HUNTINGTON’S FRANKLINS

By ALBERT TEN EYCK GARDNER
Associate Curator of American Art

This year, being celebrated as the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Benjamin Franklin, affords us an opportunity to rediscover the beauties and curiosities of the William Henry Huntington collection of Franklin portraits in this Museum and to bring together for the first time in some seventy years or more the scattered facts and forgotten circumstances of Mr. Huntington’s interesting life as one of the most indefatigable collectors of Americana of his time. All Franklin scholars and students will of course remember him for the key part he played in the nineteenth-century revival of Franklin studies.

First, to avoid confusion, it should be said that our William Huntington was not closely related to the founder of the Henry Huntington Library in California though both men were members in some distant cousinly degree of that vast family clan, and both were active collectors of Americana.

In 1883 the Museum received as a gift from Mr. Huntington his collection of more than two thousand American portraits—most of them portraits of Franklin, Washington, and Lafayette. Shortly after his death in 1885 his friend John Bigelow deposited in the Museum’s library Huntington’s collection of Franklin books. Taken all together the Huntington collection consists of about 2,000 prints, approximately 400 medals, busts, paintings, etc., and some 600 books and pamphlets.

The Franklin portraits in the Huntington collection when added to the other portraits of Franklin which the Museum has acquired from other sources make a body of Franklin material that is probably the most extensive and varied group of its kind, with a range from masterpieces by recognized artists to commercial souvenirs of the time of Napoleon III. Two of these portraits—the marble bust by Houdon and the painting by Duplessis—are historic and artistic works of the very first order. In addition to these we have in our Print Department representative impressions of most of the well-known engraved portraits of Franklin.

During Franklin’s lifetime thousands of portraits of him were made. For the likenesses of the kindly, shrewd old face that we accept without question and recognize without hesitation as the true image of the man, the patterns were set by some of the best painters and sculptors of the time—the best-remembered perhaps being Houdon and Duplessis. These were the image-makers, who set down the essentials. Following them were the hosts of effigy-makers, the copyists, casters of plaster, makers of dies, and the many engravers of varying degrees of skill. Such was the demand for copies that these popular talismans of liberty and wisdom—tokens of the almost universal admiration for Franklin—were scattered broadcast. In the many variations upon the essential patterns all the repetitive mechanical crafts of the graphic and glyptic arts were called upon to stamp, cut, impress, and trace the multiplied image of the man.

The superb portrait bust of Franklin by Houdon was given to the Museum by John Bard (1819–1899), brother-in-law of John Taylor Johnston, the Museum’s first President. Aside from its interest as an important work by the French sculptor, and its historical importance as one of the very finest portraits of Benjamin Franklin, it has also the distinction of being the first piece of sculpture acquired by the Museum. It was presented by Mr. Bard in 1872 and has remained one of the Museum’s great treasures. For a long time this bust was supposed to have belonged to Franklin’s friend, Dr. John Bard of Hyde Park (1716–1799), but more recent researches trace its ownership from Houdon, who left it in Philadelphia with the artist Robert Edge Pine to be sold. In 1802 it was in the possession of Du Pont de Nemours, who offered it to the state of Virginia without success. His son sold (or “transferred”) it to Nicholas Cruger, from whom his daughter Catherine (Mrs. Wil-
liam Bard) inherited it. Her son, John Bard, inherited it from her and gave it to the Museum.

The Duplessis portrait, which came to the Museum in 1932 as part of the Michael Friedsam collection, is generally accepted as the original painting that Duplessis exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1779. There are a number of replicas or old copies of this portrait in various collections—perhaps a dozen in other American collections (one of the replicas is in the Huntington Collection). The experts’ opinion that the Friedsam portrait is the original painting for which Franklin posed is supported by the fact that its very handsome old frame is described in contemporary accounts of the Salon of 1779. These accounts mention the carved serpent, an ancient symbol of sagacity, entwined in a garland of laurel, oak, and bay at the top of the frame. At the bottom, under the inscribed cartouche, are carved three more attributes, which seemed to have escaped attention in spite of their appropriate and entertaining symbolism. These are the hide of a flayed lion, a not too obscure reference to Franklin’s diplomatic triumph over the British; the flaming torch of Liberty; and at one side, caught up on the lion’s tail, a tasseled cap—it may be a Liberty cap, or it may suggest the fur cap Franklin wore in place of a wig, a sartorial innovation that shocked and delighted French society. The Latin inscription Vir (to be translated literally, “a man”) is certainly the mot juste for one whose plain virtues stood in no need of eulogistic rodomontade.

In addition to these works of art there is the large and curious series of Franklin portraits in the Huntington collection. Except for the fine engravings acquired by Huntington his collection is a rather heterogeneous lot of drawings, paintings, busts, statuettes, miniatures, medallions, medals, coins, tokens, postage stamps, snuffboxes, rings, plates, and what not. Some of them are old and of interest, but many of them are mid-nineteenth-century productions; in fact some are dated as late as 1883—the year Mr. Huntington presented them to the Museum.

In collections of this sort and size a certain number of the items are bound to fall rather far below the level of works of art—some indeed are little more than knick-knacks. Mr. Huntington was well aware of this, and the worst of these little souvenirs amused him very much; in actual fact he bought some of them because they were so bad, so very far from being accurate portraits of his hero.

Huntington’s interest in American history was general, but in collecting he concentrated on Franklin, Washington, and Lafayette. As his collection grew he was, like most collectors, unable to resist opportunities to buy portrait prints and medallions of other American worthies. But of them all Franklin was his favorite, with Washington a rather cool second. He was one of those collectors whose enthusiasm for his subject gradually made it impossible for him to pass up any portrait of Franklin no matter how badly drawn, how cheaply made, or how clumsy. Huntington was definitely not an art collector, and he was never under any illusion about the quality of these mementos.

After Mr. Huntington’s death in 1885 his friends George A. Lucas, Samuel P. Avery, and
John Bigelow presented several portraits to be added to the collection, one of them a portrait of Mr. Huntington painted in Paris by Walter Gay. The Huntington collection of Franklin and other portraits was exhibited by the Museum for about twenty years in spite of the fact that it was of interest mainly for its historical rather than its artistic value. About 1906 it was retired to storage. Subsequently the "modern" knickknacks were weeded out and disposed of. These were mostly small base-metal tokens, little plaster busts, and some painted plates and medallions, all of them of late nineteenth-century manufacture, none of them of the slightest artistic or historical significance.

One of Mr. Huntington's greatest treasures and the one most highly prized by him is the biscuit porcelain statuette of Franklin and Louis XVI at the signing of the treaties of alliance between France and the United States. It is supposed to have been modeled by Lemire about 1780 or 1785, and only three or four other copies of it are known. As a "portrait" of Franklin this is perhaps the best of its class, but its class is, nevertheless, that of French bric-a-brac. Louis is very grand and condescending, Franklin very meek and bending. The small scale, the
Biscuit porcelain statuette commemorating the signing in 1778 by Louis XVI and Franklin of the treaties of commerce and alliance between France and America against Britain, in which France recognized America's independence. Probably by Charles Gabriel Sauvage, called Lemire (1741–1827). Niderviller, about 1780-1785
theatrical air here reduce an important historical event to somewhat less than heroic proportions in a medium better suited to memorializing minuettes.

Mr. Huntington's collection of Franklin prints and engravings contains good impressions of many of the excellent engraved portraits, along with a number of minor variants—prints that can only be considered as scrap-book material. And tucked away in his albums there are several very interesting original drawings. The best of these is a pencil sketch, probably a study for a projected engraving by the famous designer of engravings, Moreau le Jeune. It shows an allegory in which a portrait bust of Franklin stands under the protection of a militant being holding a shield emblazoned with fleurs-de-lis, representing France. They are backed by a banner of Liberty and some aggressive cannon. At one side sits a bedraggled and disgruntled Britannia with her symbolic lion, who appears to be “playing dead” beside a burst cannon while the symbolic Gallic cock holds a gigantic sword at his chest. Huntington says in his catalogue: “I bought this sketch—for it is rather sketch than finished drawing—from Vignères the singularly honest print seller and much experienced expert, who was unhesitating in attributing its authorship to Moreau. I am apt to conjecture that it was commenced a propos of Franklin's death—and left unfinished in that storm & pressure period.—never engraved.” For those who value such information this drawing would appear to be unfinished, uncatalogued, unpublished and un-engraved. It has a signature, "J.J.M." and "moreau le jne," and is indistinctly dated 1792 (?)

Mr. Huntington’s less serious side as a collector of American portraits is perhaps best illustrated by the Chinese portrait of Franklin—a water color copied by a Chinese artist from a small engraving in Shanghai in 1883, which was sent to Huntington by one of his friends in the American diplomatic service. There are in the collection other things of this sort, whimsical curios of a kind that illuminate one of the far-gone stages of the collecting mania.

Huntington's library of Franklin books has always been a somewhat inconvenient problem for librarians and custodians. When the old man was taken ill in Paris and knew he had not long to live he had these books packed up and shipped to his dear friend John Bigelow, who was then one of the foremost Franklin scholars in this country. Many years before, Bigelow had told him that he would be interested in owning them. Huntington remembered this, but apparently Bigelow, his mind busy with new projects, had forgotten. In any case he sent the books to the Museum as New York City had no public library at that time.

The Franklin library is now seldom consulted. In the rare-book world its existence is remembered principally because in the year 1889 the bibliographer Paul Leicester Ford was unaccountably refused permission to examine the collection and he embalmed the fact in a sour little note in the preface to his Franklin Bibliography. In later years, when Mr. Bigelow was so active in founding the New York Public Library, it is curious that he did not withdraw the Huntington Franklin books from the Museum to deposit them in the new institution, where, presumably, they might be useful.
The Franklin library contains, among many reprints of standard works and odd pamphlets, a number of extremely curious volumes, the most curious of all being Huntington’s manuscript catalogue of his collection. Its title page is a fair sample of Mr. Huntington’s whimsical approach to the portrait collection. It reads:

A/ sort of/ CATALOGUE/ of parts of my Americanesque Collection,/ in Parts./ Part I goes from the beginning to page [numbers of pages were never supplied]/ and deals by the way with objects whereby, in, of, on and with various materials and/ processes, variant artists and other persons have more and less felicitously essayed to/ to represent more and less completely the appearances of the persons and clothes of/ FRANKLIN, WASHINGTON, LAFAYETTE, & Some Others. Interested but—not engraved./ Part II goes from page to page, a list of some COINS & MEDALS./ Part III from page to page, is taken up with/ an imperfectly descriptive list of portraits printed from metal, stone or wood of/ BEN. IR FRANKLIN./ part IV/

His mania for portraits of Franklin induced him to have his artist friends embellish the flyleaves of some of his books with pencil sketches—copies of well-known Franklin portraits. Most of these were done by obscure American students, but there is one by the painter Bargue. Other volumes have postage stamps or other portraits and letters inserted in them.

The only Franklin autograph manuscript in the collection is a letter addressed to Franklin’s old friend Dr. John Bard, given by his descendant John Bard in 1872.

Though Mr. Huntington never lost sight of the serious historical aspects of his collection, he was also well aware of its value to him as an amusing pastime. And although there are some very good things in it, among all the curious odds and ends, which a true collector might envy him, what seems most enviable is Mr. Huntington’s thirty-year vacation in Paris; his collection of a thousand golden afternoons; his unlimited time to ramble through the shops of old print-sellers, antiquarians, and junk dealers; his leisurely hours of rummaging through the bookstalls along the Seine, lured always on by the possibility of discovering some priceless ten-centime treasure. One envies him these seemingly aimless wanderings which would end according to premeditated plan at some good restaurant known for certain specialties or enhanced by the reputation of having been the favorite restaurant of Voltaire. Mr. Huntington tortured his American friends by describing these idyllic expeditions in his letters and in reports on the discovery of each treasure acquired for his collection—“I found the rummest bronze medallion of Franklin.”

There are very few biographical accounts of Mr. Huntington, and if his character were to be judged solely by the curiosities of his collection one would be inclined to say that he was merely a mildly eccentric old codger with a weakness for collecting knickknacks. This, however, would be a serious error. Although his collection remains today the nearest thing to an autobiography it is to be supplemented with what some of his friends have said and written about him.

He was born in 1820 in Norwich, Connecticut, the son of the Honorable Charles Huntington. He had two older brothers: one significantly named Benjamin Franklin, a farmer who lived in Franklin, Connecticut, the other James Monroe, who became a prosperous iron merchant, shipping magnate, and importer. Though William is said to have graduated from the Harvard Law School the facts of his later life would suggest that neither the law nor a business career appealed to him. In any case, in 1853 he put his financial affairs in the hands of his brother and left New York for a trip to Europe. Apparently he arrived in Paris with such a strong distaste for ocean travel that he decided to remain in Europe, making Paris his headquarters for the rest of his life. In fact he seldom left that city for the next thirty-two years. Even the two sieges during the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871) failed to dislodge him from his snuggery on the Rue de Boursault. Although he had an ample income he lived in a very simple manner in order to give away money to the poor. Clemenceau, who was Mayor of Montmartre in 1870, said that every week during the siege Huntington would visit him, bringing money to relieve the suffering of the poor or to be used in the best interest of France, requesting only that his name as donor should be kept absolutely secret. For some twenty years Huntington’s sole occupation was that of Paris correspondent of the New York
Dear Friends,

Philad. Nov. 14, 1785

I received your kind letter, which gave me great pleasure, as it informed one of your Welfare. Your friendly congratulations are very obliging. I had on my Return as you observe, some right to expect Repose, and it was my Intention to avoid all public Business, but I had not Firmness enough to resist the unanimous Desire of my Country folk; and I find my self have kept again in their Service for another Year. They engage’d the Prime of my Life: They have eaten my Flesh, and seem resolved now to pick my Bones. You are right in supposing that I interest my Self in every Thing that affects you & yours, sympathizing in your Afflictions & rejoicing in your Felicities; for our Friendship is ancient, and was never obscured by the least Cloud. I thank you for your Civilities to my Grandson, and am ever, with sincere and great Esteem I Regard my dear Friends,

John Franklin

Dr. Wm. Bard.
Franklin, a position for which his literary abilities, his wide knowledge of French history, and his sympathy with the people of France made him one of the best foreign correspondents then working for the American press. In the long, easy-going intervals between writing his newsletter for the Tribune he occupied his time browsing through the bookstalls collecting mementos of Franklin. In this happy pursuit he gradually filled his apartment with a museum of American history.

He was blessed with a genius for friendship, and from 1853 to 1885 every American visitor to Paris made a point of calling upon him. Some of these visitors thought him a bit strange, since he had no interest whatever in the doings of society and preferred to find his friends among artists, writers, and students. One of Huntington's greatest friends was John Bigelow, who, as American Consul in Paris during the Civil War, and as an agent of Seward's, brought the French press around to the side of the North and prevented Napoleon III from giving aid to the South. Bigelow was also interested in Franklin, doubtless because he was in France with somewhat the same purpose that Franklin had had during the American Revolution.

It was through Bigelow that Huntington experienced the most memorable day in his life as a collector of Frankliniana. Bigelow believed that the "lost" original autograph manuscript of Franklin's famous autobiography was lying hidden somewhere in France and could be found. Shortly after Bigelow left France the manuscript was discovered, and Bigelow commissioned Huntington to examine it and buy it for him. Huntington's letters to Bigelow, which have been preserved, contain an amusing account of the transaction by which this important American historical document was returned to the United States (it is now in the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California). This manuscript was the basis for the first accurately revised and corrected edition of Franklin's Autobiography, issued by Bigelow in 1868.

Though Mr. Huntington would seem to hold only a modest place in history as a Paris correspondent of the New York Tribune, as a collector of friends and of Americana, and as a generous philanthropist, he does have one unique claim to fame that has not been well remembered, while his other virtues have been, to say the least, somewhat muted by the passage of time. He is, we believe, the first American who, in spite of Brillat-Savarin and a long triumphant tradition of gourmets in France, had the courage to introduce in Paris a long list of Yankee delicacies by setting up a small bakery and restaurant where homesick members of the American colony could buy plain Boston baked beans, pumpkin pies, maple syrup, and all the simple "fixins" Americans long for after a prolonged diet of French cooking.

Though the Huntington collection has, with the passage of some eighty years, suffered now and then the rather severe criticisms of disappointed connoisseurs it remains, heterogeneous as it may appear to art-lovers or to seekers of rare and expensive connoisseur's items, an early milestone in the now well-trampled field of Americana. It must be one of the first collections of its kind, and certainly it is one of the few collections of its size that have been preserved more or less intact. It represents a mid-nineteenth-century attitude towards the American past, a perhaps now unfashionable Carlylean approach to history by hero-worship, an approach of antique simplicity and enthusiasm unclouded by economic, psychological, or factional connotations.

Though the mass of minor treasures in the Huntington collection have, taken one by one, little artistic significance, together they have a meaning of importance. By the very fact of their inexpensive quantity, by their duplication and repetition, they demonstrate—sometimes in touching ways—how very great a man Franklin was and what a tremendous and permanent impression his personality made upon his world and ours. They supply the best evidence of that grand invisible monument of lively enthusiasm and admiration erected to his memory in the minds of men. The Huntington collection affords a reminder of Franklin the man, whose faults and virtues add up to vir.