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45th annual-meeting paintings session june 1 a colonial portrait and a mystery by rustin Levinson

Rusty Levinson's talk was perfectly fitting as the final Paintings Specialty Group presentation. The talk was informative and had some levity and humor to boot.



The portrait (see an auction photo before treatment at left), treated and researched by ArtCare Miami with technical analysis by Emily MacDonald Korth, has been believed to depict Button Gwinnett, one of the three Georgia signers of the Declaration of Independence. This identification was not certain, and the inscription on the reverse identifying the artist and sitter, was suspect. Moreover, it appeared to be written in two different hands. The inscription is visible through a cut-out window in the lining fabric left by an old restorer. Gwinnett had a short-lived political career before dying in a duel the year after

signing the momentous document. Recently, a signature of his came to auction and fetched over \$700,000 in its sale, reaching an all-time high price for a signatory of the Declaration of Independence. This event brought this historic figure some current-day notoriety, captured by Stephen Colbert on the Late Show last year, which coincidentally appeared during the treatment and research of the portrait. Colbert and *Hamilton* creator and star Lin-Manuel Miranda performed "Button!" on the Late Show after an interview with Miranda. The "Button!" rap-style performance in costume is a spoof off *Hamilton*, and it is hilarious. You can view it at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhFeQSBZUSk>. It is definitely worth a watch! I have never experienced such a hearty laugh during an AIC presentation.



One of the goals in the analysis, research, and treatment of this portrait was to help determine whether the picture likely did in fact depict Mr. Gwinnett. The painting was covered in old varnish and different campaigns of overpaint, making it difficult to compare the likeness with a known, earlier portrait of Gwinnett by British artist Nathaniel Hone (see image at left). The painting in ArtCare's studio was attributed to Jeremiah Theus, a Swiss-born portrait painter who

worked primarily in and around Charleston, SC. Charleston was known as Charles Town until 1783. This fact creates one of the problems with the inscription, which identifies the city as Charleston, postdating the date of the portrait, which would have been before Theus' death in 1774. Another issue with the inscription(s) was the presence of modern pigments, identified through analysis, that were part of a red layer on the canvas reverse that lies beneath the inscription(s). Zinc was identified in that layer, thus discrediting the coating as well as the overlying inscription as original to the piece. It is possible that the two inscriptions were written at some point(s) in the past, perhaps early in the life of the painting, but were later reinforced by a restorer.

Scientific analysis was conducted using a variety of techniques including cross-sectional analysis, XRF, PLM or polarized light microscopy, and optical microscopy. The results revealed typical pigments used by mid-18th c. American painters along with modern pigments appearing in overpaint and coatings. Elemental analysis helped identify the pigments vermilion, a lead-based pigment, a chromium-based pigment, and zinc white on the painting, while on the verso, the presence of lead, calcium, and copper were detected, and vermilion and zinc white were identified. Part of the historical research involved looking at archival information about the Theus portrait. One such document was created when Sheldon Keck was asked to examine the portrait in the 1950s. At this time, Keck declared the portrait a "genuine eighteenth century painting."

Once cleaned the painting was compared with the Hone portrait of Gwinnett and similarities in facial features were noted. Levinson toyed with an online program to attempt to visually age the face in the Hone picture. This rudimentary program, while somewhat amusing, was not revealing. A chance connection with someone from the Georgia Bureau of investigation led to a visual comparison by the Bureau whereby they did a much higher tech, digital rendering of the earlier Hone portrait to artificially

age the figure's face, and they made a comparison with the treated picture. They determined it was plausible that the sitters were the same man.

I wish there had been a bit more discussion on the artist attribution question. Even though the focus was not on the artist, I had hoped for a bit more information on the portrait's attribution to Jeremiah Theus, particularly since I encounter Jeremiah Theus portraits in my private practice. I would have liked to know more about the connoisseurship used in the attribution, whether/which art historians may have looked at the portrait, and/or whether any of the technical analysis was compared to that of other known Theus portraits. Finally, I also would have enjoyed more discussion of the treatment, as it was somewhat glossed over. A few before and after shots side by side, including details of areas of heavy overpaint before and after with a little more discussion of the overpaint removal, would have been welcome additions to this presentation.