Portrait of a Bronx Aristocrat

by ALBERT TEN EYCK GARDNER, Associate Curator of American Art

Through the bequest of Mrs. H. W. Maxwell, Jr., the Museum has recently received a most interesting eighteenth-century American portrait. This is a well-known work of the painter Matthew Pratt (1734-1805): the portrait of Mrs. Peter De Lancey (1720-1784). It was probably painted between 1770 and 1772, at about the same time Pratt was engaged to paint the full-length portrait of Mrs. De Lancey’s father, Cadwallader Colden, which is now in the collection of the New York State Chamber of Commerce. Matthew Pratt, a Philadelphia artist, had then only recently returned from a period of study under Benjamin West in London—the high point in his career that he so felicitously recorded in his famous group portrait of West’s students, The American School, now in this Museum.

For many years the portrait of Mrs. De Lancey belonged to Herbert L. Pratt and his generosity in lending it to exhibitions and allowing it to be published in catalogues and books has made the picture a familiar landmark to students of early American painting. The most recent and authoritative study of the picture was published in 1942 in William Sawitzky’s monograph on the artist. In this book the significance of our picture in relation to Pratt’s other work is indicated by the following statement: “The portrait of Mrs. Peter de Lancey . . . exhibiting all of the essential characteristics of Pratt’s work during the 1770’s, can be taken as a prototype for the later pictures, and, together with Cadwallader Colden’s full-length, forms perhaps the best key to Pratt’s general technique of any portrait from his hand.”

However, the interest of this portrait is not by any means confined to its importance as a work by Matthew Pratt. The story of Mrs. De Lancey is a most interesting and unusual bit of New York history that transforms a somewhat arid document of American fine-arts history into a human document that cannot fail to enlist the sympathetic attention of every informed observer.

In many eighteenth-century American portraits we can no longer identify the sitters and we know the pictures only as “Portrait of a Man” or “Portrait of a Lady.” Few portraits of women of that time can be connected with any appreciable amount of biographical information. Sometimes the sole fact known is that the lady shown in the portrait was the wife of So-and-so or the daughter of Such-and-such. The portrait of Mrs. De Lancey is unusual because of the amount of interesting information about her that has come down to us. Since her father, her husband, and her son James were all well-known figures in the province of New York much information about her life can be deduced from theirs. Nor is all the evidence circumstantial, for we have a number of letters from her hand preserved among the papers of her father, who from 1761 until his death was lieutenant governor of the rebellious province of New York. In most accounts of this portrait little more is said of her than that she was Governor Colden’s daughter Elizabeth, the wife of Peter De Lancey. But when these facts are expanded and enlarged upon it is possible to catch a glimpse of Mrs. De Lancey as a person, as a human being helplessly involved in tragic circumstances. Then one sees her as both beneficiary and victim of the political activities of her revered father, her husband, and her sons.

In these days Cadwallader Colden and Peter De Lancey are both pretty well forgotten, though they were in their time among the principal political powers in New York. Colden began his career in New York as the protégé of Governor Hunter by carving out, during a term of office as surveyor general, a choice estate of three thousand acres in Orange County. He supervised closely the education of his children, and was the chief influence in Elizabeth’s life. He was one of the best educated men in New York,
Portrait of Mrs. Peter De Lancey, by Matthew Pratt. Oil on canvas. Height 29 3/4 inches
Bequest of Mrs. H. W. Maxwell, Jr., 1957
a trained physician and botanist with scientific and philosophical interests that enabled him to correspond with some of the foremost learned men of his time, Franklin and Linnaeus among them. In political matters, however, Colden was a royalist so narrow in his views, so rigid, and so concerned with his personal rights and privileges as lieutenant governor that even men of his own party considered him an obstinate old fool. His stubborn views at the time of the Stamp Act crisis nearly caused a massacre in New York. It is said that if Colden’s armed guards had obeyed his order to fire on the citizens of New York the American Revolution might have begun then and there on Bowling Green in 1765. Instead the Sons of Liberty burned the old man in effigy along with his carriage and a dummy of the devil.

The De Lanceys, through their connection by marriage with the Van Cortlandt family, had become members of that choice little group of landowners who controlled the political and social life of the colony. Peter De Lancey was a member of the assembly for Westchester.

Thus Elizabeth, as the child of Colden and the wife of De Lancey, enjoyed all the advantages any young lady could have in the province of New York in the eighteenth century. When she married in 1737 her husband took her to live at De Lancey’s Mills on the Bronx River near West Farms in lower Westchester (a site now in Bronx Park near 181st Street). Here her twelve children were born and raised with plenty of advice on questions of health from the old Governor, and all save one grew to maturity.

During the American Revolution her sons served with the British forces: Stephen, John, Oliver, Warren, and James—all except Peter, who was said to have been killed in a duel in South Carolina in 1771. Her daughters Jane and Susanna married loyalists; but Alice married Ralph Izard, a rich young man from the South who sided with the American forces. Her son James became famous, or infamous, as the leader of De Lancey’s Light Horse, a band of British raiders who terrorized and plundered that unhappy territory in southern Westchester known during the war as “The Neutral Ground.” He was known to the American forces that tried to capture him as “The Colonel of the Cowboys” because of his success in stealing cattle to pro-
vision the British army. After he was listed in the Act of Attainder he was called “The Outlaw of the Bronx.”

By the end of the Revolution the widowed Mrs. De Lancey had witnessed not only the destruction of her old home at the Mill on the Bronx River but also the plundering of her own house at Union Hill (a site now in the Bronx Zoological Gardens). Her husband had died in 1770, her father in 1776—he probably had a stroke when he heard about the Declaration of Independence. By the Act of Attainder her son James was stripped of all his property and legal rights and forbidden to live in the United States; he died an exile in Nova Scotia in 1804. Her other sons were also fugitives, exiles, or in uneasy retirement for some time after the end of the war. After the ransacking of her house at Union Hill by an American raiding party looking for the Colonel, she had fled with her daughters to Spring Hill, an estate near Flushing, Long Island that had belonged to her father, and there she died in 1784.

Mrs. De Lancey, like most women of her time, was content to make her impression on the world through her children. She never aspired, or never had the time, to be a bluestocking like her sister Jane, who studied botany and knew all about the new classification system of Linnaeus. Her interests began and ended in her home and family. Her letters to her father and mother bring before one the very spirit and attitudes of the dutiful and loving daughter, wife, and mother of the eighteenth century. In her will she left instructions that each of her sons was to be given a silver case of drawing instruments “to be made in the neatest manner, value six guineas, with the following engraved upon them: ‘When you receive this token the Parent who gives it will be no longer here on earth, let us live so as to hope to meet in heaven.’”

A NOTE ON DE LANCY FAMILY PORTRAITS: The Matthew Pratt portrait of Mrs. Peter De Lancey is said to have descended in the family of her daughter Mrs. John Watts, Jr. and passed from the Watts family into the collection of Herbert L. Pratt about 1913. The Museum also has a miniature portrait of Mrs. Peter De Lancey which has sometimes been attributed to Ramage. It is said to have belonged to her daughter Alice, Mrs. Ralph Izard.

There is a third portrait of Mrs. Peter De Lancey, a miniature now in a private collection in New York. It appears to be a copy of the Matthew Pratt oil portrait—perhaps it is a miniature by Matthew Pratt.

The Museum’s collection of miniatures also contains an interesting pair of portraits of men called James De Lancey and his brother. These date about 1700; they are painted in oil on copper. The identity of these men is something of a puzzle and the identification rests merely on hearsay. However, the miniatures are said to have come from the family of William H. De Lancey, Bishop of Western New York. Possibly they represent some of his ancestors of the Van Cortlandt or Heathcote families.

The Museum also has a pair of portraits of Mrs. Peter De Lancey’s father and mother, Mr. and Mrs. Cadwallader Colden, by John Wollaston.


Fletcher Fund, 1938
Recent Accessions: Prints

by CARL J. WEINHARDT, JR., Associate Curator of Prints

The accession policy of the Print Department is inevitably a fairly straightforward affair. There are certain gaps in the collections which must be filled as time goes on, and of course smaller lacunae in areas where we are already strong. The normal routine, however, is constantly enlivened by two unknown factors. One arises from the unpredictability of the print market: every now and then something will turn up that is so rare or extraordinary that one could never have hoped to find it. The second and perhaps even more important unknown is the constant flow of widely varying gifts and bequests.

The riches that result from these imponderables are well illustrated by even a few of the more interesting accessions of the past year. A glance at these also indicates the wide and wonderful range of a catholic collection of printed pictures: we pass from a moving religious image to a book jacket, from a rare book to a cartoon; we survey the products of five centuries.

Our earliest accession in this group, dating probably from the 1470s, is a superb impression of the Ecce Homo from Martin Schongauer’s famed Passion series. Schongauer was the first noted painter who was also a printmaker. His reputation and his style spread rapidly through his prints; there is, for example, the well-known but still touching story of how the young Dürer made a long journey to study with the master, only to find on arrival that he had just died.

One of Schongauer’s closest followers and pupils was the Master A.G., whose work on occasion shows a surprising degree of originality and independence from the strong personality of his teacher. This is particularly true of the Passion series which he executed perhaps a decade after his master’s. Among the numerous recent gifts of Harry G. Friedman is a very fine impression of the first state of the Entombment from this later series.

The next generation of German artists was