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**BEFORE  
GILBERT STUART**



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Providence, R. I.

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### Before Gilbert Stuart

ART was slow in getting started in America, as of course might well be expected. All forms of art depend on the leisure necessary for their cultivation, and there was little enough leisure for the colonists of the 17th century. Another foster father of art is wealth, the wealth which can create a demand for the products of art. And it took a good many generations for the descendants of the first settlers to acquire the wealth and social status that would nourish the first timid seeds of art.

Many have erroneously believed that the New England Puritans deliberately stifled all forms of art and artistic expression once they had come to this country and broken from England. True, they may have had some aversion to some forms of pure art, particularly painting, inasmuch as it suggested too much that was of the English Church. Most of the painting that had been done in England up to the 17th century was of a strong religious nature, and very naturally was as hateful to the Puritans as many other things in which the influence of the English Church was only too apparent. But the Puritans were not at odds with art itself, with beauty, or refinement. Though devoted to simplicity, they loved the fine; and in all their possessions, from their

houses and furniture to their dress, if all elaboration and ostentation were absent, quality was not. They wore plain costumes, but such were made (where they could afford it) of the finest materials. Their furniture had a simplicity of line that was almost severe, yet in many cases it was made of mahogany. Their silverware was in the plainest patterns, but it was solid and heavy.

Consequently, on the whole, we may well assume that it was hardly aversion, but rather a simple lack of wealth that kept the New England settlers from sponsoring art and its development as whole-heartedly as we might wish. Yet, paradoxically enough, when pure art, such as portrait painting, did begin in colonial America, it began among the New England Puritans and among the Philadelphia Quakers.

In the line of painting, it was natural that portrait painting should have preceded other branches of the art. Families which had acquired wealth deemed it a mark of distinction to have their most prominent members painted in hopes of exciting the admiration of posterity as well as of contemporaries.

As far as colonial artists and portrait painting is concerned, we of Rhode Island have been prone to shout the name of Gilbert Stuart, and let it go at that. True, if Rhode Island had had no other artists to whom she could lay partial or complete claim, this one champion would be sufficient to win her a

high place in the annals of American art. But there have been other colonial artists whom Rhode Island can claim as foster sons at least, artists who were painting long before Gilbert Stuart was born. Of these we shall only speak of two, and of one in particular.

The first of these was John Smibert, who came back to America with Dean Berkley, after making a considerable sojourn in Italy. He was a close companion of Berkley all the while the learned divine was in Newport and through him met many of the people whom he later painted. This was in 1729, the year in which Dean Berkley gave such impetus to Newport's cultural development. It was Smibert who accompanied Berkley to the home of Doctor MacSparran, the famous preacher of Narragansett, and later returned to paint both the doctor and his charming wife. And it was Smibert, a foster son of Newport, capable, prolific, and socially accepted, whose star of destiny decreed that he should be remembered when most of his contemporaries, except Coply, have been entirely forgotten. Consequently, with Smibert and Coply being two colonial portrait painters most glibly remembered prior to Stuart, much work of other artists of the time has been attributed to these two. Some artists gained, no doubt, by the error, but one at least did not.

This was Robert Feke, called by competent critics "our foremost painter up to the



middle of the eighteenth century." Yet it is only recently, through the careful research of Henry Arthur Foote, that the scattered bits of information about this fine artist have been gathered together and the life of the man portrayed as fully as possible.

But very little is known of Feke now. Many details of his life, even the exact dates of his birth and death, are lacking. But there is enough for us to show why Rhode Island can claim representation in the field of art long before the birth of Stuart, her native son.

Unsubstantiated family tradition gives the date of Robert Feke's birth as 1705 and the place, Oyster Bay, Long Island. Several of his ancestors had been goldsmiths in England, but outside of that there had been no tendency toward art in his family. His grandfather was a Quaker preacher in the young settlement at Oyster Bay, but when a William Rhodes from Rhode Island introduced the Baptist faith into the town, his son, Robert Feke's father, became a convert and then a Baptist preacher for the rest of his life. His wife had brought him money, and he was able to have quite a large estate and a mansion called "Meadowside." Here Robert Feke the painter was born. We should know exactly when if "Meadowside" had not been destroyed by fire and with it all of the family records.

What particular advantages the young artist had to stimulate his talent we do not

know. The whole atmosphere of his family was one of quiet culture and piety, however, and there was more of a chance for self education than might be found in that of the average layman of the time. Feke knew Richardson's famed novel *Parmela Andrews* and knew also the writings of Lord Shaftesbury. In addition his home was in a setting of great natural beauty.

Family tradition, among other things, asserts that for quite a while he followed the sea, and says that he was captured and taken to Spain, where as a prisoner he taught himself the rudiments of painting. This is very probable, particularly since early in his career he made Newport his headquarters. There are scarcely any contemporary documents about the man himself, and his first self portrait is the first real proof of his existence. The quality of this portrait is not that of a beginner, and he must have had a lot of experience before he painted it.

It was natural that he should have gone to Newport for several reasons. He had family connections there, and Newport was a flourishing town which could offer many opportunities for either a seafaring man or an artist. In Newport he courted his wife, and he was married there in 1742 by Rev. John Callender of the First Baptist Church. Previously he had been working both in New York and Philadelphia where he painted numerous portraits of prominent men and women. Whatever he was doing

for a livelihood before he became established as a professional portrait painter, he nevertheless found time to keep in practice with his art. He visited Boston in 1741 to paint the group picture of Isaac Royall and his family, and there, if not at Newport, undoubtedly had a chance to study Smibert's work. By this time Feke was doing as good work as any in the colonies.

With this trip to Boston he probably turned to art as a whole-time profession. His wife was Eleanor Cozzens, a Quakeress, and the couple settled in a house on Touro Street which formerly stood next to the Newport Historical Society. Inasmuch as the house and property on Touro Street had belonged to Feke's father-in-law, it is probable that Eleanor Cozzens was born in the very house which she later graced as a wife. Here Feke's five children were born, three sons and two daughters. The sons all died without having any children, and descendants of Feke must trace their lineage through his daughters. Both daughters became Quakers and were married on the same day. In the records of their marriages, their father is not called a painter but a mariner, which may be explained by the fact that the Quakers were averse to any show of ostentation which might be shown by any who either painted or sat for portraits.

Feke did not follow any of the avocations of his contemporaries to fill out the financial returns of his profession. His reputation

had become well established, and he had quite a good deal of work to do. Dr. Alexander Hamilton, a Scotchman travelling in America, was taken to the home of Feke while he was in Newport, and describes the painter thus: "This man had exactly the phiz of a painter, having a long pale face, sharp nose, large eyes,—with which he looked upon you steadfastly,—long curled black hair, a delicate white hand, and long fingers." It is remarkable that Feke should have so risen to prominence as an artist, for he was entirely self-taught. This would stamp him as much of a genius as Stuart.

In 1746 he left Newport for a short visit to Philadelphia, and there did the earliest known portrait of Benjamin Franklin. Returning to his studio in Newport, he left it again for a second visit to Boston and then for a third visit to Philadelphia. In all three places his reputation was sufficient to gain him many commissions. After this third visit to Philadelphia nothing is known of the painter. He disappears from all records. The most creditable supposition, given by Henry Arthur Foote, is that he went to the Barbados Islands for his health and there died.

What romance still lies behind the countless obscurities in the life of this colonial painter has yet to be uncovered. But his work is now attaining the recognition it has long deserved. One of his paintings is in the Redwood Library in Newport, another, that



of Parmela Andrews, is in the Rhode Island School of Design. Scores of others have been uncovered, and probably scores more will be. But whether or no, he stands as the finest colonial artist previous to Gilbert Stuart.

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**T**HE PROVIDENCE INSTITUTION FOR SAVINGS, familiarly known as "The Old Stone Bank," is in its own right a historic institution of Rhode Island. Founded in 1819 as one of the first mutual savings banks in the country, it has since contributed vitally to the development and life of this community.

Proud of its own historical significance, "The Old Stone Bank" has adopted this method of educational advertising to bring to light much that is of value and significance in the colorful annals of Rhode Island and national history.

The sketches and vignettes of old-time Rhode Island and Rhode Islanders that are broadcast weekly and then printed in this form are selected from local historical records which are full of the picturesque, romantic, and adventurous. In the hope that these glimpses into the lives, customs, and environment of our progenitors may be both revealing and inspirational to young and old, this booklet is presented with the compliments of

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