



Robert Henri
American, 1865 - 1929

Elizabeth Virginia Laning Bradner Smith (Mrs. 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 right: Robert Henri; across top reverse: Portrait of / Mrs. George
Cotton Smith / by Robert Henri / at Wilkes Barre Pa / Jan 1908 / E 172

Gift of Mrs. George Cotton Smith Adams in memory of George Cotton Smith
Adams 1986.93.2

ENTRY

This portrait, the companion to George Cotton Smith, represents Elizabeth Virginia Laning Bradner Smith. Smith, born in 1832, was the daughter of Augustus C. Laning and Amanda Elizabeth Christel Laning of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. In 1856 she married Josiah H. Bradner, who died in 1857 before their daughter, Fanny, was born the following year. After her daughter's death in 1864, Elizabeth married Bradner's business associate, George Cotton Smith, on August 25, 1868. The Smiths had two daughters, Sarah and Amanda. [1] Elizabeth Smith died in Wilkes-Barre on May 14, 1910. Her obituary in the local newspaper describes her as an active Presbyterian who was responsible for the founding of a church in Columbia, South Carolina, where her daughter Amanda lived. [2]

Robert Henri recorded the portrait of Smith in his ledger: "Portrait of Mrs Geo Cotton Smith. Jan 08 [in left side bar]. 25—gray back gr. shadow to right. gray hair. waved. black waist with Cappell [?] black or gold breast pin black earring with diamond centre. brown eyes. Painted for Miss Amanda M. Smith. Wilkesbarre Pa. owned by her." [3] As noted in Henri's ledger and described in more detail in his letters, the Smiths' daughter Amanda arranged the commission of her parents' portraits. [4] By January 1908, the date of these paintings, Mrs. Smith was confined to her home. [5] Henri recorded in his diary that he began her portrait on January

28. [6] The following day, he wrote to John Sloan (American, 1871 - 1951) that, although he had already completed the portrait of her husband, “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.” [7] Compounding the challenge of Smith’s physical limitations was Henri’s eagerness to return to New York to prepare for the exhibition of *The Eight* scheduled to open at the Macbeth Gallery on February 3. Henri finished the portrait of Smith in only a few days, noting its completion in a diary entry on January 31.

Smith sits with her body oriented toward the left to complement the companion portrait of her husband and turns her head to look directly at the viewer. The careworn expression in her eyes is balanced by her slight smile. Henri was especially responsive to the challenge of portraying aged female subjects. This frank and sympathetic depiction of an older woman is reminiscent of the work of Frans Hals (Dutch, c. 1582/1583 - 1666), particularly the Dutch painter’s *Regentesses of the Old Men’s Alms House* (1664, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem). Hals’s group portrait of five women had attracted the attention of many late 19th-century writers and artists; the painting was praised by James McNeill Whistler (American, 1834 - 1903), and both John Singer Sargent (American, 1856 - 1925) and William Merritt Chase (American, 1849 - 1916) copied it. [8] Henri was also affected by Whistler’s *Arrangement in Gray and Black No. 1* (1871, Musée d’Orsay, Paris), of which he wrote, “there is something in her face and gesture that tells of the integrity of her life.” [9] The Smith portraits exemplify Henri’s statement that “beauty is an intangible thing; can not be fixed on the surface, and the wear and tear of old age on the body cannot defeat it.” [10]

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] “Death of Mrs. George Cotton Smith,” *Wilkes-Barre Record*, May 16, 1910, 17.
- [3] 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.

- [4] Robert Henri to Amanda M. Smith, June 29, 1907, December 25, 1907, and January 1, 1908, NGA curatorial files. The December 25, 1907, letter states, “I will do the portraits for five hundred dollars if you will pay the railroad and hotel expenses. My previous figures were intended to include all expenses.”
- [5] Mrs. Smith’s obituary describes her as “an invalid for at least fifteen years from heart trouble.” “Death of Mrs. George Cotton Smith,” *Wilkes-Barre Record*, May 16, 1910, 17.
- [6] 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 commissions.
- [7] Robert Henri to John Sloan, January 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), 176.
- [8] See Francis S. Jowell, “The Rediscovery of Frans Hals,” in *Frans Hals*, ed. Seymour Slive et al. (London, 1989), 73–76.
- [9] Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*, comp. Margery Ryerson (New York, 1923), 123.
- [10] Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*, comp. Margery Ryerson (New York, 1923), 123.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The construction and condition of this portrait are nearly identical to that of the sitter’s husband, George Cotton Smith. However, some minor flaking along the right and bottom edges was consolidated in a 1992 conservation treatment.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

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.

Elizabeth Virginia Laning Bradner Smith (Mrs. George Cotton Smith)

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[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 Mrs. Smith was described by the artist in his ledger as "Painted for Miss Amanda M. Smith Wilkesbarre [*sic*] Pa. owned by her." 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

- 1969 Homer, William Innes. *Robert Henri and His Circle*. Ithaca, 1969: 136.
1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 200, repro.
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