



Robert Henri
American, 1865 - 1929

George Cotton Smith

1908

oil on canvas

overall: 81.3 x 66 cm (32 x 26 in.)

framed: 104.1 x 88.2 x 6.3 cm (41 x 34 3/4 x 2 1/2 in.)

Inscription: lower left: Robert Henri; across top reverse: Portrait of / Mr. George Cotton Smith / by Robert Henri / at Wilkes Barre. Pa. / Jan 1908 / E 171

Gift of Mrs. George Cotton Smith Adams in memory of George Cotton Smith Adams 1986.93.1

ENTRY

Robert Henri painted the portrait of prosperous businessman George Cotton Smith and a pendant of his wife, Elizabeth Virginia Laning Bradner Smith, at their home in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in January 1908, shortly before completing the full-length portrait of their neighbor Edith Reynolds. Smith was born on July 19, 1828, in Ogdensburg, New York. In 1852 he established Bradner Smith & Company, a large paper manufacturer, and in 1860 he founded the banking firm George C. Smith & Brother in Chicago. On August 25, 1868, he married Elizabeth Virginia Laning Bradner, the widow of his manufacturing associate. At the time of the Henri portrait, Smith had retired to his wife's hometown of Wilkes-Barre. He died there on November 30, 1915. [1]

Henri was familiar with the Wilkes-Barre area because his former in-laws had a summer residence in the neighboring town of Black Walnut, where he had painted landscapes. Early 1908 was a hectic period for Henri, who was eager to complete the portraits of the Smiths so that he could return to New York and prepare for the exhibition of *The Eight* scheduled to open at the Macbeth Gallery on February 3. He documented his progress on the portraits in both his diary and correspondence with John Sloan (American, 1871 - 1951). [2]

Henri took the train to Wilkes-Barre over the weekend of January 4–5 but reported in his diary that Mr. Smith was too ill to begin the portrait sittings. After a week in New York, Henri returned to Wilkes-Barre the following weekend and checked into the Wyoming Valley Hotel. On Monday, January 13, Henri began Mr. Smith's

portrait. He continued work on Tuesday and then went back to New York until January 19. Henri arranged the commission of two portraits of the Smiths' neighbor Edith Reynolds during an evening at the Reynoldses' home on January 20. The next day he recorded in his diary that he had completed Mr. Smith's portrait and that "all well satisfied, but I propose making another portrait of him on my own acc—the same to be done in hotel Valley instead of house. Doing it simply for my own satisfaction." The family found the first portrait insufficient for unknown reasons yet decided to keep it. [3] On January 24 Henri wrote to Sloan, "I must get this second portrait done this week if possible. It must be done while I can get my sittings." [4] In a diary entry for Monday, January 27, he noted that the second portrait was nearly complete. That same day he told Sloan, "Expect to finish the new portrait of Mr. Smith tomorrow morning—practically done now—its [*sic*] a good one and will commence a portrait of Mrs Smith at once—I fortunately brought with me an extra canvas."

In a diary entry for the following day, Henri noted that Mr. Smith's second portrait was finished, and that he had commenced one of the sitter's wife. On January 29 Henri informed Sloan that "I am getting along well with my portrait of Mrs. Smith—The second portrait of Mr. Smith is finished—but Mrs. Smith cannot pose more than two hours a day and that prolongs matters—she is a good sitter though and I am hoping to get a very good thing of her." Henri remained in Wilkes-Barre until January 31, when he completed the portrait of Mrs. Smith and returned to New York. On February 14 he noted in his diary that he had ordered three frames to be sent directly to the Smiths.

The artist described Mr. Smith's portrait in his ledger: "II Portrait of Mr George Cotton Smith Jan 08 [in left side bar] 25. Painted at Wilkes Barre Pa. gray beard with black in fr. Dark brown hair thin over bald. long on side. blue eyes. 80 yrs. dark overcoat with shirt showing V shape. one button showing on overcoat. gray black gr. Signed and dated on back and above number E 171 marked. Property of Miss Amanda M. Smith Wilkes Barre." [5] The sitter's torso is oriented toward the right to complement the companion portrait of Elizabeth Smith, and he has turned his head to look directly at the viewer.

Like Thomas Eakins (American, 1844 - 1916), whom Henri greatly admired, the artist was a sympathetic and exceptionally able portrayer of aged sitters. Henri asserted:

Age need not destroy beauty. There are people who grow more beautiful as they grow older. If age means to them an expansion and development of character this new mental and spiritual state will have its effect on the physical. A face which in the early days was only pretty or even dull, will be transformed. The eyes will attain mysterious depths, there will be a gesture in the whole face of greater sensibility and all will appear coordinate. [6]

The portraits of George and Elizabeth Smith are outstanding examples from Henri's strongest period and illustrate many of his maxims on portraiture. As was the artist's typical practice for bust-length portraiture during this time, he pictured Mr. Smith in a black coat against a dark background. Henri had advised his students that "in painting heads you must use the background; they often look like dead, empty spaces. They should be simple and have a get-out-of-the-way character." [7] The proper-right side of Smith's face is dramatically illuminated by a powerful source of light that leaves the proper-left side obscured by shadow. The resulting visual emphasis on Smith's right eye accords with Henri's principle that "one eye commands the greater interest. . . . In life one eye always dominates the observer." [8] He also designed the pair so that the heads of both husband and wife are consistently illuminated by a single light source when they hang side by side, and he recorded this effect by shading the appropriate areas in his ledger-book sketches of the portraits.

The vigorous brushwork in the painting creates a sense of instantaneousness and casual informality that reflects the influence of Frans Hals (Dutch, c. 1582/1583 - 1666). Henri had studied works by the 17th-century Dutch portraitist the previous summer, when he taught a painting class for New York School of Art students in Haarlem, where Hals spent most of his life.

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

NOTES

- [1] Reverend Horace Edwin Hayden, Alfred Hand, and John W. Jordan, eds., *Genealogical and Family History of the Wyoming and Lackawanna Valleys, Pennsylvania* (New York, 1906), 1:215.

- [2] Robert Henri diary, Robert Henri papers, 1870–1954, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Reel 886 contains the entries relating to the Smith and Reynolds commissions. Details in the following paragraphs are recorded from these diary entries unless indicated as a letter to John Sloan (see n. 4).
 - [3] At the time of the donation of Henri's second portrait of Smith to the Gallery, the first portrait of Smith was in a private collection.
 - [4] Robert Henri to John Sloan, letters of January 24, 27, and 29, 1908, Correspondence to John Sloan, 1893–1927, John Sloan Archives, Helen Farr Sloan Library, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, quoted in Bennard B. Perlman, ed., *Revolutions of Realism: The Letters of John Sloan and Robert Henri* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), 175–176.
 - [5] Artist's Record Book, Estate of Robert Henri, LeClair Family Collection, New York. Transcription sent February 12, 1987, by Berry-Hill Galleries, New York, to National Gallery of Art curator Nicolai Cikovsky Jr., NGA curatorial files.
 - [6] Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*, comp. Margery Ryerson (New York, 1923), 123.
 - [7] Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*, comp. Margery Ryerson (New York, 1923), 146.
 - [8] Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*, comp. Margery Ryerson (New York, 1923), 107.
-

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The unlined, plain-weave fabric support remains on its original stretcher. [1] The original tacking margins are present and covered with priming. However, because the cusping of the canvas does not line up with the current tacks, it is likely that the painting was first stretched and primed on a larger stretcher and then restretched onto this one, indicating that the canvas was prepared by the artist. The paint was applied thickly with moderate impasto in a vigorous and rapid brushstroke over a thin light-gray ground. There is no evidence of underdrawing or alterations. The paint surface is in very good condition; minor flaking along the bottom edge was filled and inpainted during conservation treatment in 1992. At that time the heavily discolored natural resin varnish was removed, and the surface was revarnished with synthetic resin.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Although the tacking margins exhibit an extra set of tack holes, there is no evidence that the painting has ever been removed from the stretcher; the extra tack holes probably came from framing strips applied to the edges at some point. The stretcher-bar creases across the middle of the painting line up exactly with the crossbar in the current stretcher, confirming that it is original.

PROVENANCE

Commissioned by the sitter's daughter, Amanda Mary Smith Adams [1877-1952], Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania; [1] by inheritance to her son, Dr. George C.S. Adams [1911-1981], Spartanburg, South Carolina; by inheritance to his widow, Adaline Holaday Adams [d. 2003], Spartanburg; gift 1986 to NGA.

[1] Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Robert Henri diary, 1870-1954, Reel 886, contains the entries relating to the Smith commissions. The NGA portrait of Mr. Smith was described by the artist in his ledger as "Property of Miss Amanda M. Smith Wilkes Barre." See also several letters, Robert Henri to Amanda M. Smith, of 29 June 1907, 25 December 1907, and 1 January 1908, in NGA curatorial files.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 200, repro.

To cite: Robert Torchia, "Robert Henri/George Cotton Smith/1908," *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/69591> (accessed August 31, 2024).