

Pat Lyon at the Forge: Portrait of an American Blacksmith

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John Neagle's *Pat Lyon at the Forge*; 1826-1827; Oil on canvas; 93" x 68"
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Herman and Zoe Oliver Sherman Fund

Introduction

The portrait of Pat Lyon by the artist, John Neagle, revolutionized the realm of American portraiture. It is the first known portrait depicting a laborer at work. Pat Lyon's personal story, the social climate of early America, and his pride in being a working blacksmith formed the basis of his choice to be portrayed in this way. *Pat Lyon at the Forge* demonstrates not only a new style of painting and subject, but also a new attitude towards the laborer and his place in society.

Early American Portraiture

American portraiture, in the decades following the revolution, documents for us a history of the burgeoning nation's attitudes and ideals. While we see continuation of the artistic styles of the Old World, there is preference for New World content. An increasingly flourishing middle class fed the American portrait market through its early colonial days in the seventeenth century through to the nineteenth, where it successfully competed

with the new genres of landscape and still life, yet still managed to maintain an approximately 90% majority of all paintings commissioned.¹

From the onset of portrait-painting in the American colonies at the end of the seventeenth century, there was already a continuation of the styles of Europe. The period, dominated by American artists such as Charles Willson Peale and Ralph Earl, is strikingly reminiscent of European artistic taste, albeit one of a preceding generation. This divergence might have stemmed from the time separating the early colonists' struggle in a primitive settlement to the relative comfort they enjoyed a generation later, after the firm establishment of the colonies. A painter, moving from Europe to the harsh life of the early colonies, would only have been able to return to painting years after his immigration, at which point, he would have been reproducing portraits from memories of his younger years, a previous European style that would have since gone out of fashion in Europe.² It was not until the very end of the eighteenth century that portrait-painting on both sides of the Atlantic would be revived with an entirely new style. This new style, originating in Europe, spread to America in 1793, when the highly-acclaimed master Gilbert Stuart returned after spending eighteen years in London and Dublin. With his return, he brought with him a proclivity for fluid brush strokes and elegant subjects and it became popular wherever he traveled. His influence can easily be traced in the work of the artists he encountered as he traveled around the country: New York, 1793-1795; Philadelphia, 1795-1803; Washington 1803-1805; and Boston 1805 to his death in 1828.³

The Artist: John Neagle

One artist, in whose work Gilbert Stuart's influence is obvious, was American-born John Neagle (1796-1865). As a boy, Neagle received a little instruction in art from a classmate named Petticolas, who later became an artist of some renown in Virginia. But after his skills quickly surpassed those of his young master, he was instructed for a short time in the drawing school of Signor Pietre Ancora, an Italian painter, and later, as an apprentice to Thomas Wilson, a coach- and ornamental-painter in Philadelphia. Many of America's first artists were either self-taught or had very little instruction, most of them beginning as house-, sign- or coach-painters.⁴ It was while Neagle was apprenticed to Wilson, around the age of nineteen, that he first met Bass Otis, a Philadelphia portrait painter and engraver from whom Wilson was receiving painting lessons. Neagle customarily carried Wilson's palettes and brushes to and from Otis' studio, so Otis offered to give him a few of his own lessons. In 1815, during his short, two-month study there, Otis painted the portrait of his student depicted below, now the property of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. It was also during this time at the Otis studio that Neagle was fortunate to meet the prominent artist Thomas Sully. Sully began their relationship by inviting Neagle to visit his gallery and study his paintings. After a period of instruction under Sully, Neagle attempted to start a

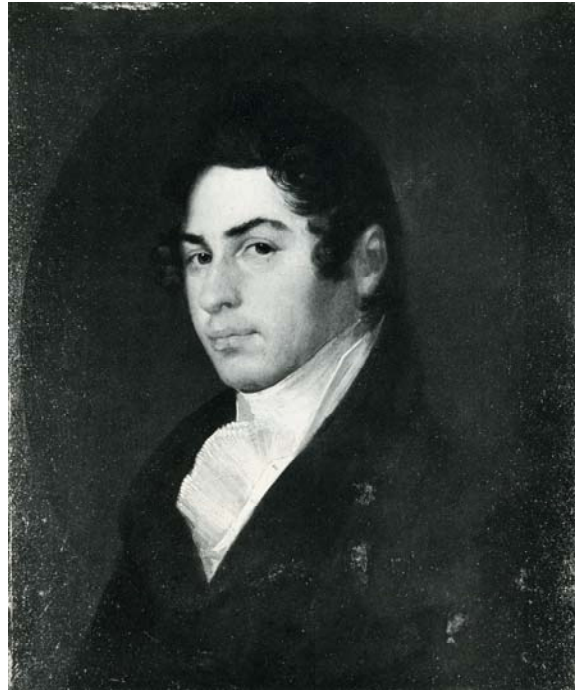
1 Craven, Bass Otis: Painter, Portraitist and Engraver, 25

2 Dresser 31

3 Craven, Bass Otis: Painter, Portraitist and Engraver, 25-26

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livelihood painting portraits in both Kentucky and Louisiana, but to no avail. He eventually found his way back to Philadelphia to start what would become a very successful painting career. It was in 1826 when Neagle received the commission of his lifetime, the portrait of Patrick Lyon.



Bass Otis' *John Neagle*; c.1815; Oil on wood panel; 22" x 19"
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; Gift of Garrett C. Neagle

The Blacksmith: Patrick Lyon

Patrick Lyon (1779-1829) was a Philadelphia blacksmith of some reputation and wealth. Born in London, he moved to America to establish a smithing business there. In addition to blacksmithing, he also built fire engines and was renowned for his locksmithing. Early in his career, the Bank of Pennsylvania commissioned him to make the locks for their vault and in 1798, when it was robbed of over \$160,000, suspicion immediately fell on him. 1798 was the same year that yellow fever plagued the region and therefore, Lyon was away from Philadelphia, in Delaware, with his assistant. Upon his return and learning of the accusations against him, he went to prove his innocence to the bank's president, cashier and alderman. Despite an undeniable alibi for his whereabouts, they insisted that he was at the least an accomplice and had him imprisoned under a large bail. Unable to meet the bail, Lyon remained in the Walnut Street Gaol for three months. It was later discovered that the robbery had actually been perpetrated by the bank's porter and a carpenter, who returned almost all of the stolen money, the porter having died of yellow fever shortly after the robbery. Upon his release, Lyon sued the bank's directors and was eventually granted a sum of \$9,000 for the damages to his smithing business and reputation. It is unclear whether this sum was the foundation of his fortune, but he was able to recover fully from the injury to his business and went on to amass considerable wealth.

The Portrait: *Pat Lyon at the Forge*

Pat Lyon at the Forge, or as it is formally known, *Full length Portrait of Mr. Patrick Lyon representing him as engaged at his anvil*, is a large oil on canvas of dimensions 93" by 68". It was painted between the years of 1826 and 1827 and is owned by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (Herman and Zoe Oliver Sherman Fund). There is one enlarged (69" by 95") replica from 1829 by Neagle with some changes and additions, owned by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. The magnitude of this portrait lies in the fact that it depicts Pat Lyon dressed not as a gentleman, as was almost exclusively customary, but as a laborer, in leather apron, no jacket, his sleeves rolled up, at work at his anvil. In the background, an assistant stokes the forge and through the window peeks a small cupola. Although the cupola is usually assumed to belong to the Walnut Street Gaol, where Lyon was imprisoned, it is more likely Carpenters' Hall, where the Bank of Pennsylvania was housed at the time of its robbery.⁵ Lyon's blacksmithing tools are carefully painted as exact as Neagle could make them; at the time of the painting, he confided in his friend John Sartain, an engraver, that his anxiety had made him meticulously reproduce all of the smith's tools, going so far as to measure them.⁶ These tools, so faithfully rendered, were the source of great praise for Neagle from contemporary critics. In a June 1827 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*, the editor Chandler related that they were reproduced "with a fidelity that would have done credit to the superior acquaintance in such implements, of Otis."⁷ [This comparison stems from an early piece of Otis', entitled *Interior of a Smithy*. The piece, completed around 1815, is supposedly painted from Otis' childhood memories of a foundry in New England, where he was apprenticed. Otis' influence most likely did appear in the Neagle painting, but the Otis work differs profoundly, in that it was a genre composition, not a portrait.] Neagle's piece received other, even greater, praise during his lifetime. A Boston artist, known only under the initials D.F., declared that "the novelty of the subject, and felicity of its execution" made it "the most unique portrait that had appeared before the public."⁸ Today it is remembered as one of the period's greatest examples of its particular genre.

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6 Fielding 10

7 *Saturday Evening Post*, unidentified issue of June 1827 in Scrapbook I, HSP. Cited from Torchia 84.

8 D.F., *Evening Gazette*, 31 May 1828. Neagle identified the author only as a "Boston artist." Cited from Torchia 84.