In the Latest London Manner

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A pair of portraits that visited the Museum briefly in the Hudson-Fulton exhibition of early American art in 1909 has now returned to the building as a significant addition to the permanent collection of American painting. Acquired from lineal descendants of the sitters, John Smibert's portraits of Colonel Francis Brinley (Figure 1) and Mrs. Francis Brinley with Her Infant Son (Figure 2) bring to our collections two of the most important colonial portraits that have remained in private possession. Artistically they represent the master at the height of his powers, while historically they bring us into contact with an important member of Boston society during the first half of the eighteenth century.

Although Boston was already one hundred years old when the Brinley portraits were executed in 1731, it remained essentially an English community peopled with Englishmen who sought to establish for themselves an English way of life in their transplanted homes. Today, pictures such as those that Smibert offered to his Boston patrons are generally regarded as characteristic examples of "early American art," yet the Brinley portraits are in fact English portraits of English subjects by a British artist in British America.

John Smibert (1688-1751) had indeed been in America for less than three years when he painted the Brinleys. Born in Edinburgh, Smibert had served as an apprentice to a house painter and plasterer in that city before journeying to London, where he gained employment as a coach painter and as a copyist of pictures for dealers. After acquiring some formal training at the Great Queen Street Academy, he returned to Edinburgh, where he "first tryd to paint faces." According to the English engraver George Vertue (about 1684-1756), whose notebooks in the British Museum form our principal source of information about Smibert prior to his arrival in America, the Scot journeyed to Italy in 1717 and spent the next three years in Florence, Rome, and Naples, copying a number of old masters and painting some portraits from life. It was during this trip to Italy, Vertue records, that Smibert first met George Berkeley, later the distinguished Dean of Derry and Bishop of Cloyne, an encounter that was to alter not only Smibert's own career, but the whole development and advancement of the visual arts in New England.

Returning from Italy in 1720, Smibert found the London art world almost completely dominated by the factory-workshop of the German-born portraitist Sir Godfrey Kneller. Even before Kneller's death in 1723 Vertue had described Smibert as "a good ingenious man [who] paints and draws handsomely." Residing in Covent Garden, "the rendezvous of the most celebrated artists," Smibert soon became, in fact, one of the foremost practitioners of the mildly mannered elegancies of the well-established Knellersque formula. Indeed, by 1732, when Vertue classified in his notebooks the various artists of his acquaintance, Smibert enjoyed a very handsome reputation, even though he was then "abroad, in Boston, New England." Listing the court painter Charles Jervas, Jonathan Richardson, and the Swede Michael Dahl as the three most accomplished artists of the day—"the Old Masters," he called them—Vertue named Smibert among the eleven masters of the "next Class," along with Joseph Highmore, William Hogarth, and a group of others whose names are today almost completely unknown. Although only a small number of Smibert's works of this
period have been identified, these few reveal that Smibert was, like the majority of his contemporaries in London, an artist of no extraordinary talent. Nevertheless, with a substantial number of patrons apparently awaiting his brush, it appears as though Smibert enjoyed a rather lucrative practice on the eve of his departure from England.

All of this Smibert left behind when he accepted Dean Berkeley’s invitation to journey to America to help in carrying out Berkeley’s “romantic design” for the establishment of a new university in the western hemisphere. Vertue records Smibert’s departure with an attitude of regret and impending disillusionment for the emigrating artist, giving the impression that the two had discussed in detail Smibert’s big step:

“Mr Smibert left England. to go to the West Indies, New York, or Bermudas taking all his pictures Effects entending there to Settle. according to a Scheme propos’d by Dean Barclay. to lay the foundation of a College for all sorts of Literature on Bermudas. & professors of several sciences. to Instruct the European and Indian children in the Christian faith, & other necessary educations. . . . to which design the Dean had engag’d, or persuad’d several gentlemen of fortune & Substance to join with him in this project. 3 or four of them. sett out with ye Dean & Mr Smibert. Mr Smybert had a very good business here. a great many friends generally all of them dissuaded him from leaving here a certainty. for an uncertainty. but he was warm’d with imaginations of the great success of such a design, & the pleasures of a finer Country & Air more healthfull he being often inclined to indispositions. . . . he thought such a retirement, as at Bermudas he might live quietly & for small expence. & make a great advantage.”

After a trip of nearly five months, the Berkeley entourage arrived at Newport in late January 1729. Shortly thereafter Smibert painted himself into the background of the so-called Bermuda Group, or Dean George Berkeley and His Family (Figure 4), in which he not only commemorated the mission that had brought Berkeley to these shores, but created at the same time a work of art in which was demonstrated an unprecedented standard of artistic excellence in New England. It was, as a matter of fact, not long before Smibert was devoting himself full time to painting. Realizing that the funds that Dean Berkeley anticipated to implement his plans for a college in Bermuda were not to be immediately forthcoming, Smibert removed to Boston late in 1729, apparently with the expectation of settling there permanently.

His success was assured. He was, after all, the first major artistic personality to reach the shores of New England. In contrast to the crude efforts of the artisans who had preceded him, Smibert brought not only a firm academic training but also an impressive awareness of the major traditions of European painting. Equally important, perhaps, was the studio equipment that he brought, including (according to the itinerant diarist Pierre du Simitiere of Philadelphia) not only “a large collection of original Drawings of the best masters Prints mostly Italian . . . & a good collection of casts in plaster of Paris from the best antiques [among them the Medici Venus!] besides basso relievo seals & other curiosities,” but also a large group of copies of old masters for purposes of instruction in that never-to-be-founded institution of higher learning in Bermuda. Indeed, within three months after his settlement at Boston, Smibert organized the first art exhibition ever held in America, wherein the copies of old masters were shown in conjunction with his own recent portraits of Boston subjects.

Smibert’s revolutionary activities in the Boston art world were quickly heralded in the London press, where Smibert was endowed with the unrestrained praise worthy of a Raphael or a Titian! At home in Boston Smibert’s studio became, in effect, an informal “academy,” where a succession of young American artists was introduced to the sophisticateds of antique, Renaissance, and baroque art.

Although several of the portraits that Smibert exhibited in 1730—including that of Samuel Sewall, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and our portrait of Nathaniel Byfield (Figure 3)—were in the intensely realistic manner that he apparently considered to be more appropriate to the distinguished and aging worthies of Boston, his ability to offer more fashionable likenesses in the London manner was quickly recognized.

Among those who sought Smibert’s fashionable
1. Francis Brinley (1690-1765), by John Smibert (1688-1751), American, probably 1731. Oil on canvas, 50 x 39 1/2 inches. Rogers Fund, 62.79.1
2. Mrs. Francis Brinley (1698-1761) and Her Infant Son, by John Smibert, probably 1731. Oil on canvas, 50 x 39 3/4 inches. Rogers Fund, 62.79.2

Brush was Colonel Francis Brinley of Datchet House, Roxbury, who undoubtedly regarded Smibert’s portraits as a refreshing reminder of the cultivated and sophisticated society that he had left behind in England. Although Brinley’s father had been born at Newport, Rhode Island, he himself, born, raised, and educated in England, had come to New England as recently as 1710. Writing in 1755, Brinley reviewed his illustrious ancestry. “As to Pedigree,” he noted, “Thomas Brinley of . . . Datchet in the County of Bucks, was my Great Grandfather. He dyed in 1661, was Auditor General to both King Charles y’er first and Second. . . . He was personally known well by their Maj’ys, particularly the old King . . . and for his loyalty was a great sufferer. For obeying his Princes Command to come to him to Oxford, he had all they Could find of his Estate Seized . . . and an order from the Then Parliament to apprehend his Person, soe was forst to abscon’d near 4 years, untill His Maj’y King Charles y’er 2’d . . . Came to England in 1660, when he was possesst of his office again. He was with his Maj’y in his Exile, But being antient upwards of 70 years, dyed in less than a year, soe had little or no benefit, or recompense which he Expected (and ought to have had) from his Maj’y for the . . . loss . . . still due from y’er Crown to his Famely If Common justis Could be distiguishd properly. Had he lived [it] undoubtedly would have happin’d. . . . Oliver y’er Usurper deprived him . . . and by that means me and myne.”

According to an inscription on a tombstone in the little chapel at Datchet, near Windsor, Thomas Brinley married Ann Wase of Petworth, Sussex, by whom he had five sons and seven daughters. Several of these children, including one Francis Brinley (1632-1719) – grandfather of our Francis – settled in America. In consequence of the losses sustained by his father for faithful adherence to the royal family, Brinley was offered a grant of either lands or office on the island of Barbados. The climate proving unsatisfactory there, in 1652 he removed to Newport, where his son Thomas was born. After an education in England, Thomas Brinley settled in Boston, where he married Mary Apthorpe. He became a prominent merchant, a member of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company, and a founder of King’s Chapel, the earliest Anglican congregation there. In 1684, after his wife’s death, Thomas went to England, where he married Catharine Page, by whom he had three children. In 1693 Thomas and one of his sons died in a smallpox epidemic. Meanwhile, his younger brother William had married against his father’s wishes, and in retaliation Brinley urged Thomas’s widow to bring her children Elizabeth and Francis (the subject of our portrait) to New England, promising to make the latter heir to his substantial fortune.

Francis Brinley, a graduate of Eton, arrived in America in 1710. Settling initially in Newport, he was admitted a freeman in July 1713, but shortly thereafter he moved to Boston, where he spent the rest of his life. In 1718 he married Deborah Lyde, daughter of Edward and Catherine Lyde of Boston and granddaughter of that distinguished old judge Nathaniel Byfield.
In the autumn of 1719 the death of Brinley’s grandfather brought him the substantial fortune that had originally lured him to New England. Having inherited a tract of high ground at the “sound end of Boston Neck,” commanding a superb view of the miniature metropolis and harbor below, Brinley gradually formulated plans to build a new home for himself, his wife, and his expanding family. Traditionally said to have been a slightly reduced version of the Brinley family H-plan house at Datchet, England, the new residence at Roxbury (built on the present site of the Church of the Redemptionists) brought to the Boston countryside a structure that was to be a distinguished landmark well into the nineteenth century. Although nothing of the house remains today – the last remnant of it having disappeared more than sixty years ago – several

4. Dean George Berkeley and His Family, by John Smibert, 1729. Smibert appears in the left background, Berkeley is at the right, and his wife with her infant son Henry sits behind the table. Oil on canvas, 69 1/2 x 93 inches. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Isaac Lathrop

nineteenth century descriptions suggest its character. Emily Pierpont Delesdernier, great-granddaughter of Robert Pierpont, the Boston merchant who acquired the house from Brinley’s heirs in 1773, attempted to capture the early appearance of the house in her “Fannie St. John,” a short story published in 1874 concerning a “romantic incident” of the American Revolution: “It was situated in the midst of a large domain of park and wooded hills, and presented a picture of grandeur and stateliness not common in the New World. There were colonnades, and a vestibule whose massive mahogany doors, studded with silver, opened into a wide hall, where tessellated floors sparkled under the light of a lofty dome of richly painted glass. Underneath the dome two cherubs carved in wood extended their wings, and so formed the centre,
from which an immense chandelier of cut glass depended. . . All the paneling and woodwork consisted of elaborate carving done abroad, and made to fit every part of the mansion where such ornamentation was required. Exquisite combinations of painted birds and fruits and flowers abounded everywhere, in rich contrast with the delicate blue tint that prevailed upon the lofty walls."

Francis S. Drake, noted nineteenth century historian of the New England scene, augments this description in his *The Town of Roxbury* (1878), adding a Victorian vignette (Figure 5) of the building to our image:

"It is difficult for the visitor of to-day, who looks upon its bare walls and curtailed proportions, to realize that it could ever have been the seat of such splendors. . . . Tradition, however, tells us of an apartment hung with blue damask, and known as the 'Blue Chamber'. . . . To the right of the large hall in the centre of the building, forty-four feet in length and twenty-two in depth, and which occupied the entire space between the two wings, was the reception room."

It is interesting to speculate on the magnificent furnishings that must originally have filled these splendid interiors. Although none of the Brinleys’ furniture, silver, or other possessions (except our portraits, of course) appears to be identifiable today, we are fortunate in possessing an exceptionally detailed inventory of the contents of the house, prepared in 1766 after the death of Colonel Brinley, which suggests that the house was indeed very well furnished. As is true of so many early American inventories, there is but a brief mention of the pictures and prints with which the Brinleys had lived. It is only as a final item that we find listed “a Number of prints” valued at £13/-/8 and “5 prs. of paint[ings]” valued at £6, which we may hope included the pair of portraits that the Brinleys had ordered of John Smibert.

It was in the palatial surroundings of Datchet House that Colonel and Mrs. Brinley lived for nearly forty years, raising a large family of two daughters and five sons: Deborah, Cather-
ine, Thomas, Francis, Edward, Nathaniel, and George. Henry Wilder Foote, Smibert’s most comprehensive biographer to date, has identified the child in our portrait as Henry, a name that does not, however, appear among those of Brinley’s children. Before that, and since the publication in 1878 of the initial checklist of Smibert’s portraits, the child had always been called Francis. Since Francis would have been a child of two at the time the portraits were painted, it seems most unlikely that he would have been represented as a babe in swaddling clothes. Although one hesitates to discard the sacred institution of family tradition, nevertheless it is tempting to suggest that it was rather Edward, born in August 1730 and a child of one year when our portraits were painted in the autumn of 1731, who is represented here.

It was indeed “Edward Brinley, of Roxbury, grocer,” who was one of the administrators of his father’s estate, and it is from the various papers of administration that he and his brother Nathaniel filed in the Boston Probate Court that we learn something of the vast wealth of Colonel Brinley. In addition to “the mansion House, Barn, & Other Buildings” and “land part upland & part Salt Meadow” at Roxbury, Brinley owned at the time of his death extensive acreage at Brookline, Needham, Framingham, Princeton, and many other places in eastern Massachusetts. The inventory reveals, too, that he owned a large number of slaves.

Whereas the inventory of Brinley’s estate shows the fortune of which he was possessed, the records of King’s Chapel suggest his charitable activities. Following the precedent of his father, Francis Brinley became a warden there in 1723 and a member of the vestry in 1728. When the vestry voted in 1747 to replace the small wooden meetinghouse erected in 1688 with a more monumental edifice in stone, built after the designs of
the architect Peter Harrison of Newport, Brinley subscribed £50 to the building fund and later pledged another £150 on a “subscription for Finishing the Church.”

Brinley was active, too, in the political, military, and social life of the colony. He earned his title as Colonel of the Roxbury regiment during the French and Indian War. He was also Deputy Surveyor-General of the province and served as Justice of the Peace under Governor Francis Shirley. His importance in the Boston community is further attested by the role he often played as official host to visiting dignitaries. When Governor Shirley returned to Boston in 1756, for example, as Commander-in-Chief of His Majesty’s Forces in North America, it was to Datchet House that he was directed. The Boston News-letter of February 5, 1756 records the event:

“Thursday a Number of Gentlemen, upon Information of His Excellency’s being upon the Road, went out of Town and met him at Watertown, where they dined, and from thence they attended him to the Seat of Francis Brinley, Esq., within four Miles of this Town, where His Excellency lodged that Night. . . . The next Day he was escorted to Town by his Troop of Guards, with a very great Procession of the principal Gentlemen of the Town (in their Coaches and Chariots) who had waited upon him at Mr. Brinley’s to pay their Compliments of Congratulations.”

Among the other distinguished guests who enjoyed the Brinleys’ hospitality were Dean George Berkeley (the author of the Bermuda project that had originally brought Smibert to America), his wife, and family, who, having come from Newport, spent ten days at Datchet House in September 1731 prior to their return to England. According to tradition, it was at this time that Smibert painted the Brinley portraits: the pres-

ence of haystacks in the background of Colonel Brinley's portrait presents a convincing verification of the September date, since haying time around Boston occurred in late summer.

It was, to be sure, in keeping with the English practice of displaying likenesses of the heads of the manor that the Brinleys called upon John Smibert to paint their portraits for their recently completed copy of an English house. Smibert responded with a pair of three-quarter-length portraits that rank today among the very finest of his American works. The pictures were, in fact, as English as the house they adorned. That British mezzotints were the most familiar artistic source for colonial American portraitists has been made clear by the discoveries of Waldron Phoenix Belknap, collected and published posthumously in 1960 in *American Colonial Painting*. There is no reason to believe that Smibert's portraits of the Brinleys were an exception: on the contrary, the design of the chairs in which the Brinleys sit, the conventional arrangement of the draperies, and the composition of the pictures as a whole are closely dependent upon British mezzotint sources. However, in contrast to some colonial portraits that were rather precise copies of a single British print (such as the Museum's John Singleton Copley portrait of Mrs. Jerathmael Bowers, which is based upon James Mc Ardell's print after Sir Joshua Reynolds's Lady Caroline Russell), the Brinleys appear to be composite images based upon several different sources. The position of Mrs. Brinley's right hand, plucking a blossom from an orange tree may, for example, have been taken from a mezzotint after a portrait of Lady Price (Figure 6) painted by Sir Peter Lely.

Whereas the Brinley portraits thus conformed basically to the conventions inherent in Anglo-American portraiture of the early eighteenth century, in certain respects they made important departures from contemporary practice. English portraits of mothers with an infant child are extremely rare; so, therefore, are reproductive British mezzotints in this genre. Among Smibert's American predecessors, an unknown New York limner based his portrait of Mrs. Samuel Vetch (Figure 7), painted in 1702, upon a British mezzotint, but for the unrealistic image of her child he was forced to look elsewhere. Similarly, Smibert had certainly looked beyond the familiar British mezzotints not only when he painted the infant Henry Berkeley in the Bermuda Group (Figure 4), but also for the Brinley child and for the young child of Mrs. Andrew Oliver (Figure 9), which he painted about 1732. In each case the independent existence of the apparently weightless baby betrays the additive character of the artist's unsophisticated efforts in composition.

Without British prototypes to turn to, in what direction did Smibert look? To be sure, the variety and number of English and Continental prints available in New England in the pre-Revolutionary period was enormous, many of them being imported by Smibert himself. The
scope of Smibert's own collection is vividly suggested in an advertisement that he placed in the Boston Newsletter of May 15-22, 1735:

“To be Sold, at Mr. Smibert's, in Queen Street... A Collection of valuable prints, engrav'd by the best Hands, after the finest Pictures in Italy, France, Holland, and England, done by Raphael, Michael Angelo, Poussin, Rubens, and other[s] of the greatest Masters, containing a great Variety of Subjects, as History, etc, most of the Prints very rare, and not to be met with except in private Collections: being what Mr. Smibert collected in the above-mentioned Countries, for his own private Use & Improvement: The Price of each single Print or Book to be mark'd upon 'em, and to be the same, which Mr. Smibert... himself gave for them.”

To someone who had been subjected to the often-repeated yet infinitely varied image of the Italian Madonna and Child, as Smibert had been during both his Italian sojourn and his years as a copyist in London, the selection of a source for the Brinley infant was certainly not very difficult. Although it has been impossible to identify the specific composition to which Smibert turned, any cursory investigation of Italian reproductive prints will reveal a large number of baroque bambini (Figure 8) that allow us to place generically the focus of Smibert’s attention. Whether it was a Bolognese, a Roman, or a Neapolitan painting—or a Flemish composition based upon an Italian model—is less important.

In the topographically accurate landscape background of his portrait of Colonel Brinley Smibert made another important innovation. Although it has been conjectured that Smibert placed the Berkeley Group against a distant view of Narragansett Bay, it seems more likely that, following the conventions of his day, he had concocted an ideal landscape from one or more British prints. Indeed, in an order for supplies sent to his London agent, Smibert requested “a set of ships published by Lempriere and sold by H. Toms in Union court Holburn,” which he wanted “sometimes... to be in a distant view in Portraits of Merchts etc who chuse such.” In the portrait of Colonel Brinley, however, Smibert abandoned convention in favor of a view of Boston (Figure 10) from the high ground at Roxbury on which the house stood. It has been called the earliest painted view of that city. On the basis of our rare Burgis-Johnson map of Boston issued in 1728 (Figure 11), it is indeed possible to identify several important landmarks. Beyond the broad acreage called the “Roxbury Flats” in the Burgis map, the beacon that gave Beacon Hill its name is clearly visible at the left. The map further helps us to identify the two prominent structures in the middle distance as the “Watch House” at the left and the “Powder House” at the right.

Although this view is hardly suggestive of the cosmopolitan society Smibert had left behind in London and Edinburgh, Boston was by this time well on its way to becoming one of the principal cities of the British Empire. As Boston’s most accomplished artist at this time, Smibert played an important role in this metamorphosis. He had cast his die when, in 1728, already over forty years of age, he had abandoned his apparently successful London career in favor of Dean Berkeley’s romantic dreamings of an institution of higher learning in the western hemisphere. Smibert had found in the Boston community a receptive clientele for his fashionable portraits. He was, despite the failure of Berkeley’s plan, settled permanently in Boston and was reluctant to give up the security of the enthusiastic patronage there in favor of the uncertain circumstances that might await him elsewhere. When in May 1735, three and a half years after Berkeley left America, he again tried to alter Smibert’s career, he apparently therefore found the artist unwilling. Berkeley, trying to persuade Smibert to come to Cork, wrote:

“What if there be in my neighborhood a great trading city? What if this city be four times as populous as Boston, and a hundred times as rich? What if there be more faces to paint, and better pay for painting, and yet nobody to paint them?

Whether it would be disagreeable to you to receive gold instead of paper? Whether it might be worth your while to embark with your busts, your prints, and your drawings, and once more cross the Atlantic? Whether you might not find full business in Cork, and live there much cheaper than in London? Whether all these things put together might not be worth a serious thought? I have one more question to ask, and that is, whether myrtles grow in or near Boston without pots, stoves, or greenhouses, in the open air? I assure you they do in my garden. So much for the climate. Think of what hath been said, and God direct you for the best.”

Smibert's reply does not survive, but its content is not hard to imagine. In Boston he enjoyed a degree of popularity that he could never have experienced in one of the great cities at home.

Recording Smibert's death, Vertue, in June 1752, summarized the happy situation in which Smibert had found himself in New England: "Mr John Smibert I was told dyd, about March was twelve month – that is March 1751 – & left a widow and two children – in very good circumstances. in the art of painting he was a skilfull painter, had made great improvements by study in England and at Rome, w[h]ere he staid a considerable time, at his return to England he was well esteemed by the Curious and the Judges of Art. but he was not contented here, to be on a level with some of the best painters. but desird to be w[h]ere he might at the present, be lookt on as at the top. [of] his profession then, & here after. in which no doubt, he there succeeded in. and Smibert’s name in after Times. by his works will be there remembered in a superrior degree.”

NOTE