A PORTRAIT BY SMIBERT

By LOUISE BURROUGHS
Assistant Curator of Paintings

Among the Boston gentry who had their portraits painted by the fashionable artist John Smibert were the three children of James Pemberton—Hannah, Mary, and Samuel. Very stylish portraits they were, done in the English manner, the girls with curls over their shoulders and young Samuel smartly dressed and wigged. The canvases are all of a size, and from the ages of the subjects, who were born in 1715, 1717, and 1723 respectively, it is apparent that they were painted at the same time—probably a few years before Hannah's marriage to Benjamin Colman in 1739.

These portraits have been continuously in the hands of various descendants of the Colman family until recently, when the Metropolitan Museum secured the one of Hannah Pemberton.

It is an excellent and typical Smibert and as such is a valuable addition to our collection, for Smibert is important in the history of American painting because of the considerable influence he had on our early native artists. When he arrived at Newport, Rhode Island, in 1729, he was already forty years of age and had behind him his training in England, three years of travel and study in Italy, and eight years of experience as a practising artist in London. Thus he brought to a colonial community all the authority of a mature artist whose style had been formed in the mother country.

Painting in England was at that moment trembling on the verge of a new and brilliant era, but when Smibert left it was still bound by the century-old tradition of the Stuart portrait painters under the leadership of the aging Sir Godfrey Kneller. Strong and original artists would be needed to lead it forward into something fresh and new. These artists were in the making—young Hogarth had just set himself up as an engraver, Reynolds and Gainsborough were in their infancy. But John Smibert was none of these. His modest talents flowed naturally in the deep grooves channeled by the established current. It was the style of Lely and Kneller that he carried with him across the ocean, and in painting our portrait of Hannah Pemberton he must certainly have had in his mind's eye some such canvas of Kneller's as the so-called Princess Sophia of Hanover. The pose, the gown, the curl, the painted oval, all are like, and Smibert made good use of them in a number of portraits—in that of Mrs. Thomas Bulfinch, for instance, of Hannah's sister Mary, of Mrs. James MacSparren.

This style, though so nearly outworn in England, was greeted as the height of elegance in Boston where Smibert settled. His large painting of Dean Berkeley and His Entourage, made immediately on his arrival in Newport, had shown what he could do and he was soon enjoying a lively patronage. Although his gifts were not remarkable, Smibert's work had an air of cosmopolitan sophistication that was very gratifying to his patrons. But where provincial vanity must surely have been touched by his fashionable poses we are pleased to see his natural honesty triumph over the conventional framework. He has not imposed on his Bostonians a languid grace or vapid prettiness. Hannah Pemberton, for all that she is clothed and combed in the familiar pattern, is a fine young woman, full of life and humor. Her eyes are bright, her cheeks are pink, her skin is firm. She is in fact a buxom lass, ready and eager for all life may have in store for her. She is very welcome in our gallery of colonial portraits, and she gives Smibert a fairer showing than he had before with only the old and toothless Nathaniel Byfield to bear him witness.

Acc. no. 43.5I. Rogers Fund, 1943. Oil on canvas, h. 30 inches, w. 25 inches.
Portrait of Hannah Pemberton, by John Smibert (1688-1751)