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## WILLIAM BIRCH

(1755-1834)

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Born in England in 1755 and trained in the art of enameling, William Birch was a master craftsman and copyist, and an accomplished painter in his own right. Although perhaps best known for his fine enamels after Gilbert Stuart's portraits of Washington, Birch also painted a series of exquisite portraits from life which establish him as an artist of the first rank.

Born into an old Warwickshire family, Birch attended Latin School as a youngster, but showed no interest in formal education. Sent to the London shop of jeweler Thomas Jeffreys, a family friend, he applied himself wholeheartedly to learning the jeweler's art.

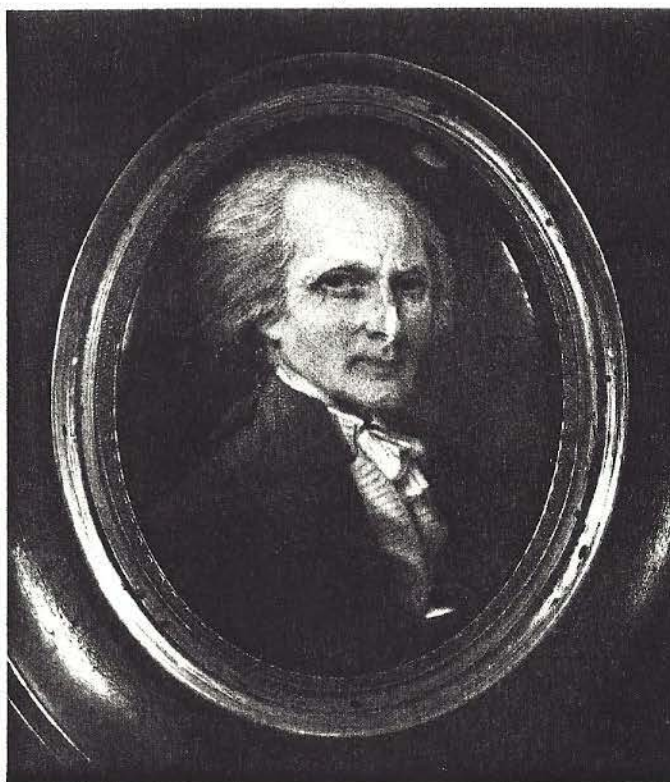
Birch's enameled miniatures were first exhibited at the Society of Artists in 1775, when he was 20. Ten years later he was awarded a medal by the Society in recognition of his contributions to the art of enameling.

Birch enjoyed aristocratic patronage and a warm friendship with Sir Joshua Reynolds, who engaged the young painter to copy many of his portraits. With such a promising career well underway, it is difficult to understand what prompted Birch to pack up his family and move to the United States, yet this is what he did in 1794.

Arriving in Philadelphia with a letter of introduction from Benjamin West to William Bingham, a patron and friend of the arts, Birch set about building a clientele in America. Soon commissions began pouring in, some for miniature copies of large paintings done by other artists, but many for portraits from life with originals done by Birch.

George Washington offered to sit for the English artist, but Birch preferred to paint Washington from the Stuart portraits. In all, he made about 65 copies of the Stuart works.

Birch was an accomplished engraver. Shortly after arriving in Philadelphia, he began documenting the city's buildings and urban activities in an album of



*Portrait of Arthur Lee, 1795, signed l.r. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.*

engravings copied from designs by his son Thomas. The work was published in 1800 under the title *City of Philadelphia*. Later he published another group titled *Country Seats of America*, in which he illustrated rural scenes in Delaware, Maryland and Pennsylvania.

Birch died in 1834 at age 79, leaving a remarkable unpublished autobiography, *Recollections*, which is still in the possession of the Birch family in Philadelphia.

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### PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City  
Mount Vernon Association, Mt. Vernon, Virginia

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