

Mr. Cairns

NEWS RELEASE

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

FOR RELEASE: May 21, 1950

WASHINGTON, May 20: David E. Finley, Director of the National Gallery of Art, announced today that a full-length portrait by the well-known American artist, Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828), entitled The Skater has been acquired by the National Gallery and added to the Mellon Collection. The portrait was purchased from the great-great-granddaughter of the sitter, in whose family it had been for over 150 years.

"This painting," said Mr. Finley, "is one of the finest works ever executed by an American artist. It established Gilbert Stuart's reputation in England where The Skater has long been ranked with the work of Gainsborough, Romney, and Raeburn. This important painting can now be seen for the first time on this side of the Atlantic and will give added distinction to the National Gallery's rapidly growing collection of great paintings by American artists."

Painted in London, The Skater was first exhibited in the Royal Academy exhibition in 1782 where it was catalogued as Portrait of a Gentleman Skating. It is actually a portrait of W. Grant, Esq., of Congalton, who is depicted skating in St. James's Park, London. The painting marked the real beginning of Stuart's success in England and it is believed that it was his first attempt at a full-length portrait. W. T. Whitley, biographer of Gilbert Stuart, has written that the portrait attracted considerable and well-deserved notice at the exhibition. He states that "Horace Walpole, the principal arbiter of taste of the time, showed his admiration for the portrait by writing 'very good' against it in his Acedemy catalogue." Another visitor to the exhibition described it as "a noble portrait ... which produces the most powerful effect."

Little did Stuart dream in 1782 that his skating portrait, which he had never signed, would be shown again at the Royal Academy nearly a century later and give rise to disputes as to its authorship. This was in 1878. In the catalogue of that exhibition The Skater was tentatively attributed to Gainsborough. Critics also thought it might be by one of those other celebrated British portrait painters, perhaps Romney or Raeburn. The Art Journal remarked that "a more graceful and manly figure was surely never painted by an English artist, and if Gainsborough were that artist

this is unquestionably his masterpiece." The true author of the portrait did not become known until it had been on view for some weeks. The lender of the picture, Lord Charles Pelham-Clinton, had come into possession of it through his wife, the granddaughter of the Mr. Grant whom Stuart had portrayed. He wrote to his wife's uncle, the son of The Skater, then living in Virginia, to ask if he could give him any information. The latter hastened to reply that the portrait "was painted by an American artist little known in England but highly appreciated in America, his name Stuart."

The critic of the London Times, writing in 1878, described The Skater as an "admirable full-length of a skater in full swing, his manly face ruddy with swift motion in the keen air, his arms crossed on his chest, his stalwart and graceful figure in black from head to foot, only relieved by the grey of the fur lining of his coat and the silver buckles of his shoes." In the middle distance are other figures skating, and in the extreme background loom hazily the towers of Westminster Abbey against a winter sky.

# # #