

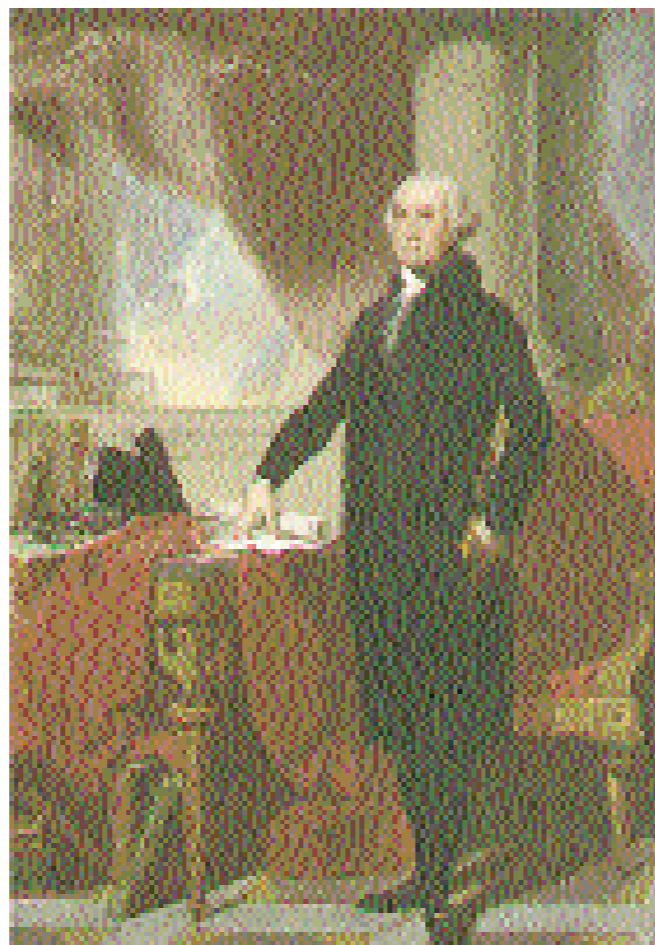
# Americans in Britain: Portraits of Americans in The National Portrait Gallery

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One of the many things I like about the National Portrait Gallery in London (America, of course, has its own version of a national pantheon) is that it is national without being too nationalistic. It celebrates individual achievement within the context of the nation's history, but it does so, in my experience, without any very fierce sense of border disputes. If in doubt, then the Trustees of the Gallery are inclined to be liberal in recognising the wide range of people who have contributed to national achievement.

Thus, soon after I arrived as Director of the Gallery in 1994, the Trustees of the Gallery acquired a portrait of Seamus Heaney, without anyone asking at any point during the process of acquisition as to whether or not we were technically correct to be acquiring a portrait of an Irish citizen: it was sufficient that he has made an undeniable contribution to the English language through his poetry; and he has, after all, been Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, which ought to be more than enough to establish his contribution to national life this side of the Irish sea. More recently and more controversially, the Trustees of the Gallery decided not to acquire a purple bust of the footballer Eric Cantona, but none of the Trustees felt that he was disqualified as a candidate for admis-

Figure 1  
After Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington*, 1797



sion to the Gallery on the grounds that he was French.

As a result of this liberalism in the process of acquisition, the Gallery has in its collection rather more portraits of Americans than one might superficially expect of a national collection. In a small room on the top floor, diplomatically called 'The Struggle for America', one finds, as one would expect, an early portrait of George III by Allan Ramsay looking debonnaire as well as regal. Less expectedly, hanging opposite it is a small portrait of George Washington, in some ways replicating George III's pose, but less suavely, an image of forthright independence in the mode that Washington cultivated. Not only is it of an American, but it is a copy of a portrait by an American, Gilbert Stuart (*fig. 1*). The picture was offered to the Trustees of the Gallery by George Meredith in a letter dated 4 July 1877 in which he wrote that he had 'an original portrait of General Washington, painted by Stuart of Boston, and I should be glad to submit it to the Trustees of the National Portrait Gallery for purchase'. In a subsequent letter he described how the portrait had come into his hands:

Mr. William Scholefield late M.P. for Birmingham married in New York in 1828, an American lady. The Portrait of General Washington came into his possession through this lady. The tradition in the family was that a Member of the family had been on General Washington's staff and that the picture was presented to him by the General himself. I have no means at hand of verifying this statement, but I have never heard it doubted.

There is no record that the Trustees objected to the acquisition of such a fascinating historical record and, indeed, it was neither the first time nor the last that Washington entered the collection. On 2 June 1864, George Scharf, the first Director of the Gallery, had been offered two pastel portraits, one of which was of George Washington. According to James Yates, who previously owned the pastels:

They were executed from the life at Philadelphia in 1795 or about that year. Mrs. Sharples, the artist, was, I believe, an Englishwoman who removed to Philadelphia, and endeavoured to support herself by taking portraits of this kind. Her likenesses were thought to be very good.

Once again, there is no indication that the Trustees demurred at the acquisition. Presumably they relied on the principle that someone who had been born an Englishman was always an Englishman, even if he was



Figure 2  
James SHARPLES (1751?-1811), *George Washington*

the first American President. Equally they were happy to acquire a version of the same pastel when it was offered to them in 1936 (*fig. 2*).

George Washington was not the only prominent American from the colonial period to enter the collection. Benjamin Franklin was likewise acquired — and probably for similar reasons — early in the life of the Gallery when a portrait of him was offered to the Board of Trustees on 26 May 1871. Franklin's importance as a scientist, inventor and eighteenth century man of affairs must have been felt to transcend any issues as to whether or not he was really British; and he, too, was acquired not simply in a single version, through a copy of a portrait by Joseph Siffred Duplessis, but also in a portrait medallion by Jean Baptiste Nini, dated 1777 and proudly inscribed 'Americain' (*fig. 3*).

A number of eighteenth-century Americans were also acquired on the grounds that they are artists whom we have more or less co-opted into the national school as a result of their long residence in London,

Figure 3  
Jean Baptiste NINI (1717-1786)  
Benjamin Franklin  
1777



although, for equally obvious reasons, Americans continue to regard them as American. Thus we have good portraits of both John Singleton Copley and Benjamin West by their fellow countryman, Gilbert Stuart.

The first of these to be acquired, as well as the first chronologically, was Stuart's portrait of Benjamin West (*fig. 4*). Stuart had worked for West when he first arrived penniless in London in 1776 and this portrait was one of the early proofs of his skill, dating from 1781, shortly after West had completed his *Moses Receiving the Laws on Mount Sinai* visible in the background. It was this portrait which Stuart borrowed back from West in 1785 — ostensibly in order to make alterations, but which Benjamin West was to find for sale in Alderman Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery in order to help Stuart pay off his debts.

Alderman Boydell, the print-seller and general impresario of artistic life in late eighteenth-century London, also commissioned Stuart's intense portrait of John Singleton Copley, said by Copley's family to be 'the most agreeable' of the various likenesses of him, including self-portraits (*fig. 5*). When Copley's history painting *The Death of Major Pierson* was

Figure 4 (opposite)  
Gilbert STUART (1755-1828)  
Benjamin West  
1785

exhibited in Boydell's gallery in 1784, a reviewer described how 'Three ovals are placed on top of that frame, in the centre of which is placed Mr. Copley's portrait, painted by that able artist, Mr. Stuart'. The

portrait was subsequently bequeathed to Copley's son, another John Singleton Copley, who became Lord Lyndhurst and Lord Chancellor. It was acquired by the Gallery in 1926 following the death of Dame Georgiana Du Cane who had been bequeathed it for her life by Lady Lyndhurst, Lord Lyndhurst's widow.

All of these acquisitions sit quite comfortably and uncontroversially in the collection. It was more surprising to find, tucked away in a corner of the Gallery's recent exhibition 'British Sporting Heroes', a small Staffordshire figure of an early nineteenth-century black American boxer, Tom Molyneux, who made his name as a prize fighter (*fig. 6*). This ceramic statuette was acquired at auction as a pair to a matching one of Tom Cribb, who became boxing champion of England in 1808 and was challenged to a fight by Tom Molyneux in 1810. The contest went through to 33 rounds, after which Cribb narrowly emerged as the victor. They fought again nine months later in a famous contest in which Cribb smashed





Figure 5  
Gilbert STUART (1755-1828), *John Singleton Copley*, 1784

Molyneux's jaw. As a result of these epic contests, both boxers became folk heroes, commemorated by the commercial ceramic industry in souvenirs of the fight.

Just as Tom Molyneux entered the collection as the sparring partner of a British boxer, so a number of Americans entered the collection as participants in the great Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840, recorded by Benjamin Robert Haydon in a large group portrait (*fig. 7*). The Convention was held in June 1840 at the Freemason's Hall to discuss issues leading on from the formal abolition of slavery by Act of Parliament in England in 1833. For good reason, participants at the Convention felt that the meeting was worthy of record. Haydon's diary records the circumstances of the commission in 12 June 1840:

Exceedingly excited and exhausted. I attended the great convention of the Anti-Slavery Society at Freemasons Hall. Last Wednesday a deputation called on me from the committee, saying they wished a sketch of the scene. The meeting was very affecting. Poor old Clarkson was present, with

delegates from America and other parts of the world. I returned after making various sketches, and put in an oil one.

He worked on portraits of individual members of the Convention through the second half of 1840, including Lucretia Mott, the leader of the women delegates from America, who had not been allowed to be a formal member of the meeting because she was a woman. He completed the work on 30 April 1840 with a tremendous sense of relief, recording in his diary:

I have finished my great work, and this day ends

Figure 6  
Staffordshire figure of Tom Molyneux, c.1810-1815



Figure 7  
Benjamin Robert HAYDON (1786-1846), *The Anti-Slavery Society Convention*, 1840

the month. The delight I had in turning to one of my historical compositions after I had got rid of that dreadful collection of faces is not to be described.

Those who attended the Anti-Slavery Convention had no option but to ask a painter to record the occasion; but not long afterwards photography became available as an appropriate medium of historical record. Although the National Portrait Gallery did not collect photographs systematically until the early 1970s, it has since then accumulated a vast photographic archive, which, as with the collection of paintings, includes Americans. For example, an album of photographs by Maull & Co. (subsequently Maull and Polyblank), which was acquired in 1979 and which depicts members of the Linnaean Society, necessarily includes as its Vice-President Dr. Francis Boott, a

botanist and physician as well as an American (*fig. 8*). Likewise, an album of photographs by Herbert Watkins found in the attic of a house in Norfolk includes Charlotte Saunders Cushman, an American actress, and Barney and Maria Williams, both American actors.

But by far the most famous nineteenth-century American in the collections of the National Portrait Gallery, at least so far as the British are concerned, is Henry James, whose portrait by John Singer Sargent has recently been on display in the great Sargent exhibition at the Tate Gallery and the National Gallery of Art in Washington (*fig. 9*). Henry James was officially an Englishman by the end of his life, since he was naturalised in 1915, the year before he died. His portrait by Sargent was commissioned by a group of his friends and admirers as a way of celebrating his seventieth birthday on 15 April 1913.



Figure 8  
 Photograph by Maull & Co of Francis Boott, 1855

At first he refused, but in the end was persuaded to sit to Sargent, his fellow countryman. Edmund Gosse, who organised the arrangements for the birthday celebration, wrote to Thomas Hardy on 17 June 1913 describing how ‘Sargent’s portrait of Henry James is nearly finished, and I hear is a masterpiece. There is a plaid waistcoat in it, heaving like a sea in a storm, which is said to be prodigious’. James himself wrote of it once it had been completed that it depicted him ‘all large and luscious rotundity — by which you may see how true a thing it is’. Max Beerbohm on the other hand was much less polite, declaring it ‘a dead failure, a good presentment of a butler on holiday; but no more’.

Amongst twentieth-century Americans who have made a deep impact on British history, perhaps the most famous is Wallis Simpson, the American divorcee whom Edward VIII was so determined to marry that he was prepared to sacrifice his crown. We acquired a portrait of her by Gerald Brockhurst quite recently in the sale of her effects in New York in February 1998 (*fig. 10*). We first became aware that this picture was going to come up for sale in August 1997. Staff at the Gallery were already familiar with

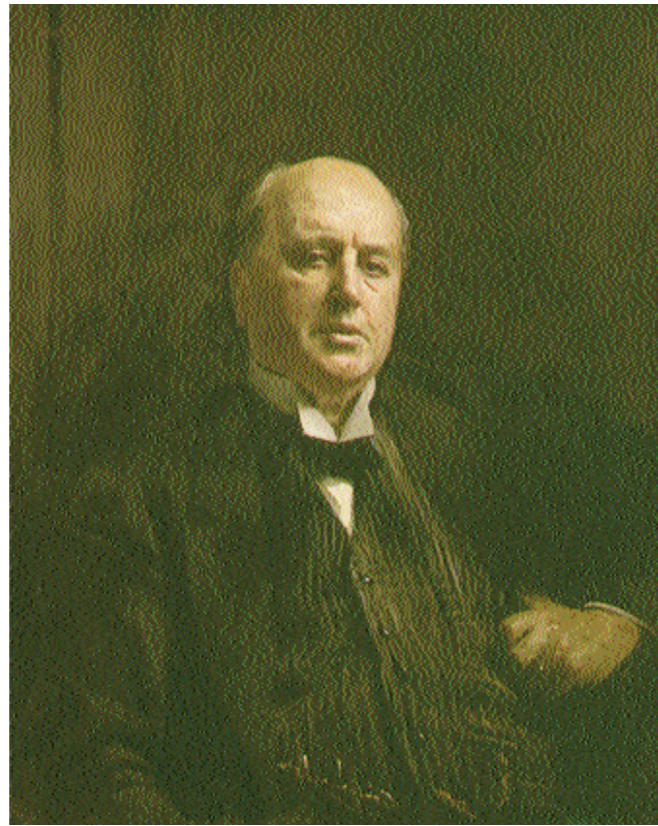


Figure 9  
 John Singer SARGENT (1856-1925), *Henry James*, 1913

the portrait because it had been included in a small exhibition of Brockhurst’s work organised by Sheffield City Art Galleries and shown at the National Portrait Gallery in 1987. We all recognised that it was the key iconic image of the Duchess of Windsor, commissioned by the Duke in 1939, painted at their house in Paris, number 24, Avenue Suchet, just before the second world war, and hung for the rest of their lives over the fireplace in the library of their house in the Bois de Boulogne. It now hangs in our early twentieth-century gallery.

Wallis Simpson is representative of the way that during the twentieth century the boundaries of nationality have become more permeable. There have been plenty of Englishmen who have made their careers in America, including Christopher Isherwood, Cary Grant, Alfred Hitchcock and Charlie Chaplin. English women have also made a substantial contribution to American culture, including:- Elizabeth Taylor, of whom we have two photographs by the Canadian photographer, Yousuf Karsh, and a lithograph by

Figure 10 (*opposite*)  
 Gerald Leslie BROCKHURST (1890-1978)  
*Wallis, Duchess of Windsor*, 1939



Andy Warhol; Joan Collins, who is represented by a silkscreen print by Andy Warhol; and Tina Brown, who appears in a double portrait with her husband, Harold Evans, with the skyline of Manhattan in the background.

Amongst American who have spent their lives in England, one thinks first of T.S. Eliot. I am confident that his nationality was not regarded as remotely problematic when the Gallery acquired the fine, rather cubist portrait of him by Patrick Heron in 1965. It is more surprising to learn that there is a photograph of Marilyn Monroe in the photographic collection, since Marilyn Monroe cannot by any stretch of the imagination be regarded as British; but this did not prevent her from being acquired for our photographic collection as one amongst innumerable sitters of the late Sir Cecil Beaton, whose archive of negatives was presented to the Gallery in 1991 by his former housekeeper, Eileen Hose. He had photographed her many times in 1956 in appropriately sex-kittenish pose (*fig. 11*). We also have a photograph of Robert Mapplethorpe, the photographer, who is well known for his photographs but perhaps less well known as a subject. His photograph by John Swannell was acquired in 1983 at the time of the Gallery's Mapplethorpe exhibition.

One of the most recent photographs acquired for our archive is of Michael von Clemm, the former chairman of Credit Suisse First Boston, who was instrumental in establishing the Roux Brothers in Britain at their famous restaurants, le Gavroche and the Waterside Inn, as well as being one of the key people behind the establishment of Canary Wharf. The life of Michael von Clemm demonstrates how global the life of a successful businessman has become: an American by birth, he came to England in 1957 to do a doctorate in social anthropology and remained a resident in London even when, in the late 1960s, he was a faculty member of Harvard Business School and again, in the late 1980s, when he was Chairman of Merrill Lynch's Capital Markets operations.

So, as business and finance become more and more



*Figure 10*  
Photograph by Cecil Beaton of Marilyn Monroe, 1956

international, as Britain moves into Europe, as Scotland becomes a more separate entity within the United Kingdom, there is an argument that a narrowly focused national collection might become an anachronism. However I am sceptical that this will ever happen to the point where it ceases to be relevant to have an institution which represents and records the portraits of those people who have made a contribution to national culture. In fact, portrait galleries look as if they may have a bright future, as well as a distinguished past. The American National Portrait Gallery was established in 1964. The Australian National Portrait Gallery was established in 1994. There has been discussion in recent years about the possibility of establishing portrait galleries in Pakistan, Romania and New Zealand. This is evidence that issues of nationhood and of national identity will remain subjects of legitimate public interest well into the twenty first century.