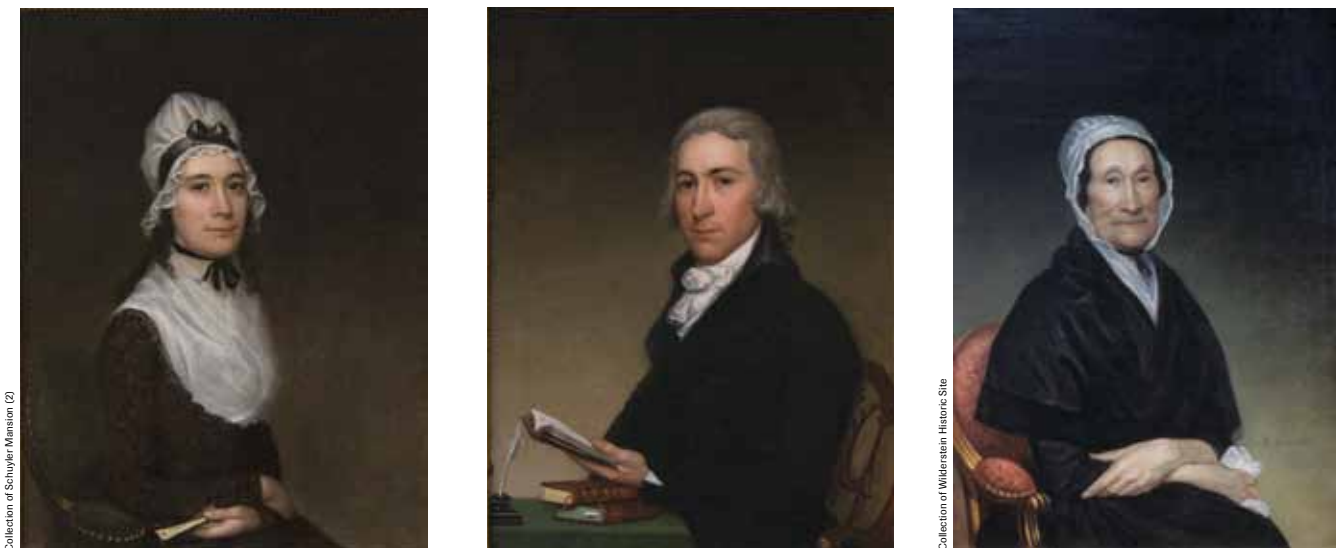
Once the paintings' surfaces were clean, they were removed from their stretchers. The stretcher supporting Phebe Sands's portrait was in good condition. Mr. Sands's stretcher, however,

had to be repaired as it was broken in two places. The significant draws and distortions in both canvases were slowly reduced through a gradual process of applying damp blotters under increasing weight. The tears in Phebe Sands's portrait were also addressed in this fashion in an attempt to bring the separated edges as close together as possible. As canvas naturally dries out and constricts over the course of its life, existing tears open further and further. Based on this, the tears in Mrs. Sands's portrait appeared to be old. To mend these areas, I cut lightweight Japanese tissue to size and affixed it with Jade 403 adhesive.

In spite of this local damage, the canvases' overall stable condition allowed me to use their original tacking edges to re-stretch them. The original tacks, corroded and weakened by frequent exposure to damp conditions, were replaced with copper tacks, which are more resistant to humidity.

After the paintings were back on their stretchers, they received a brush coat of varnish comprised of Paraloid B-67 and Laropal K 80. Two centuries without protection had made the surfaces very dry, and much of this first coat was quickly absorbed. I then began in-painting both canvases' losses using powdered pigments mixed with Paraloid B-67 and Laropal K 80 resins in xylene. When this was complete, the pictures received additional coats of varnish to saturate their colors and seal their surfaces from moisture and other potentially damaging agents.

One final note of interest on the process of conserving these two paintings: for reasons that are still unclear, Robert and



Sarah Rutsen Schuyler and *Philip Jeremiah Schuyler*, oil on canvas, c. 1795, and *Alida Livingston Rutsen Van Rensselaer*, oil on canvas, 1796.

Phebe Sands's portraits were fitted with replacement frames early in their history. These frames are later in style and a few inches too tall for both canvases. Previously, wooden inserts painted black to match the portraits' backgrounds spanned the gap from the top of each canvas to the upper rabbet of each frame. Over time, as the color of the inserts faded and their size changed through cycles of expansion and contraction, they became more and more visually distracting. Because cutting down the frames would require altering their joinery, WACC conservator Hugh Glover instead devised two sets of toned inserts. These inserts run along the canvases' upper and lower edges and mimic the frames' patination.

Although there is more to be discovered, the work of the last two semesters has helped me understand the portraits' physical qualities and connect them to the broader issue of Monsieur Robert's artistic practice. Curator Ellen Miles has noted that Robert's work demonstrates a strong interest in individual sitters' appearances as well as substantial knowledge of stylistic conventions. She further states, "The portraits painted by this mysterious artist in New York in the 1790s are a new window into the relationship between patronage, politics, and artistic commissions in the new republic."¹⁴ Thus, my experiences conserving and researching Robert's portraits have allowed me to engage with their complexities on a number of different levels.

In conclusion, the Lenett Fellowship and my time at WACC have provided a fruitful environment in which to strengthen my knowledge of conservation approaches and techniques.

Because I hope to pursue curatorial work in the future, the opportunity to follow treatments from beginning to end has proved invaluable. The process has fostered a firmer connection between my interest in art's physical and material qualities and my commitment to the ever-shifting field of art history.

1. By "Mr. Steward," Schuyler likely means the American portraitist Gilbert Stuart.
2. Letter in Van Rensselaer Manor Papers, New York State Archives, Albany (SC 7079, Box 76). This transcription has been edited for spelling and punctuation.
3. "Robert" is pronounced in the French manner: "ROH-bare." The artist is also referred to as "M. Robert" or simply "Robert."
4. The New York City Directory and Register for the Year 1795, published by William Duncan, lists the artist as "Robert, _____, portrait painter, 4 Wall [Street]."
5. Wilderstein was the countryseat of the Suckleys from 1852 to 1991. It features a nineteenth-century mansion and grounds and an extensive library and archive documenting the full span of the Suckleys' life in the Hudson River Valley. For more information, www.wilderstein.org.
6. The history of Wilderstein began with Catherine Suckley's son, Thomas Holy Suckley, who purchased land along the Hudson and built a residence there in 1852.
7. Conversation with William Clutz, Volunteer at Wilderstein Historic Site, January 2010.
8. The reverse of Robert's oil portrait of Sarah Rutsen Schuyler features a monogram resembling one used by Vanderlyn. It is unclear when this monogram was added or whether it was intended to deceive. Schuyler Mansion files, Albany, New York.
9. Correspondence with Ellen Miles, Ph.D., Curator Emeritus, Department of Painting and Sculpture, Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington D. C., April 2010.
10. Helen Wilkinson Reynolds, *Dutchess County Doorways and Other Examples of Period-Work in Wood, 1730-1830* (New York: William Farquhar Payson, 1931), 208-9.
11. New York State Legislature, Joint Legislative Committee on Regulating Elections, "Certificate of Election, 1796," New York State Archives, Albany (L0232).
12. Eliza Sands Bowne, quoted in Reynolds, *Dutchess County Doorways*, 209.
13. Michelle Vellucci, "Fire destroys historic Robert Sands home," *Poughkeepsie Journal*, 11 March 1999, B1.
14. Correspondence with Ellen Miles, April 2010.