

William Birch: His American Enamel Portraits

By JEAN LAMBERT BROCKWAY

WILLIAM BIRCH was an English enamel painter and engraver who spent the greater part of his professional career in America. Half his life he lived in England; but at the very height of his reputation, laden with English honors, he brought his family to the United States, and here remained until his death forty years later. During his American residence Birch fulfilled the promise of his brilliant years in London by designing and executing the exquisite enamel portraits upon which his reputation chiefly rests.

Birch came from an old Warwickshire family. His father placed him in a Latin school in Warwick at an early age, but to little purpose. The lad was then taken into the household of his cousin, William Russell of Birmingham, where he made some advance in his formal studies. But when his decided taste for the arts finally revealed itself, he was sent to London to the shop of Thomas Jeffreys, friend of the Russell family. Here he spent six years and some months in learning the jeweler's art and the difficult technique of enameling.

In 1775, at the age of twenty, Birch first attracted attention by his exhibit of enamel miniatures at the Society of Artists. He likewise exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1781 and 1782, and three years later was awarded a medal by the Society of Artists for excellence in his art and for his contributions to improvements in its processes. These improvements included a method of obtaining a warm white by underlaying the final coat of white with a thin coat of yellow.

Through the good offices of his wealthy cousins and through his acquaintance with the Earl of Mansfield, Birch enjoyed considerable aristocratic patronage. But his most important professional connection was with Sir Joshua Reynolds, who not only became his warm friend but a genuine admirer of his talents. In fact, the great Sir Joshua had many of his own famous portraits copied in enamel by the young painter, thus, according to Birch's statement, to "preserve their beautiful coloring."

In addition to portraits, Birch executed charming little still-life subjects in enamel, and contrived various ornamental enamels rather more closely allied to the jeweler's art, such as his

exquisite simulated cameo brooches. It is likewise interesting to note his somewhat ambitious projects in a quite different field, that of engraving. He considered himself a copyist, and his *Délices de la Grande*, published in England, was a collection

of engravings after well-known paintings and prints. This interest also Birch brought to America, and, once established in Philadelphia, he undertook an elaborate set of views of that city engraved after designs by his son Thomas. The set was published in 1800. In 1808 he published yet another group of engravings called *Country Seats of America*, the sketches for which he had made on a tour through Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland.

Birch's decision to move to the United States lends little support to the theory that the emigrant is generally a failure at home. His friends had arranged for his

appointment as Enamelist to the King, an honor which, for some obscure reason, the artist declined. Furthermore, he was patronized by a fashionable clientele, had many influential friends, and lived in comfortable surroundings. But in spite of these attractions, he could not resist the urge to depart from his native land.

Some of the reasons for this are revealed in his autobiographical *Recollections*. The death of his two friends and patrons, Sir Joshua Reynolds and Lord

Mansfield, greatly distressed him. The French Revolution, and its effects in England, were unsettling influences. But not improbably his decision to visit America hinged primarily on his wish to view the American scene at first hand. His profession depended for support on a society possessed of a certain amount of wealth, leisure, and interest in the arts; and he had learned from American visitors to London that the young Republic offered these requisites. Nor had he lacked more definite encouragement to undertake the great adventure. Acquaintance with various wealthy and cultivated Americans had assured him of finding sympathetic surroundings in an overseas home. More particularly, Judge Samuel Chase of Annapolis, a patron of the arts in the New World, had insisted upon his trying his fortunes in a fresh territory. So at last, in October 1794, at the age of thirty-nine, Birch, with wife and four children, moved to Philadelphia.

He had been offered many letters of introduction, but wisely



Number 4 (left) — MRS. WILLIAM R. BIRCH, THE ARTIST'S WIFE
This and other illustrations are numbered to conform to the check list of portraits and their owners appended to the accompanying article. All illustrations actual size.



Number 5 (right) — MARY BIRCH, THE ARTIST'S MOTHER



Number 11 — ALEXANDER HAMILTON



Number 15 — THOMAS JEFFERSON

decided that one from Benjamin West, president of the Royal Academy, would be sufficient. This document was addressed to William Bingham, genial friend of the arts in Philadelphia, who immediately engaged Birch to instruct his two daughters and one of their friends in drawing. The artist's career as a tutor was brief. He was soon engaged in his preferred occupation of making portraits in enamel. In his remarkable unpublished *Recollections*, which are still owned by the Birch family in Philadelphia, he tells of building himself a furnace. His first paintings in America were apparently "a full-size picture in enamel of Mr. Bingham and a smaller one from it for Miss Bingham." Since it is possible to make an enamel as large as two feet square, the portrait of his Philadelphia patron may have been life size.

In his *Recollections*, Birch describes the art of enameling. "Enamel painting," he writes, "is the unique Art of heightening and preserving the beauty of tints to futurity, as given in the works of the most celebrated Masters of Painting, without a possibility of their changing; the colors are made of metallic substances, metals and minerals, soluted, calcined, and composed with glassy substances, commonly called Flux, and when laid on bodies of their own kind and placed in a strong heat, will melt in one with them and become permanent."

This statement affords an interesting general definition, but it gives small notion of the tedious steps involved in enamel painting and of the strict limitations placed upon the artist. In its simplest terms, true enameling consists in coating the surface of metal, porcelain, or any substance that may be safely raised to red heat, with a layer of melted glass. As practised by Bone, Birch, and the eighteenth-century miniaturists in enamel who stem from the Limoges school, the process is briefly this: on the back of a small plate of gold or copper, the artist fires a thin coat of enamel, or finely powdered and washed glass. Then on the front he lays a thin coat of enamel, usually white, which constitutes the background for his miniature. During the firing the plate is carefully watched, for, unlike other fusing, the melting of enamel takes but a few minutes. When the plate glows brightly the deed is done. After each firing, the plate is gradually cooled on a bed of hot sand. When the background coat is ready, the design is applied to it by transfer, and the dark shadings of enamel are introduced and fired. Next the artist takes his lumps of colored enamel, which are nothing but glass melted with oxides of various metals, and grinds them very fine in a mortar. The resultant powder is mixed with a little water until it spreads like butter. It is then applied with fine brushes or needles. On patches that require no color, a little clear flux is placed to keep the surface even. The whole is pressed down, dried in a slow oven, and then fired. Subsequently, if the artist so chooses, flecks of gold are added and other finishing details worked in. All this

demands the greatest patience and care, as well as considerable practical experience with the chemistry involved. It is not strange that many of those who have excelled in the enamer's art have been content to master the craft itself without attempting to invent their own designs.

Soon after beginning his enamel painting in Philadelphia, Birch found that commissions came in "fluently," and he devoted himself exclusively to filling them. More than half of these orders were for copies in enamel of large portraits by other painters, and were usually of miniature size; the remainder were for enamel portraits from life, Birch making the original studies.

It is interesting to observe that 1794, the year of Birch's migration to this country, is also marked by Gilbert Stuart's return to America with the avowed purpose of painting Washington. Birch tells us that Washington offered to sit to him also, but that he declined the honor, preferring to make an enamel miniature after the Stuart portrait. This he did, with such success that he was led to make, in all, sixty-one enamel copies of the two Stuart versions of the General. The first is perhaps the most interesting. It is a copy of the so-called Mount Vernon head, Stuart's first likeness of Washington. Birch sold it directly to Mr. McHenry of Baltimore, about 1796, and made no more copies from that particular original.

His other sixty Washington enamels are taken from Stuart's "Lansdowne" portrait. They usually measure about two and one half by three inches in size, and Birch states that he received from thirty to one hundred dollars each for them. The Mount Vernon Association owns one example, and several others are known in Philadelphia. Not more than nine have thus far been located.

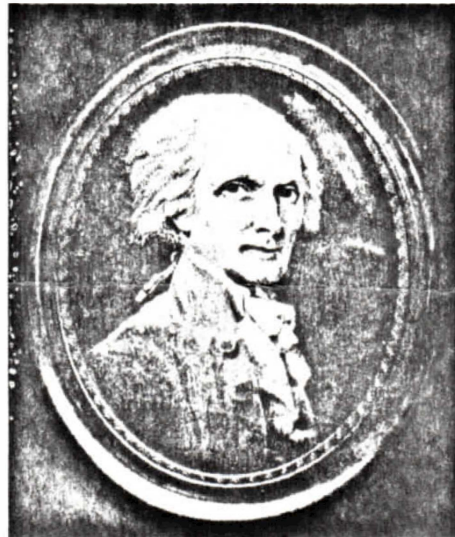
Birch's beautiful enamel of Jefferson is another copy after Stuart. In his memoirs, the artist describes the curious circumstances attending the production of this work. In October of 1805, he called on Jefferson and spent a pleasurable visit

in conversing about the arts. Jefferson then presented him with a small engraved portrait, which Birch thought very bad. With surprising frankness, he told the President that there should be a law against such wretched performances, and that he, Birch, could certainly do much better. Jefferson apparently agreed, for he lent the courageous visitor his Stuart profile from which to make a drawing for an engraving of his own. Ironically enough, when Birch reached home and attempted the engraving, he found himself unequal to the task. However, he made a drawing, and engaged the engraver Edwin to make a plate from it. This Birch used in pulling a few impressions, but then decided to rebite the copper, and, in so doing, ruined the plate. Eventually, after so many fiascos, he used his drawing after the Stuart original as the basis for his now famous enamel.

To Stuart's completely simple composition Birch added a symbolical background showing the liberty cap in the sun



Number 16 — THE MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE



Number 18 — ARTHUR LEE

routing the devils of injustice. Such a background was fashionable at the time, if not in accord with present æsthetic notions, and in this instance, because executed by a master, it is decorative and suitable to the medium. There may be two of these Jefferson enamels, though but one is now known. For many years in the collection of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, this dainty triumph is still in the possession of the Mitchell family.

The several enamels of Bishop William White, first Episcopal Bishop of Pennsylvania, made by Birch after Sully's portrait, reveal an interesting characteristic of the enameler's technique as copyist. Each enamel is distinctive in size, scale, and coloring. Evidently Birch did not adhere to a ruled and squared drawing. To each new enamel he brought a fresh study of the portrait in hand and of its subject. Consequently his work is relieved of mechanical stiffness, a quality too often present in French enamels of the period. The two known Lafayette portraits further illustrate this point, as do also the Washington enamels.

In addition to his copies, Birch left a small group of portraits exquisitely done from life, as if to prove that the great enamelist may surpass the usual limitations of his medium. Many of these portraits represent members of his own family: Mary Birch, his mother (now at the Metropolitan Museum); Mrs. William Birch, his wife (now in the collection of Edmund Bury, Philadelphia); Priscilla Birch, his daughter (later Mrs. Barnes). There is also a dainty little portrait of Mrs. John Mifflin (Clementina Ross)

owned in Philadelphia, and one of Mrs. John Penn as "Luna." The drawing in shoulders and bust of these feminine subjects is sometimes weak, a fact that usually passes unnoticed because of the finely harmonized coloring and brilliant surface.

Somewhere there must still survive the portrait of the "HON. Mr. Van Bram" whom Birch mentions in his *Recollections*. He also speaks of having had a sitting from the Spanish minister, Joseph de Jaudenes, although he did not copy the Stuart portrait of that diplomat. At least another six of the Birch portraits must have been done from life.

Birch has long been known as a brilliant copyist, famous chiefly for his fine enamels of Stuart's Washington. Working from the design of another artist, he could achieve an interpretation within his own difficult medium that preserved the original with remarkable fidelity. He was a craftsman and master of an exacting medium, and had he been nothing more his name would still be distinguished among enamelists.

But Birch was more than a successful copyist. He had a talent for portraiture that freed him of dependence on other artists. His originals show him to have possessed a fine sense of design, and an ability not merely to draw a good likeness, but to produce a sensitive character study. Birch thus combined the talents of craftsman and artist. In his work are the delicate touch of the engraver, the draughtsmanship of an able portrait painter, and the imagination of a pure colorist.



Number 19 — MRS. JOHN PENN AS "LUNA"



Number 38 — BISHOP WILLIAM WHITE

List of Portraits by William Birch

(The numbers starred are pictured in the text)

1. GENERAL BARKER
2. BINGHAM, WILLIAM
Large size, probably from life; mentioned in Birch's *Recollections* as first enamel portrait painted in America.
3. BINGHAM, WILLIAM
Miniature enamel after above, mentioned in *Recollections* as a copy made for Miss Bingham.
- 4.* BIRCH, MRS. WILLIAM R., the artist's wife
Oval, 1 3/4" x 1 1/2".
Edmund Bury, Philadelphia
- 5.* BIRCH, MARY, the artist's mother
Oval, 1 5/8" x 1 3/8".
Metropolitan Museum of Art
6. BIRCH, PRISCILLA (later Mrs. Barnes), the artist's daughter
Milton Birch, Philadelphia, 1898
7. CLAY, HENRY
Enamel on porcelain.
Lewis Wolz, Washington, D. C.
8. DELAPLAIN, BROCKHURST
9. FRANKLIN, BENJAMIN
10. GILMOR, ROBERT
Formerly in the collection of C. Allen Munn, New York
- 11.* HAMILTON, ALEXANDER
After bust by Ceracchi. 2 1/2" x 2 1/4". Signed lower right *W. B. Mrs. John Kearsley Mitchell, Philadelphia*
12. JACKSON, ANDREW (In 1820)
13. JAUDENES, DON JOSEF DE
After Stuart. Birch made several copies, which he mentions in his *Recollections*.
14. JEFFERSON, THOMAS
Signed *Jefferson, G. Stuart Pinx. W. Birch delin. D. Edwin, Sc. 1809. 2 3/8" x 1 7/8"*. This may be same as No. 15, or it may be the original drawing mentioned in the *Recollections*, made by Birch for his enamel.
- 15.* JEFFERSON, THOMAS
After Stuart. 2 1/4" x 2 1/4". Signed lower left *W. Birch. Mrs. John Kearsley Mitchell*
- 16.* LAFAYETTE, MARQUIS DE
After Ary Scheffer. 2" x 1 7/8". Inscribed on back *General Lafayette as at the Battle of York Town Oct. 19th, 1824 by W. Birch from A. Scheffer. Herbert L. Pratt, New York*
17. LAFAYETTE, MARQUIS DE
1 7/8" x 1 3/8".
Mrs. John Hill Morgan, New York
- 18.* LEE, ARTHUR
2 1/4" x 1 7/8".
Historical Society of Pennsylvania
- 19.* PENN, MRS. JOHN (as "Luna")
1 7/16" x 1 7/16". Signed *Mrs. Penn of Pennsylvania, W. B. Mrs. John Kearsley Mitchell*
20. MISS M. T. PHILLIPS
21. RAHNEQUE, C. SAMUEL
Circular, 2 1/4" diameter, signed on back *W. Birch. Bowlingham Collection, New York*
22. ROSS, CLEMENTINA (Mrs. John Fishbourne Mifflin)
Mrs. C. S. Bradford, Philadelphia, 1898
23. HON. MR. VAN BRAM (1797)
Four copies mentioned in Birch's *Recollections*.
24. WASHINGTON, GEORGE (c. 1796)
After Stuart's first portrait of Washington, known as the Mount Vernon head; only one copy made by Birch. 3 1/4" x 2 1/4".
John N. McHenry, Garrison, Maryland
25. WASHINGTON, GEORGE
After Stuart's "Lansdowne" portrait. One of sixty copies by Birch.
Albert Rosenthal and Ebrich Galleries
26. WASHINGTON, GEORGE
After Stuart's "Lansdowne" portrait.
Judge H. A. M. Smith, Charleston, South Carolina
27. WASHINGTON, GEORGE
After Stuart. Signed *W. B. 1796. Formerly in the collection of C. Allen Munn, New York*
28. WASHINGTON, GEORGE
2 5/8" x 3".
Samuel Avery, 1909
29. WASHINGTON, GEORGE
Mrs. S. W. Edwards, 1881
30. WASHINGTON, GEORGE (1797)
C. G. Barney, Richmond, 1881
31. WASHINGTON, GEORGE
Mr. Lyle, Dublin, Ireland, 1881
32. WASHINGTON, GEORGE
Mt. Vernon Association, Mt. Vernon, Virginia
33. WELCH, JOSEPH
Signed *W. B. 1796*. Mentioned in A. H. Wharton's *Heirlooms* (p. 143).
34. WHITE, BISHOP WILLIAM
After Sully. Oval, set in brooch, worn by Miss Betsy White, Bishop White's daughter. 1" x 1 1/4".
35. WHITE, BISHOP WILLIAM
After Sully. 1 3/16" x 5/8".
Historical Society of Pennsylvania
36. WHITE, BISHOP WILLIAM
Rectangular, 3/4" x 1", set in brooch.
37. WHITE, BISHOP WILLIAM
Rectangular, 5/8" x 3/4".
- 38.* WHITE, BISHOP WILLIAM
After Sully. 1 1/4" x 1 13/16".
Ebrich Galleries
39. MRS. WHITTAKER
3" x 2 1/2". Set as brooch.
Albert Rosenthal, Philadelphia