

Thomas Sully

Born to actors in Horncastle, Lincolnshire, England in 1783, Thomas Sully emigrated to the U.S. with his family, taking up residence in Charleston, South Carolina. There, almost all of the family members were pressed into theatrical service. In 1799 he moved to Virginia to live with his older brother Lawrence, a painter of miniatures. In 1804 Lawrence died, leaving behind his widow, Sarah, and three young children. Sully took up the care of his brother's young family and in 1806, he and Sarah were married. Marriage to a brother's widow was illegal in Virginia and thus the family moved to New York, then Hartford, Connecticut, and finally Philadelphia, where they would both reside until their deaths.

In 1807 Sully traveled to Boston to visit Gilbert Stuart and to seek his advice. Stuart apparently reviewed his work and suggested, "Keep what you have got, and get as much as you can," according to American art historian, William Dunlap, who, by 1820 was calling Sully "The Prince of American portrait painters." Not only was Sully a fine artist, but also a good businessman. He kept journals as well as registers or "Accounts of pictures" of all his work. In order to encourage business upon arriving in Philadelphia he cut his portrait prices in order for the first thirty patrons to commission him. Later, in 1809, when he decided to travel to England, he developed a scheme to finance this. He proposed to several gentlemen that for \$200 in advance he would paint a copy of an excellent picture in London and deliver it to Philadelphia. One month prior to sailing for England he became an American citizen.

In England he was cordially received by William Beechey, Thomas Lawrence and Benjamin West, to whom Charles Willson Peale had written a letter of introduction. Forty years earlier, West had also tutored Peale, extending his generous guidance to yet another American artist. It is ironic that early in his London sojourn Sully regarded the work of Sir Thomas Lawrence—an artist with whom he is often compared—as being "too much loaded with paint, and the red and yellow overpowering." Sully's portraits have an elegant, flowing style, and utilize warm, subdued colors which demonstrate a feeling of warmth and beauty. He is most well-known for his beautiful portraits of women done in an idealized or romantic style with elongated necks, and peaches and cream tones. Although romanticized, his portraits have a quality of realism unlike those of West, Copley, and Stuart. This realism is evident in *The Student*, a portrait of the artist's daughter.

Apart from teaching his own children, Sully's journals are peppered with the names of many aspiring artists who sojourned with him. In his *Hints to Young Painters* his advice to others was: "From long experience I know that resemblance in a portrait is essential, but no fault will be found with the artist (at least by the sitter) if he improve the appearance." His placement of figures was a distinguishing feature; often, he left more space than usual above the head. In 1838, accompanied by his other daughter, Blanche, Sully was once again in England, commissioned by the Sons of Saint George in Philadelphia to do a full length portrait of the young Queen Victoria. This portrait shows skill his skill in arrangement. His subject was a short, dumpy, young woman with a retreating chin and protruding eyes. In representing her ascending the steps of the throne with a long cloak trailing behind her, he gives her the appearance of height. Working in his studio Sully aimed at six sittings of about two hours each. His first step for portraits was preliminary sketches determining the size and pose, the second was worked on a temporary canvas which had the dull surface of a middle gray tint. The study was drawn in black and

white chalk and sometimes two colors ground in “sweet oil”—a slow-drying oil such as cloves or olive. This chalk study became the study for the actual portrait on another canvas primed with a white ground. In the last sitting he would introduce glazing colors, such as asphaltum and madder lake, a reddish pigment. Sully experimented with many media and materials. Some of the more disastrous attempts were sugar of lead as a drier which became white powder on the surface of the painting, and India-rubber waterproofing, which penetrated the canvas.

Although Sully completed over 2,000 portraits in his career, he also painted about 600 genre and historical scenes which he called “fancy pictures.” At a time when his career was declining, he took a commission from the North Carolina Legislature; from this commission came the monumental, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Unfortunately it was too large for the space and now resides in the Boston Museum of Fine Art.

Sully was affiliated with many professional organizations, but the longest was with the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art. He was elected to honorary membership in 1812 and served on its board from 1816 to 1832. Five years prior to his death, and in financial need, the Academy voted him a stipend of \$1,000 per years out of gratitude for all his service to the organization.

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