



BEHIND THE SCENES

BY CYNTHIA MOORE

FACE-TO-FACE WITH MY FAMILY'S PAST



Conservator Mina Porell with William Williams's large portraits of David, Jr. (left) and William Hall. On the easel at far left is the artist's much smaller self-portrait, also in Winterthur's collection. Photo: Bob Leitch

Few places capture that old-money aesthetic quite like Delaware's Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library. Walking around the former estate of Henry Francis du Pont (1880–1969) is like entering another world. It's been that way for me since my first visit 14 years ago, when I came to see some 18th-century silverware created by my ancestor John Leacock of Philadelphia; it had been acquired by "Harry" du Pont and then bequeathed to the institution with the rest of his extraordinary collection of Americana.

I have been back several times since then, most recently in December, when I was ecstatic to finally see a pair of 1766 oil portraits that have been in the care of Winterthur's renowned conservators, and therefore off public view. To see such pieces, it's essential to book a tour, often months in advance. These paintings are especially significant to me because the two sitters are my first cousins, eight generations removed.

While waiting for the tour day to arrive, I decided to research the paintings' provenance. I knew that my relative Mary Leacock had wed David Hall

Mina Porell uses a microscope to examine the portrait of David Hall, Jr. Photo: Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library

(Benjamin Franklin's partner in the Philadelphia printing industry) at Christ Church in 1748. Almost two decades later, the Halls hired a prominent local portraitist, William Williams (1727–1791), to paint their children. Likenesses of the two sons (William and David, Jr.) became part of Winterthur's collection. The portrait of their daughter Deborah (named after Deborah Franklin, her mother's cousin) is in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum and is now undergoing long-term conservation treatment there.

I asked Brian Hack, director of Brooklyn's Kingsborough Art Museum (on the campus of Kingsborough Community College), if he knew how the portraits had been passed down through the generations. He replied, "I believe they descended through the family of Jane Trenchard Hall, William Hall's spouse." Sadly, Deborah Hall died when she was only 16. William and David Hall, Jr., eventually took over their father's printing business, but neither had any grandchildren, so the paintings ultimately went to in-laws.

My curiosity was piqued, so I consulted Winterthur's associate curator of art and visual culture, Kedra Kearis, to better understand how the boys' portraits came to the museum. She directed me to a sales receipt dated 1940, confirming that Harry du Pont bought them from a dealer in Pennsylvania. "The following year," Kearis explained, "the same dealer offered him the portrait of Deborah Hall, but due to its condition, he passed on the deal."

At last, my visit to Winterthur's conservation laboratory arrived. Seeing the portraits was an incredible experience for me. Associate paintings conservator Mina Porell kindly explained the challenges that she and her colleagues had faced, starting with the portraits' large size. More importantly, past restoration efforts had made new conservation more difficult. She explained, "The paintings have been lined [with a supporting canvas glued to the back of the original canvas]. That's not something we would do today, but it was once common practice."

Another issue was the paint itself. Porell noted that the portraits "have pronounced cracks and cupping paint that was not resolved by the previous restoration. That has left the lifting edges of the original paint exposed and vulnerable." The presence of a pigment called orpiment was also a problem. Apparently William Williams used this canary-yellow color even though it was toxic. "It contains arsenic and degrades quite quickly when exposed to light," Porell observed. "It's considered a historic pigment today."

Is there a physical resemblance between the two sitters and me? Maybe not, but it was nonetheless gratifying to see their portraits up close and to learn they have been given such attentive care at Winterthur.

Most people are fortunate if they can discover the names and dates of ancestors beyond their great-grandparents. Seeing life-size portraits of relatives from almost 260 years ago is exceedingly rare. That experience seems like something usually reserved for royalty or the very wealthy, so I'm amazed and grateful to have enjoyed such a privilege. ●

Information: winterthur.org

CYNTHIA MOORE is a writer, educator, and aesthete. In her spare time she enjoys reading and spending time in nature.



Mina Porell works on the portrait of David Hall, Jr., while her colleague Matthew Cushman stands before that of William Hall. Photo: Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library