WILLIAM WOOD (British, 1769–1810)

Portrait of Sandford Peacocke

1801

Watercolor on ivory; oval, 8.6 x 7.3 cm (3 3/8 x 2 7/8 in.)

Signature: inscribed in ink on paper backing: By Will: Wood of Cork Strt. [?] Lond.

Setting: gold frame with glazed reverse; inscribed by different hand in ink at bottom of paper backing: W. [?] Wood.

The Edward B. Greene Collection, 1942.1159

WILLIAM WOOD WORKED primarily in London and exhibited over one hundred miniatures at the Royal Academy, where he began his training at the age of sixteen.¹ His portraits of men in particular are regarded as highly refined and remarkably sensitive psychological studies. While Wood is known to have copied miniatures by Richard Cosway (1742–1821), George Engleheart (1752–1829), and John Smart (1741–1811), his distinctive style can be observed in the network of small dots and dashes of paint that follow the contours of a sitter’s face (fig. 1). In addition to portrait miniatures, Wood executed a number of eye miniatures and became increasingly interested in watercolor landscapes during the years preceding his death in 1810. He signed his miniatures on the paper backing, often with the sitter’s name or initials, Wood’s studio location, and the year. The fact that the artist signed his work on the back rather than the front has contributed to making his miniatures harder to identify immediately, an issue complicated by his aptitude for imitating a variety of styles employed by his fellow miniaturists.

Historians have rare insight into Wood’s working process due to the survival of his four-volume ledger that documents 1,211 miniatures painted by the artist between 1790 and 1808; the ledger is now in the collection of the National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The entries are remarkably thorough, frequently including information about when a work was begun and completed, its size, the colors used and their durability, the sitter’s costume, and the price charged. From 1794 Wood also attached to the ledger entries tracings of many of the miniatures. Along with the careful notes he kept, these tracings would have facilitated the making of copies or revisions, which were evidently performed with some frequency when a sitter desired a change in hairstyle or costume; the promotion of an officer necessitated an alteration of his uniform; or a miniature’s pigments proved fugitive. Wood usually used numbers to refer to the colors applied in a work, but no key for them exists, and their identity often remains a mystery.

The entry for this portrait is characteristically complete and notes that the sitter was residing at Devonshire Street in London (fig. 2). It contains an attached tracing of the miniature and records that the portrait was begun on 25 March 1801, finished on 11 April, and delivered 29 July (fig. 3). Wood’s miniatures were often delivered days after they were completed, so it is noteworthy that this work was not relinquished by Wood for more than three months after its completion. Moreover, it was received not by the sitter or a family member but by a “General Stuart,” whose relationship to Peacocke is unknown.

Wood also recorded his experiments in these books. For instance, we know that in response to the translucency of the ivory, he tried placing yellow paper and foil behind some sitters’ heads. In this portrait of Peacocke, the entry notes that white paper was placed

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3 Ibid., p. 160.
behind the sitter’s head, that he had “a West Indian complexion” and powdered hair, and was painted with an “averted eye.” Wood also noted the fact that the jacket was altered from brown to black and that he felt the black tone—laden with gum arabic to make it richer—was an “excellent effect.” The distinct gray vertical lines beneath the sitter’s chin were carefully transcribed onto the tracing. At 3¼ inches high, this miniature is on the larger end of the scale of the work produced by Wood.

Wood was traveling around England in 1801, the year that Peacocke married the wealthy Amelia Apreece, who came from an illustrious old family. Little is known about Peacocke’s family beyond the fact that his father was Marmaduke Peacocke, Esq., of London and five of Sandford’s six brothers were officers in the military. In Wood’s ledger Sandford’s portrait is numbered 5840. Portrait no. 5842 is of a “Mrs. Geo. (Rachel) Peacock,” Sandford’s sister-in-law. Amelia Apreece was also painted by Wood (no. 5864), as was her mother (no. 5865). The close proximity of these commissions suggests that they may have been related to the couple’s engagement, marriage, or imminent move to Jamaica. By January 1802 Sandford Peacocke was serving in the British military in Jamaica. In her diary Lady Maria Nugent (née Skinner), wife of General George Nugent, governor of Jamaica from 1801 to 1806, noted that she had been introduced to Peacocke at breakfast on 7 January 1802. On 30 December 1802, Lady Nugent wrote, “Mr. and Mrs. Peacocke soon joined us. She, poor thing, was so unwell, that she was obliged to remain in my room all the morning. She told me her history, and I really feel for her very much. She is lady-like, and well informed, and appears to be perfectly thrown away upon an unfeeling, speculating, foolish man, to say the least of him.” Lady Nugent was already ill disposed to Peacocke, who earlier that year had indiscreetly asked her husband to aid him by cosigning a £3,000 bill. Wood beautifully captured a hint of this hauteur in the portrait of the dashing soldier. Cory Korkow

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4 The couple’s names are variously spelled Amelia/Emily and [George-] Sandford Peacocke as well as Peacock. The most common seem to be Amelia and Sandford Peacocke. See Births and Marriages of Remarkable Persons supplement, Gentleman’s Magazine 71, part 2 (December 1801): p. 1208.
7 Ibid., p. 139.