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Reflections: Furniture, Silver, and Paintings in Early America

PRESS RELEASE

Contact: Patricia Powell
Tel.: 608 263-2068
ppowell@lvm.wisc.edu
www.lvm.wisc.edu

October 11–December 28, 2003
Birmingham Galleries VI, VII, Elvehjem Museum of Art

From the collection of the Caxambas Foundation in Florida comes this wonderful selection of early American paintings, furniture, and silver. The exhibition suggests how Americans experienced these objects in dimly lit homes between about 1630 and 1830, through the reflections of light from candles in mirrors or sunlight on silver.

Period furniture in the exhibition includes chests, chairs, tables, and mirrors. Also featured are paintings, predominately portraits, by such renowned early American artists as John Singleton Copley, Charles Willson Peale, John Smibert, and Thomas Sully. Silver objects include candlesticks, tapersticks, tankards, bowls, pots, tea, coffee, and chocolate wares, and plates. These objects were produced mostly during the eighteenth century both domestically and in England and graced early American homes. Furniture, silver, and paintings are displayed to show how light and its reflection was at a premium. The groups of objects focus on greater issues of use and functionality, as well as, historical significance and technique. By looking at the objects from the American past and reading the wall labels, the viewer may learn more about this past, in particular how these objects signified taste, wealth, and prestige for their original owners.

The word reflection in the title suggests many meanings. People engage in reflection when they contemplate an idea or remember something or someone from the past. Objects literally create reflection through their physical interaction with light. Finally, objects—whether shiny or not—are a reflection of the status and tastes of the owners. Scientists, philosophers, architects, and craftspeople all considered the problem of light and reflection in the eighteenth century. Lighting the darkness was expensive and messy. Throughout this time, people

used reflective materials for glitter and reflection to enhance light in a room. Benjamin Franklin even proposed daylight savings time to make better use of natural sunlight, thus preventing the extraordinary expense of artificial lighting from candles and oil lamps. By the end of the eighteenth century, several important technologies were in place to improve light output from traditional fuel sources of candles and oil.

Professor Ann Smart Martin's and her students in a year-long art history seminar selected and researched the objects and the period. This museum-training course provided students invaluable experience in many facets of mounting an exhibition.

RECEPTION

A reception for this exhibition will be held on Saturday, October 11, from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Live music by the Seranata String Trio and refreshments will be provided.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING

Thursday, October 16, 5:30 p.m. Elvehjem room L140
Ann Smart Martin, Stanley and Polly Stone Professor, Department of Art History, UW–Madison, slide-lecture "Through the Scholar's Looking Glass: Interpreting a Collection"

Ann Smart Martin, scholar/curator for *Reflections*, examines the collection through a broad social and cultural lens. She will discuss the exhibition themes of "reflection"—in several of its disparate meanings and show furniture, mirrors, silver, and portraits in a new light.

Thursday, October 23, 5:30 p.m.
Thomas H. Broman, associate professor, Department of History of Science, UW–Madison, lecture "Publicity, Sociability, and the Cultivation of Virtue in the Enlightenment," Elvehjem room L140

During the eighteenth century, a new understanding of virtue appeared that displaced the idea of virtue from its traditional associations with political engagement and military service. Instead, virtue became both a product of social intercourse and a code of behavioral norms for life in society. This talk will explore how the Enlightenment ideal of sociability was linked to virtue, and how that ideal was articulated in the public forum of the periodical press.

Thursday, November 13, 5:30 p.m. Elvehjem room L140
Anne Verplanck, curator of prints and paintings, Winterthur Museum, slide-lecture "Reading the Clues on Canvas: Early American Portraits"

Anne Verplanck will encourage the audience to look closely at American paintings, “reading” the paintings for clues about the sitters' age, gender, social position, family position, and aspirations. Such portraits are likenesses of early Americans who owned furniture and decorative arts like those in *Reflections: Furniture, Silver, and Paintings in Early America*. They were striking and important furnishings in sparse colonial homes.

Thursday, November 20, 5:30 p.m. Elvehjem Room
L140

David L. Barquist, associate curator of American decorative arts, Yale University Art Gallery, slide-lecture
“Looking Glasses in American, 1640–1840”

The talk will examine the subject matter from a variety of perspectives, including the technology of glass production, frame construction and styles, marketing the looking glass, and how they were used in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries.

FUNDERS

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The Elvehjem Museum of Art is open Tuesdays-Fridays 9-5 pm; Saturdays and Sundays 11-5 pm; closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission to galleries and educational events is free. The museum is located at 800 University Avenue on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is accessible to wheelchairs from the Murray Street (north) entrance. Parking is available at the city of Madison's Lake Street and Frances Street ramps, university lot 46 on Lake Street between Johnson and University Avenue, university lot 47 on Johnson Street between Park and Lake streets. Evening and weekend parking is also available under Grainger Hall with entrance on Brooks Street between University Avenue and Johnson streets. The Elvehjem Museum of Art will provide sign language interpreters for associated programs by three-week advance request to Anne Lambert, Curator of Education, weekdays, 608 263-4421 (voice).

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