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BASS OTIS AND HIS CRITICS
During His Early Career in Philadelphia

by

John Carpenter McKee

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Early American Culture

Summer 1995

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ABSTRACT

The portraitist Bass Otis enjoyed fame and prosperity during his early career in Philadelphia. Despite never having studied in Europe, Otis received critical acclaim among a community of older, more established artists in what was a very competitive portrait market. Two surviving critiques of exhibited Otis portraits demonstrate that the artist was perceived to possess qualities associated with artistic genius. In fact, Otis' brush work and method of lighting his subject conformed to what Sir Joshua Reynolds, one of the most famous art theorists of the time, identified as characteristics of genius in his widely-read treatise Discourses on Art. Parallels between Otis' style and the theories and portrait style of Reynolds provide an explanation of Otis' early critical success in Philadelphia. Moreover, comparisons between the two contemporaneous critiques of exhibited Otis portraits reveal a common stylistic preference among Philadelphia critics in the early nineteenth century.
PREVAILING CRITICISM IN PHILADELPHIA TO 1812

The painter Bass Otis is best known today by two works he completed early in his Philadelphia career. He painted Interior of a Smithy, which was exhibited in 1815 at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts under the title A Foundry in New England With Operatives, Machinery, Etc.¹ His lithograph Landscape: House and Trees at Waterside, published in the July 1819 issue of Analectic Magazine, established Otis as the first lithographer in America. Ironically, Interior of a Smithy and Landscape: House and Trees at Waterside are atypical of Otis's work during his long career. Otis was predominantly a portrait painter. Hundreds of extant portraits currently attributed to the artist² and the artist's own notebook underscore this point.³

The fact that Otis and his works enjoy relative obscurity today stands in sharp contrast to the fame the artist enjoyed in Philadelphia from 1812 to 1822, the first ten years he lived in the city. Reviews of Otis's exhibited works, the prominence of his portrait subjects, and his high level of recognition within the Philadelphia
artistic community indicate that Otis was then regarded as one of the most promising young American artists.

Paradoxically, Otis was more famous in his youth than in his old age and death, when his name fell into obscurity behind the fame of other Philadelphia painters like the Peales, Thomas Sully, Jacob Eichholtz, and John Neagle. While the subsequent decline of Otis's reputation is beyond the scope of this paper, this study of Otis's early career attempts to reveal what phenomena were present in Philadelphia that provided such a favorable atmosphere for Otis's success as a young artist. Was it the climate of art criticism in Philadelphia that critics, artists, and patrons alike perceived Otis as a promising example of native-born and American-trained artistic genius?

Except for those privileged enough to study art through European travel, Philadelphian artists and patrons had few opportunities to view art prior to 1812. Nonetheless, art criticism and theory were available to artists and patrons through articles appearing predominantly in two Philadelphia magazines, Analectic Magazine and The Port Folio. These articles sought to perform the dual functions of exposing the reader to art through vivid descriptions and providing the reader with vocabulary to critique and evaluate art. The degree to which published criticism influenced the collective
readers' perception of art remains unknown, but it is certain that the criticism favored some styles of painting over others. More significant to an understanding of Otis's acclaim is the language used in early nineteenth-century criticism and the sources of critical rhetoric.

Several factors support the notion that criticism influenced the way Philadelphians looked at art in the early nineteenth century. Despite its position as an "artistic" center of the new nation, Philadelphia contrasted sharply with Europe in its public and private collections of painting and sculpture. Philadelphia lacked the frequent public exhibitions, famous art collections, and professional art instruction available to European artists and patrons. As a consequence, critiques and descriptions of art appearing in magazines offered insight into the fine arts to those who otherwise had limited opportunities to cultivate their own opinions about art.

This is not meant to imply that Philadelphians lived in an environment devoid of fine art. Commissioned portraits by some of the most highly-talented American artists would have been found hanging in the houses of wealthy Philadelphians, but portraiture was not considered as "fine" an art as other genres like history or religious painting. Portraiture was the dominant subject for
American painters, and the market favored those who could produce accurate likenesses over painters of religious, historical or genre subjects. Unfortunately for American artists, most portraits were displayed in private rather than public spaces. This made it more difficult for American artists than their European counterparts to study contemporary artistic trends. Magazine articles on the fine arts provided at least some descriptions of the brushwork, arrangement, and techniques used by the acknowledged masters at the time, both living artists like Benjamin West and Renaissance artists like Titian or Veronese. Annual public exhibitions were not conducted in Philadelphia until 1811, when the Society of Artists, a union of Philadelphia painters, sculptors and engravers, held an exhibition using the galleries at the Pennsylvania Academy. Art reviews published in magazines like Analectic Magazine and The Port Folio followed the rise of regular exhibitions.

American art criticism was in an infant state in 1812. Prior to the Society of Artists First Annual Exhibition of 1811, there was little basis on which to cultivate art criticism in America. For the early nineteenth-century student bent on learning art history and criticism, the source was to be found in art theory as it was developing abroad. Treatises on European art
theory were available through American public libraries. Among the most recent and influential treatises on art in the early nineteenth century was Discourses on Art, written by Sir Joshua Reynolds. An exploration of the language of criticism surrounding Otis's early Philadelphia career confirms that the theories of Reynolds measurably impacted how writers and artists evaluated the works displayed in the newly-born public exhibitions.
THE LANGUAGE OF CRITICISM AND THE INSPIRATION OF GENIUS

For us to "see" art the same way as an early nineteenth-century viewer, it is necessary to examine theories on art existing at the time. Artists, critics and patrons alike followed notions of artistic genius derived from European writers like Sir Joshua Reynolds. As the first president of the Royal Academy in London, Reynolds profoundly influenced nineteenth-century artists, art critics, and patrons. The earliest American art academies and exhibition galleries emulated the Royal Academy in its multiple functions of providing a venue to exhibit the work of contemporary artists, to serve as an educational center for young artists, and to raise public consciousness of native artistic talent.

During his tenure as president, Reynolds passionately promoted portraiture and sought to bring its traditionally low status to a level closer to that of history painting, then considered to be the "highest" subject to which every artist aspired. Reynolds's message appealed to American artists who, despite all efforts, had difficulty securing commissions for subjects other than

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portraiture. To follow Reynolds's writings was to appreciate the artistic merit of portraits, to see them as being more than a mere record of the subject. Reynolds' popularity among Americans was ensured by his promotion of portraiture. His conviction that artistic ability stems from inherent qualities within the artist, and not from the slavish emulation of European masters, appealed to Americans who otherwise had little access to the galleries of Europe. Reynolds's influence on American art theorists is easily perceptible through a brief survey of early nineteenth-century published articles on art.

Contributors to early nineteenth-century Philadelphia magazines like The Port Folio and Analectic Magazine repeatedly referred to Reynolds in articles on art and art criticism. In context, citations of Reynolds affirm his influence on how Americans—or at least Philadelphia magazine contributors—judged art. The following commentary appeared in the April 1815 issue of Analectic Magazine:

Our artists have already attained to great excellence in portrait and miniature; and it is with pleasure and pride that we now behold an opportunity offered them of aiming a higher and bolder flight; of rising from the cold delineation of individual nature, to the dignity and invention of the higher branches of art, as aspiring to that nobleness of conception which, says Reynolds, goes beyond any thing in mere exhibition even of perfect form.11
Another article from Analectic Magazine further alludes to the influence of Reynolds on American perceptions of art. The author invokes Reynolds to justify his claim that excessive detail in painting weakens the expressiveness of the subject:

Of every large composition, even of those which are most admired, a great part may be truly said to be common place; it was with this impression that Sir Joshua Reynolds... delivered his opinion in relation to minor objects. "It is not," says he, "the eye, it is the mind which the painter of genius desires to address, nor will he waste a moment upon those smaller objects which only serve to catch the sense, to divide the attention, and to counteract his great design of speaking to the heart."12

In this case, Reynolds is cited by the anonymous critic to reinforce his point. This would imply a widespread acceptance of Reynolds among readers of Analectic Magazine.

Between 1810 and 1820, articles on art appearing in Analectic Magazine and The Port Folio frequently invoked the term "genius." Yet the fact that the term "genius" was never defined in these articles suggests that its meaning was widely understood among the educated readers of the period. Given the high regard of Reynolds's theories among Port Folio and Analectic Magazine contributors, we can then turn to his famous treatise Discourses on Art for an understanding of this
term "genius" as it was conceived in the early nineteenth century.

Discourses on Art consisted of a compilation of speeches given annually by Reynolds while he was president of the Royal Academy. Reynolds addressed the concept of genius in Discourses VI and XI of Discourses on Art. In Discourse VI, titled "Genius begins where Rules end," Reynolds provided a succinct definition of genius:

GENIUS is supposed to be a power of producing excellencies, which are out of the reach of the rules of art; a power which no precepts can teach, and which no industry can acquire...

WHAT we now call GENIUS, begins, not where the rules, abstractedly taken, end; but where known vulgar and trite rules have no longer any place.

Although Reynolds believed that cognizance of nature was a necessary part of every artist, he also cautioned artists against too close a reliance on natural models. Reynolds identified paintings produced by genius as those which expressed line, color, and movement without descending to the extremes of naturalism. He believed that minutiae could be over-wrought to the point of suppressing the subject's "inner nature:"

yet it is certain, that a nice discrimination of minute circumstances, and the punctilious delineation of them... never did confer on the Artist the character of Genius.... when the general effect only is presented to us by a skilful hand, it appears to express the objects represented in a more lively manner than the minutest resemblance would do.... let the power of a few well-chosen strokes, which supersede
labour by judgement and direction, produce a complete impression of all that the mind demands in an object...\textsuperscript{15}

Reynolds considered this "lively manner" to be the most important quality of painting, especially portraiture. He wrote that a portrait subject's character and likeness depend on artistic creativity and genius:

The excellence of Portrait-Painting... the likeness, the character, and countenance... depend more upon the general effect produced by the painter, than on the exact expression of the peculiarities, or minute discrimination of the parts.\textsuperscript{16}

Two main components of artistic genius emerge from Reynolds's discourses: freedom from detailed representation without sacrificing truthfulness, and the ability to convey the intrinsic characteristics of the subject (more than just the physical appearance) in spite of the limitations of the medium (painting).

How did Philadelphians apply "genius" in assessments of Otis's work? Only two contemporary critiques of Otis's portraits survive: a review of the 1812 Second Annual Exhibition published in the Port Folio, and comments on the 1816 Special Exhibition recorded in the diary of the Charleston sculptor John Stevens Cogdell. The two critiques, one public and one private, offer insights into the broader perception of Otis's portraits and demonstrate how the writings of Reynolds shaped these opinions.
CRITIQUES OF BASS OTIS

The Port Folio review of the Second Annual Exhibition was extensive, published in two installments and covering a large majority of the works on display.¹⁷ The Port Folio critic singled out specific characteristics in Otis's technique worthy of praise:

Nos. 1, 21, 46, 53 and 54, are portraits by Otis, a young painter of very promising talents. We perceive in his works a strength of character, force of effect, and correctness of likeness, that certainly would do credit to artists of more experience; and there is no doubt that, with proper application, Mr. Otis will become a very distinguished portrait painter.¹⁸

The catalog from the Second Annual Exhibition does not identify the subjects of the eight portraits exhibited by Otis, listing them only as "Portrait of a Lady" or "Portrait of a Gentleman" (six of the portraits were of men, and two were of women).¹⁹ Two examples of his work contemporaneous to the exhibition (but not documented to the exhibition) serve to demonstrate the stylistic manifestations which elicited praise from the Port Folio critic.²⁰

Otis's Self-Portrait (figure 1) is signed and

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Figure 1. Bass Otis. Self-Portrait. 1812. Historical Society of Delaware.

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dated "B. Otis pinx/ Jan. 7th 1812," and features a seated half-length portrait of the artist holding a calling card reading "Mr. Otis/ Philadelphia." Otis painted himself in a three-quarter pose which would become standard in his portraits painted between 1812-1822. The subject's posture is formal and erect with the shoulders back, and the face turned towards the viewer. The eyes look directly at the viewer, and the mouth is firmly set with pursed lips. The subject neither smiles nor frowns, but wears an expression of confidence and intelligence. Light is reflected off the eyes of the sitter, along high ridges in the scarf, and off the brass tacks and gold paint of the chair. The bright areas contrast sharply with the overall darkness of the portrait. The level of detail expressed in the brush work varies between areas of light and dark. Otis used exceedingly small precise strokes in areas of light, and broader, larger, and more uniform strokes in dark areas.

The same pose, expression, and brush work can be seen in Otis's 1813 portrait of Henry B. Brevoort (figure 2). The subject is shown in the seated, half-length, three-quarter pose with his shoulders back and his face turned towards the viewer. Similarly, light reflects off the same areas as seen in the artist's Self-Portrait: the eyes, the ridges in the white collar, and the metal of the
Figure 2. Bass Otis. Henry B. Brevoort. 1813. The New-York Historical Society.
brass buttons on the uniform. The brush strokes are precise and small in areas of light, like the face and collar, but larger and looser in darker areas, especially the background. Most significantly, Otis portrayed the sitter with the an expression of intelligence and confidence just as he captured the inner personality in his Self-Portrait. The attitude of the sitter is again conveyed through the direct, calm gaze of the eyes and the pursed lips.

The _Port Folio_ critic identified "strength of character" and "force of effect" in portraits by Otis. While the portraits exhibit what Reynolds would call "minute discrimination" in the face, hands, clothing, and upholstery, they do not succumb to the level of detail considered to be detrimental to the "character" of the sitter or the force of the "effect," as was criticized in the work of other artists participating in the same exhibition. The _Port Folio_ critic at once sensed a spontaneity in Otis's brush work which, when properly executed, served to heighten the effectiveness of the portrait. This endowed Otis's portraits with "character" and "effect" that was found to be lacking in the mechanical, overwrought work of artists also exhibiting at the 1812 Exhibition, artists like Thomas Lawrence, whose pictures were "touched with too heavy a hand" (26).
These critical observations conform to what Reynolds identifies as indications of genius: "the likeness, the character, and countenance... depend more upon the general effect produced by the painter, than on the exact expression of the particularities." Although it is seemingly impossible to determine what portraits Otis exhibited at the Second Annual Exhibition, his contemporaneous works of Self-Portrait and Henry B. Brevoort demonstrate a limited use of detail that was deemed desirable by Reynolds's criteria.

A comparison of a Reynolds portrait to early portraits from Otis's Philadelphia career confirm the technical similarities between their styles, and illustrate the brush work and lighting Reynolds himself used in achieving "strength of character" and "force of effect." Like Otis's Self-Portrait and Henry B. Brevoort, Reynolds's 1763 portrait of Charles Carroll of Carrollton (figure 3) exhibits a striking contrast in brush work and illumination between the face and the clothing and background. The variation in brush work and lighting draws the viewers attention to the intelligent expression of the face, a stunning image of the young ambitious Carroll. If we accept the portrait of Charles Carroll as a manifestation of what Reynolds called a "lively manner,"
Figure 3. Sir Joshua Reynolds. *Charles Carroll of Carrollton*. 1763. Yale Center for British Art.
then similarities between brush work and illumination in Reynolds and Otis portraits imply that Otis’s techniques of representation agreed with Reynolds’s recommendations for producing a portrait expressive of the sitter’s character and countenance. Otis’s brush work embodies two of the principal characteristics Reynolds associated with genius—truthfulness in appearance without naturalistic detail, and the ability to convey the inner character of the subject. The *Port Folio* critic’s comments identify these elements, especially Otis’s ability to render the subject with expressiveness.

John Stevens Cogdell, an artist and contemporary of Otis, offered a concurring opinion on exhibited Otis portraits. Visiting the Society of Artists’s Special Exhibition in 1816, Cogdell wrote in his diary:

> I must mention to you a likeness of Dr. Caldwell one of the most expressive heads in the Room painted by Mr. Bass Otis... his style is the crossing & hatching apparently done with great haste... a good head also of Rev. Abercrombie by Bass Otis not exactly in the style of that of Dr. Caldwell- in this there is an effort at action- that of Dr. Caldwell is seated and still...24

During his visits to Philadelphia in 1816 and 1826, Cogdell made detailed notes of the exhibitions and artists’s studios he visited.25 Cogdell also wrote on the specifics of Otis’s brush work, and these observations reinforce the notion that Otis painted in a manner favored
by Reynolds. The similarities between the two criticisms—the writer in Port Folio and Cogdell's diary notes—separated by four years's time, gives reason to acknowledge a common public critique of Otis existing during his early Philadelphia career.

The portrait of Dr. [Charles] Caldwell described by Cogdell is not known today, but another Otis portrait from the same exhibition, the portrait of William Branch Giles (figure 4), is available to us in the collection of the Virginia Historical Society. This portrait features the same pose, expression, treatment of light, and brush work as Otis's Self-Portrait and Henry B. Brevoort. Otis used the half-length, three-quarter pose, and the sitter wears the same confident expression. The eyes look directly at the viewer, and the mouth is firmly set. Light reflects off two points in the eyes and off the ridges in the white collar. The brush strokes are small and precise around the head and neck, and larger and lose in the background.

In his comments, Cogdell observed both the expressiveness of Dr. Caldwell while also noting the specifics of Otis's brush work. William Branch Giles provides an example of the "crossing & hatching apparently done with great haste" described in the Caldwell portrait. The sky in the portrait background is represented with
feather-like, large brush strokes. In Discourse XI, Reynolds discussed this very technique as a sign of genius. According to Reynolds, using naturalistic representation in secondary areas like the background detracted from the expression of the primary subject:

EXCELLENCE in any one of these parts of art will never be acquired by an artist, unless he has the habit of looking upon objects at large, and observing the effect which they have on the eye when it is dialated, and employed upon the whole, without seeing any one of those parts distinctly. It is by this that we obtain the ruling characteristic, and that we imitate it by short and dexterous methods.28

Thus, Reynolds advocated that peripheral details be painted as they would appear to a viewer whose attention is centered on the face of the sitter. Otis concentrated on the face and the hands, areas most expressive of the sitter's confidence and intelligence. The variation of brush strokes as the eye moves away from the face results is an illusionistic device that artificially focusses the face and intentionally blurs the background. The face and shirt collar of William Branch Giles are shown with much greater detail than the ruffle on his stomach, the curtain, or the sky in the background. The viewer's attention does not easily drift to secondary areas of the portrait, because, if nothing else, there is not much else to look at beyond the face, the hands, and the highlighted areas of the clothing.
The similarities between Cogdell's observations and Reynolds's discourses does not necessarily mean that Otis was following the advice of Reynolds. In fact, no known evidence implies that Otis was intentionally following the recommendations of Reynolds. The comments of Cogdell and the *Port Folio* critic merely demonstrate that Otis' artistic technique conformed to characteristics considered by Reynolds, and possibly Philadelphia critics, to be indicative of genius. Otis's formula of representation, incorporating techniques embraced by Reynolds, remained largely consistent throughout his early career in Philadelphia, attested by other portraits dated 1812-1822. This comparison between the two surviving critiques of Otis establishes the strongest quality perceived in his portraits: the expressiveness of the subject's character, or the "force of effect." The consistent brush work, illumination, and pose comprised a successful formula employed by Otis throughout his early career in Philadelphia. Whether the artist's technique conformed to Reynolds's writings by coincidence or intention is of secondary significance to the results—the production of expressive, confident, strong portraits which earned Otis his reputation in Philadelphia. His acclaim was acquired despite Otis never having studied in Europe, his youth in age and career, and his competition
in what was possibly the most competitive portrait market in America.

Otis arrived in Philadelphia at a time when patrons were demanding more from a portraitist than an accurate representation. They desired a work of fine art as well as a familiar image. Otis's success demonstrates his understanding that the expressiveness of the subject, the quality singled out by both the Port Folio critic and Cogdell, was essential to a favorable reception of a portrait.
THE STYLISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF BASS OTIS, 1812-1827

The foundation of Bass Otis's success during his first fifteen years in Philadelphia rested on stylistic choices which conformed to notions of artistic genius articulated in the writings of Sir Joshua Reynolds. The Port Folio critic and John Stevens Cogdell singled out a "force of effect" in the works of Otis, that distinguished his work from that of many of his artistic rivals. Otis created this effect in his paintings through a discrimination of brush work and a formulaic posture and expression which enjoyed positive reception at public exhibitions. Although the carefully selected variance in brush work which elicited praise from critics diminished over time, Otis's reputation as an artist did not lessen until much later in his career. Otis's style accommodated the dual demands to produce an accurate likeness while creating a work of art possessing qualities associated with the higher branches of painting. Otis was held up by the Port Folio critic as an example of the rising genius among American artists, a fact which would have been
desirable to those interested in fostering and promoting native talent. Cogdell identified in the work of Otis techniques of representation that were considered fashionable in early nineteenth-century Philadelphia. Otis's habit of varying his brush strokes between primary and secondary areas was not only promoted by Reynolds, but also practiced by painters like Thomas Sully and Gilbert Stuart, who were among the most famous American artists when Otis first arrived in Philadelphia. His ability to balance that fashionableness with a flattering and accurate likeness ensured his success and fame among Philadelphia patrons.

In his diary, Cogdell contrasted the poses seen in the portraits of Dr. Caldwell and Rev. James Abercrombie (Davis cat. no. 22). The pose of Rev. Abercrombie differs greatly from that of the Self-Portrait and Henry B. Brevoort, but the brush work and lighting techniques remain consistent. Cogdell remarked on the portrait of Abercrombie: "in this there is an effort at action." Rev. Abercrombie is shown seated, but with his torso oriented squarely towards the viewer. Otis painted Abercrombie leaning forward in his chair, and the head is bowed slightly as if awaiting a reply. The gaze looks down and to the side, as opposed to directly viewer as seen in the other portraits. His right hand forms an open gesture,
while his left points to a page in a book on an adjacent table. Abercrombie's countenance bears less of the confidence seen in the other portraits, and instead exhibits an expression of inquisitiveness. The "effort at action" results from the sense of movement in the portrait, both in the gesture of the sitter, but also the temporal elements of the painting. Unlike most Otis portraits which possess an overwhelming quality of stillness and formality, the portrait of Reverend Abercrombie features a pose more spontaneous, as if the subject was caught in a moment of conversation with the viewer.

The brush work and lighting techniques used in Reverend Abercrombie are typical to Otis portraits from his early Philadelphia period. The lighting and brush work are precise around the face and the hands, and the brightest reflections are off the metal in the spectacles and the creases in the collar and cuffs. The background and robe are represented with dark colors and broad brush strokes, which serve to keep the viewer's attention focussed on the areas of greatest expression. Cogdell's observation that the pose is unusual for Otis holds true for his portraits from his early Philadelphia period, most of which feature poses seen in either his Self-Portrait or those of Henry B. Brevoort and William Branch Giles.
The format Otis selected for the portrait of Abercrombie is atypical of Otis portraits painted during the period of 1812-1827. Beyond the difference in pose, the expression of the subject lacks the most common characteristic of Otis sitters—an attitude of boldness and indifference towards the viewer which translates into an air of strength, nobility, and self-assuredness. Abercrombie appears to engage the viewer, whereas other Otis subjects meet the viewer's gaze with reserve and superiority. Although the level of lighting differs between portraits, the techniques of representation in the brushwork and light reflection show little deviation. However, change over time was apparent in Otis's work. A brief survey of works from Otis's early Philadelphia period, however, reveals how his formula of representation subtly changed as Otis matured stylistically.

The portrait of the artist John Neagle (Davis cat. no. 8) may have been painted during the months in 1815 when Neagle studied under Otis. The light level and amount of detail differs from the same in the portrait of Commodore Thomas Truxton (Davis cat. no. 16), painted approximately two years later. Like the portrait of William Branch Giles, the portrait of Truxton was commissioned by Joseph Delaplaine. Otis probably painted the portrait of Neagle, however, without a commission. It
is important to note that although the Self-Portrait and John Neagle were painted under different economic incentives than William Branch Giles and Commodore Thomas Truxton—commissioned portraits which had to please others versus uncommissioned portraits—the pose and expression of the sitters remain consistent in Otis portraits. But a comparison of brush work illustrates some characteristics of representation which evolved over time.

In Otis's work, differences emerge through the treatment of secondary areas. The portrait of John Neagle featured precise brush strokes in the areas adjacent to the face, like the collar and the hair. Clothing and the background is represented by broad feather-like brush strokes. A shift in technique is perceptible in the portrait of Commodore Truxton. Here, small precise brush strokes are found in areas outside the face. In this portrait, Otis depicts the intricacies of the uniform, placing more emphasis on the entire costume than seen previously. Less contrast in brush work exists between the face and the clothing. As a result, the attention of the viewer is not as sharply focussed on the expression of the sitter as seen in the portrait John Neagle.

A continuation of this trend is visible in the 1821 portrait of Charles Miner (Davis cat. no. 26). The pose, eyes, lips, and lighting are reminiscent of Otis's
earlier work, but here the artist used an even greater level of detail in secondary areas. The folds of the vest are represented with brush strokes which are almost as small and precise as those used for the face, the hands, and the collar. The face and hands contrast in lighting with the clothing and the background, but the brush work has become increasingly more uniform than in earlier portraits.

By 1823, even less variance in brush stroke existed between primary and secondary areas. Otis endowed secondary areas like clothing with increasingly greater detail than previously, while at the same time reduced the detail of the face and hands. The portraits of Priscilla Cobb Smith (Davis cat. no. 34) and Calvin Smith (Davis cat. no. 35) exhibit naturalistic representations of their clothing and the furniture, yet Otis used broader brush strokes in the faces and hands. The brush work on the hand of Calvin Smith is virtually identical to that on his vest, and Otis actually used more precise brush strokes on the scarf than the hands. Moreover, the brightest section of the portrait is in the area around the collar and scarf, not in the eyes of the sitter. As a result, the gaze of the viewer is directed to the sitter's chest. The same phenomena occurs in the portrait of Priscilla Cobb Smith. Her hairpiece and lacy shawl contain both the
brightest illumination and greatest detail of the canvas. The expressions of the sitters, although identical in the treatment of the eyes and lips, do not carry the forcefulness of Otis's earlier portraits, the unfortunate result of Otis using naturalistic detail in representing secondary areas, and a practice Reynolds specifically warned against.

Not all Otis portraits painted after 1820 exhibit this emphasis on clothing over the face and hands. The portraits of Thomas Leiper (Davis cat. no. 40) and Reverend Joseph Eastburn (Davis cat. no. 44) attest to this fact. The clothing of Thomas Leiper is hardly distinguishable from the dark background. However, the areas which once reflected the brightest light in Otis's portraits 1812-1816 do not shine with the brilliance as before. The brass tacks in the chair upholstery, the folds in the scarf, and the reflections of the eyes, contrast less with their surroundings than in the paintings Self-Portrait, Henry B. Brevoort, and William Branch Giles. Similarly, less variation can be seen between the brush work of the face of the sitter and the secondary areas, which continues throughout the 1820s to diminish the effect of the sitter's confident expression.

A comparison between the 1826 portrait of Reverend Eastburn and John Neagle summarizes the change in Otis
portraits over his early Philadelphia period. Although the pose and expression of the sitters remained fairly constant over time, the brush work evolved from being highly varied within the portrait to being relatively uniform. The primary areas became less precise, while the secondary areas were treated with an increasing attention to naturalistic detail. Unfortunately, there is no surviving contemporary criticism of Otis after 1820. While such stylistic changes may not have affected his status among Philadelphia artists and patrons, it is certain that Otis portraits painted fifteen years after his arrival in Philadelphia contained fewer characteristics than his early Philadelphia works that Reynolds would have associated with artistic genius.
NOTES

1. It has frequently been stated that Interior of a Smithy was inspired by Otis's earlier apprenticeship to a Massachusetts scythe maker (Rutledge 157, Hendricks 18, and Davis 42).

2. Despite the large number of portraits currently attributed to Otis, connoisseurship on the known characteristics of Otis's hand remains in a youthful state. The Catalogue of American Portraits in Washington, DC, identifies 116 portraits, dating from the entire span of Otis's career, currently believed to be the work of the artist. However, very few (twenty-one, at the most) of the surviving portraits are recorded in Otis's notebook. Taking this into consideration, the number of attributed portraits listed in the Catalogue of American Portraits seems inflated. Otis was in fact a fairly precise record keeper: a comparison of his exhibited works and his notebook demonstrates this. The great majority of works exhibited 1815-1854 can be found recorded in his notebook. Exceptions to this general precept can be found with works— all currently unlocated—listed in exhibition catalogues, like the Washington Family (exhibited in the Pennsylvania Academy in 1819), John Stock (Pennsylvania Academy 1821), Bishop White (Pennsylvania Academy 1823 and Peale's New York Museum in 1825); and Stephen Moore, Mrs. Rankin, Mrs. Welch, and Reverdy Johnson (all exhibited at Peale's Baltimore Museum in 1825). Similarly, almost all extant signed portraits from 1815-1854 appear in the notebook. The few exceptions to this are Mary Rogers Sarmiento (owned by Nicholas Biddle); John Greenleaf Whittier (Haverford College Library); Thomas Garrett (Historical Society of Delaware); and Virginia and George Simmons (Museum of Fine Arts). This evidence underscores the need for a re-examination of Otis, ideally in the form of a monograph and an up-dated checklist. For the purposes of this study, I have limited my survey to Otis portraits painted between 1812-1827 with the most
3. The notebook is owned by the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts. It contains material spanning the years 1815-1854. Otis recorded business transactions; notes on painting; sketches; and scattered names and addressees of patrons in this notebook.

4. Otis was admitted to the Society of Artists upon first arriving in Philadelphia. The Society of Artists' membership was limited to forty, indicating that Otis was respected among his fellow artists. Otis received a favorable review of work exhibited at the Second Annual Exhibition, held within a year of his arriving in Philadelphia from New York. During his early career in Philadelphia, Otis was commissioned to paint some of the wealthiest and famous Americans of his time, men like Thomas Jefferson, Casper Wistar, James Barker, and Stephen Girard. A list of his patrons alone would testify to Otis's high reputation during his lifetime.

5. In her doctoral dissertation, Stephanie Wasielewski Fay documented the act of describing art through nineteenth-century writing.

6. Occasionally, exhibitions were held in private houses, as exemplified by the 1773 exhibition of the artist Matthew Pratt during his stay in London. According to a 1773 advertisement in the Williamsburg Gazette, the exhibition was held in the house of Mrs. Vobe, and marks the first known public exhibition held in America. However, the exhibition did not feature works by Pratt or other contemporary American artists, but consisted entirely of copies Pratt made of works by European artists and Benjamin West during his stay in London.

7. The seeds of Philadelphia art exhibitions were planted by Charles Willson Peale at the end of the eighteenth century. At a meeting with artists and financial supporters on December 29, 1794, Peale established "a school or, academy of architecture, sculpture, painting," the first of its kind in America. Called the Columbianum, the school allowed artists and art patrons to view works of American art. Unfortunately, disagreements among the artists and sponsors caused the Columbianum to fail its first year, but not before its First Annual Exhibition ran for six weeks in the Senate Chamber of the State House. Opening on May 22, the exhibition featured 137 works of painting, sculpture, drawing, and architectural design. In the nineteenth century, the New-York Academy of the Fine Arts opened in 1802, followed three years later by
the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. In their early years, these institutions did not conduct public exhibitions, but instead collected works of European art and casts of antique sculpture for the private study of their subscribers (Gertz xxii).

8. The inquisitive scholar, patron or artist would not have found a definition for "art criticism" in an early nineteenth-century encyclopedia, which implies that art criticism was not considered a mainstream body of knowledge at the time exhibition reviews began to appear in Philadelphia magazines. Abraham Rees's *Cyclopedia; or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature* does not contain a heading for "art criticism." Rather it identifies "philosophical criticism," "theological criticism," "political criticism," "literary criticism," "grammatical criticism," "criticism of Antiques," "sacred criticism," "conjectural criticism," and "musical criticism." The lack of "art criticism" demonstrates the relative youth of an organized discipline of art criticism.

9. Literary criticism attracted far more attention than the arts in the early nineteenth century, undoubtedly due to the fact that literature and poetry were more accessible to Americans than the fine arts. Likewise, the relative youth of organized art associations and paucity of professionally-trained artists made it easier for criticism to attend prose and poetry, both of which had longer artistic traditions in America than painting or sculpture.

10. Open to the public through subscriptions and memberships, libraries owned European treatises on art. However, eighteenth- and nineteenth century library catalogues show that even those were numerically minuscule in relation to other library holdings. In 1810, the Library Company of Philadelphia contained more art treatises than any other American library. The Library Company owned thirty titles on art and aesthetics, ten more than the Library Society in Charleston or the Society Library in New York. The Library Company of Baltimore contained sixteen treatises, the Harvard College Library owned twelve, and all other American libraries owned less than ten works on art theory and aesthetics. While this reinforces the long-held notion that Philadelphia was the most "artistic" American city of the Federal era, thirty titles was a tiny percentage of Library Company's collection. The Library Company of Philadelphia contained 18,391 volumes in 1800 (*The Americana*, n. pag.) By 1835,
the library held over 27,000 volumes (Encyclopaedia Americana, VII 536). The fact that a mere thirty titles on art and aesthetics existed in the most art-oriented library company testifies to the predominance of other subjects over art criticism. The ten most common theoretical works owned by American libraries were: A Philosophical Enquiry by Burke; Characteristicks by Shaftesbury; The Art of Painting by Du Fresnoy; Essays on the Principles of Taste by Alison; An Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting by Webb; Discourses on Art by Reynolds; An Essay on Painting by Piles; and A Treatise of Painting by Leonardo (Schimmelman 172). The Library Company of Philadelphia owned copies of each of the above works.

11. Analectic Magazine 5 (April 1815) 347.


13. The fifteen discourses were published in 1797 in London. Reynolds's discourses first arrived in Philadelphia in the late eighteenth century, published in pamphlet form. The first pamphlet to be recorded in the Library Company of Philadelphia was in 1789. The two volume 1797 compilation of Discourses on Art appears in the Library Company's 1798 catalogue, indicating that the library acquired a copy as soon as it was available (Schimmelman 151).


17. Member artists of the Pennsylvania Academy founded the Society of Artists in 1810. By then the Pennsylvania Academy was in its fifth year, but it had fallen short on two goals written into its 1805 charter. Unfortunately for Philadelphia artists, the two neglected areas were the establishment of an art academy and public exhibitions promoting local artists. It was under these circumstances that a group of artists formed the Society of Artists, which entered into a contractual agreement with the Pennsylvania Academy whereby certain privileges would be exchanged for money. For two thousand dollars annually, the Society of Artists was given access to the collection of European works, studio space for the artists, and the use of exhibition galleries for six weeks every spring.

The Society of Artists held their First Annual
Exhibition in 1811, and featured works by contemporary Philadelphia artists. In 1812, Bass Otis moved from New York to Philadelphia, where he faced keen competition among artists like the Peale Family, Thomas Sully, and Thomas Lawrence. He nonetheless established himself among Philadelphia artists soon after his arrival. He was unanimously elected to the Society of Artists in the spring of 1812, and exhibited eight works in the Second Annual Exhibition, held later that spring.

The Port Folio published more articles on art than any other magazine in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Founded in 1801, the magazine waxed poetic on famous American artists like Benjamin West, Thomas Sully, Jonathan Trumbull, Gilbert Stuart, and John Singleton Copley. Descriptions and criticism often praised works on public display, such as West's *Christ Healing the Sick* and the works *Death on a Pale Horse* and *Paul and Barnabas* displayed at the Pennsylvania Hospital. However, art was a minor topic even in the Port Folio, in which articles on travel writing, fiction, poetry, literary criticism, theater criticism, politics, mathematics, and science competed for the reader's attention. For this study, however, the Port Folio is vital in that it published the 1812 review of the Second Annual Exhibition which praised the works of Otis.

In the early nineteenth century, there was no resident American "art critic," per se, who regularly contributed to magazines. When art criticism appeared in magazines like the Port Folio, it was written by someone who generally wrote on other subjects (like philosophy, politics, literature, etc.). The current knowledge on Port Folio contributors is that they were a group of lawyers, doctors, dandies, and other professionals who wrote criticism based on their extra-professional interests, but no one was paid for their articles, except the editor himself. Albert Smyth identified many Port Folio contributors and the pseudonyms under which they published (108-145). Port Folio writers predominantly belonged to a literary club called the "Tuesday Club," which included the magazine's founder and first editor Joseph Dennie. Members of the Tuesday Club shared a love of literature, and articles in the Port Folio were customarily authored by persons operating outside their professional realm. For instance, a medical professor might contribute a translation from Greek or a lawyer may submit an original poem. Although most of the articles were unsigned, no evidence suggests that the author of the 1812 review or other articles of art criticism were anything but generalists in various branches of higher learning.
Fortunately, magazine writers contributing articles on art sometimes identified one important theorist influencing their critique. The Philadelphia magazines The Port Folio and Analectic Magazine reveal that Sir Joshua Reynolds was among the most influential art critics in the early nineteenth century. This becomes significant as one examines the Port Folio and its 1812 review of the Second Annual Exhibition.

The most critical factor in understanding the message of the 1812 review lies in the language used to describe works by Otis and other artists. Readers and critics would have shared a closed system of understanding about certain terms and words which carried slightly different meaning than today. The 1812 review does not merely praise Otis, but does so in a manner that communicates specific inferences to the state of the artist's mind. The reviewer implied that Otis was an artist of "genius," a term which held specific meaning to a reader of The Port Folio or Analectic Magazine. An examination of the review, its language, and its source is necessary for a deeper understanding of how a Port Folio subscriber may have perceived Otis through the words of his critic.


20. It is revealing of art criticism in Philadelphia at that time that Otis received high praise in comparison to some other artists who participated in the same exhibition, like Thomas Birch and Thomas Lawrence, Rembrandt Peale, and Thomas Sully.

Any reader acquainted with Reynolds's theories would have recognized in the Port Folio criticism qualities thought to be indicative of genius. The "strength of character" and force of effect" appear to derive from Reynolds's opinion that an effective portrait conveys personality invisible in a purely naturalistic representation. Considering the negative comments made about other exhibiting artists who produced over-labored and excessively detailed paintings, the lack of such criticism for Otis, a relative amateur compared to Rembrandt Peale, Thomas Sully or Thomas Lawrence, implies that his "correctness of likeness" derives from Otis successfully capturing the personalities, as well as the general appearance, of his subjects. Otis apparently did not fall into the trap of over-working his portraits.

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21. The writer criticized artists who did not demonstrate a familiarity with nature, paid too much attention to minute detail, and failed in their expression of "inner character." The landscapes of Thomas Birch were deemed to be over-labored and unnatural:

...he has bestowed much more care and labour on them than we have witnessed in any other of his works, and had that pains been bestowed from a close observance of nature in the individual parts of the particular views he has meant to represent, we will make free to affirm that, with less labour, they would have been superior to what they are (26).

Similarly, the reviewer believed Thomas Lawrence to have painted with too much attention to detail, and again suggested a closer observance of nature for improvement:

Mr. Lawrence's pictures are hard; the colouring is monotonous, his trees and the foliage altogether is too formal, and touched with too heavy a hand. We would recommend him to study some of the best pictures he can find of the old masters, endeavoring at the same time to compare their productions with the appearance of nature, and apply them together to his purpose (28).

Reading the Port Folio reviewer's criticism of other artists confirms that a close observance of nature was perceived to be one of the most significant characteristics distinguishing a good painting. Rembrandt Peale's Roman Daughter lacked naturalism according to the review:

The female figure... is far from being graceful, and conveys but a faint idea of that extreme delicacy and beauty so perceivable in the female figures of the ancients. ...The drapery of the female figure seems to stick to the body (20).

The Lady of the Lake by Thomas Sully also appeared unnatural to the Port Folio critic:
The figure of the lady is by far too large; the size of it destroys the grandeur of the scene, which conveys but a faint idea of the stupendous rocks and mountains. The figure in the background, evidently intended to appear at some considerable distance, according to the rules of perspective is too large: and the water represents better a mill-race than a lake (21).

These fragments of the review present the characteristics deemed laudable and faulty to the critical eye of a—presumably well-educated—nineteenth-century critic. The reviews of Thomas Birch, Lawrence, Rembrandt Peale, and Sully show that a close observance of nature while maintaining a degree of spontaneity (or, freedom from excessive detail) designated superior artistic ability.

22. Reynolds 200.

23. John Stevens Cogdell was a lawyer-turned sculptor who travelled widely along the Eastern Seaboard visiting exhibitions and artists's studios.

24. Diary of John Stevens Cogdell in the Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Ephemera, Winterthur Library, Winterthur, DE.

25. Cogdell's criticisms of artists participating in the same exhibition augment his approval of Otis. On the same grounds that Cogdell admired Otis, he criticized Sully's portraits of Cooke for giving to much detail to secondary figures, thereby reducing the expressive strength his main subject:

...our objection to this picture is- that the artists has by an unnecessary representation of a witch figure just at the back of the Wonder of the stage- broke and divided the attention & irresistible is the effect- that our Eye cant be kept upon the subject without being torn away by this graceful figure behind...

In the opinions of both Cogdell and the Port Folio critic, artists whose styles diverged from Reynolds's conception
of artistic genius received negative criticism, while Otis, who was perceived to possess qualities Reynolds associated with genius, won praise. Opinions of the two critics, separated by time and profession, affirm that Otis was considered a promising young talent within the competitive artistic environment of early nineteenth-century Philadelphia.

26. Charles Caldwell ("M.D. 97 South Fourth"), editor of The Port Folio, is the only "Dr. Caldwell" in the 1816 Philadelphia Directory.

27. It is significant that Otis employed this approach in pose, illumination, and brush work for three portraits painted under different circumstances. His Self-Portrait was probably uncommissioned, while the portrait of Henry B. Brevoort was commissioned by the sitter or a relative. William Branch Giles was commissioned by the Philadelphia publisher Joseph Delaplaine for his biography Delaplaine's Repository of the Lives and Portraits of Distinguished American Characters (Knoles 85). The fact that he chose the same formula for the three portraits implies that it successfully satisfied the requirements of both commemorative and private portraits, or that the artist sought to endow every sitter with the expressiveness and attitude with which he represented himself.


29. This and all other portraits discussed in the Appendix are illustrated in: Davis, Gainor B. Bass Otis: Painter, Portraitist and Engraver. Wilmington: Historical Society of Delaware, 1978. Numbers appearing in parentheses following each portrait refer to the catalogue number in this work.

30. Davis 41.
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