Pastels by Gerrit Schipper in the Metropolitan Museum

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This article represents an abridgment and a revision of a manuscript essay submitted to the Metropolitan Museum Journal in 2002 by the late David W. Meschutt, former curator of art at the West Point Museum. At the time of his death, in July 2005, Dr. Meschutt was amending and revising his analysis of portraits in the Metropolitan Museum by or attributed to the pastelist James Sharples, to one of his followers, or to members of the Sharples family. Dr. Meschutt’s effort to reassign certain portraits to specific members of the family remained in a provisional state at his death, which to verify would require considerable further study. He did, however, convincingly distinguish two portraits in the group as the work of a contemporary practitioner of pastel portraiture independent of the Sharples family. What follows is a revision of that part of the original manuscript which argues for the reattribution.

The Museum’s recently published catalogue of American drawings and watercolors lists and reproduces ten pastel portraits—six of them in profile, four in three-quarter view—credited to the English immigrant artist James Sharples (ca. 1751–1811), to Sharples or his wife, Ellen Wallace (1760–1849), and to his son, James Sharples Jr. (ca. 1788–1839), as well as one portrait attributed to a “Follower of James Sharples.” The task of differentiating the hands of the four Sharpleses who practiced pastel portraiture in America (the fourth was Felix, Ellen’s son by a previous marriage) has proved challenging: nuances of draftsmanship, pastel technique, and expression are discernible, but do not boldly distinguish individual style in a family enterprise where consistency of approach was paramount to success. James, the father, set the standard (Figure 1), and the Museum preserves four portraits reliably attributed to his hand. At least four other portraits, three of them at present given to James Sharples or Ellen Wallace Sharples and one to James Sharples Jr., warrant careful reconsideration. And two—Dorothea Hart (Figure 2), currently attributed to James Sharples or Ellen Wallace Sharples, and Peter Labagh (Figure 3), currently given to a “Follower of James Sharples”—may be confidently reassigned to the hand of the Dutch-born artist Gerrit Schipper (1775–ca. 1830).

A native of Kromenie, near Amsterdam, Schipper may have developed his talent in Brussels and Paris, where he lived in the 1790s. He emigrated to New York in May 1802, just a few months after the return of the Sharples family to their native England. Schipper

Figure 1. James Sharples (ca. 1751–1811). Albert Gallatin, ca. 1796. Pastel on light gray wove paper, 23.8 x 18.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Miss Josephine L. Stevens, 1968 (08.144)
worked initially in Charleston, South Carolina, but soon moved north, pursuing portrait commissions in Boston, Salem, and Worcester, Massachusetts; Hartford, Connecticut; and upstate New York, where he married in 1806. In 1808 the artist moved on to Canada. Whether it was because he was neither as skilled as James Sharples nor as ambitious, Schipper seems to have been content to work as an itinerant artist, drawing portraits chiefly of the middle class. His most prominent sitter was Isaiah Thomas (1749–1831), newspaper publisher and founder of the American Antiquarian Society. Unlike Sharples, Schipper did not seek out the great statesmen and military leaders of the day nor, apparently, was he sought out by them. After seven years in America and Canada, he may have exhausted his client base and, in 1810, departed for London. There he settled permanently and evidently enjoyed considerable success, sending his son Nicholas to an expensive boarding school in the early 1820s. Precisely when Schipper died is unknown, but his widow, Elizabeth Burt Schipper, returned to the United States with the couple’s four children and remarried, in Rochester, New York, in 1834.

Like the Sharpleses, Schipper drew chiefly cabinet-size profile portraits in pastel—presumably, also like the Sharpleses, with the aid of a physionotrace—and his work bears a superficial resemblance to theirs. Nevertheless, though very competently rendered, Schipper’s pastels differ in several respects: the figure-to-picture ratio is typically smaller; as with Dorothea Hart, they frequently have a “porthole” format, with the figure enclosed in an oval or, less frequently, a polygon; and, consonant with Schipper’s experience in the Neoclassical climate of Revolutionary-era Paris, they are generally harder, flatter, and more linear.

Dorothea Hart and Peter Labagh conform very well to both the middle-class status of Schipper’s sitters and to his signature style. The matronly Dorothea Hart, whose portrait, according to early Museum records, was inscribed on the verso with her name and the words, “aged 60 years / March 1st, 1809,” undoubtedly sat for Schipper in or near Montreal, where the artist was then working. She is probably identifiable with Dorothea Judah Hart (1747–1827), wife of the English immigrant merchant Aaron Hart (1724–1800). Hart served in the British Army during the French and Indian Wars, and returned to England temporarily in 1768 to marry Dorothea and take her back to Canada, where they raised a family that distinguished itself in both the economic and political life of the then British province. The artist’s rendering of her is
virtually identical in style with the portrait of Mrs. George Warner (Magdalena Walgrove) (Figure 4), signed and dated 1806, in the New-York Historical Society, especially in the articulation of the bonnets and double chins of both sitters and in the wedge of illumination modulating the backgrounds of both portraits. The formats—oval versus polygon—differ in this case but, as mentioned above, Schipper exploited both. Dorothea Hart is also comparable to the portrait of Mrs. Jonathan Walter Edwards (Figure 7) dated August 1805 on the verso, which does have the more typical oval format.

Peter Labagh (Figure 5), inscribed on its old wood backing with the sitter’s name and profession, “Minister Dutch Reformed Church,” portrays a young cleric (1773–1858) who enjoyed a career of more than half a century in ministries from Kentucky to New York and New Jersey. Indeed, he was so admired that the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church published a lengthy memoir about him in 1860 (Figure 5). At the time that Labagh sat for the artist, about 1807, he was head of congregations in Catskill and Oakhill, New York. On first glance, the Labagh portrait seems almost to represent a different hand from that of Dorothea Hart. Of similar scale, it lacks the oval or polygon format favored by Schipper; it is even more sharply and plastically rendered than Dorothea Hart, and has a different modulation of the dark background, here lightened about the crown and back of the sitter’s head. Yet all of these distinctions find correspondences in other portraits reliably attributed to Schipper. Figures represented behind counters—in preference to within ovals or polygons—are not unknown in Schipper’s pastels: a portrait of George Warner (Figure 6), husband of Magdalena Walgrove (Figure 4), shows not only the counter but also the illumination behind the crown of the head indicated in Peter Labagh. What also seems distinctive about the Labagh portrait is the execution of the sitter’s dark hair, rendered in tonguelike masses whose tapers are finished with very fine lines of hard black pastel. An excellent comparative example of this articulation is found in the previously cited Mrs. Jonathan Walter Edwards (Elizabeth Tryon) (Figure 7), which is signed and dated on the verso.

Tending to confirm Schipper’s authorship of the Labagh portrait is the fact that long before the pastel was purchased by the Museum, in 1906, it had already been attributed to Schipper. In 1951, Frick Collection photo archivists Hope Mathewson and Mary Rotan...
provisionally assigned it to Schipper, many years after Mrs. Allan M. Perkins, the owner at the time, had shown it to Harry B. Wehle, curator of paintings at the Metropolitan, who rejected the prior attribution to James Sharples. Whether Mathewson and Rotan did not communicate their opinion to Mrs. Perkins, or whether she or subsequent owners rejected or were unaware of the attribution to Schipper, the pastel came to the Museum as attributed to James Sharples, and was subsequently reattributed to an “Unidentified Artist (Follower of James Sharples).”

The renown of the Sharples portrait business and the large number of surviving works by members of the family compared with the relative obscurity and smaller oeuvre of Gerrit Schipper perhaps suggest that there are present in other collections American pastel portraits ascribed to the Sharples family that warrant reattribution.
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NOTES


2. The most detailed study to date of James Sharples and his family is Katharine McCook Knox, The Sharples: Their Portraits of George Washington and His Contemporaries (New Haven, 1930). Not among the Sharples family members in the text is Rolinda, the daughter of James and Ellen, who practiced portraiture only in England and chiefly in oils. Other important sources of information about the Sharpleses are John C. Milley, “Thoughts on the Attribution of Sharples Pastels,” in University Hospital Antiques Show Catalogue (Philadelphia, 1975), pp. 59-63; and Sheena Stoddard, “The Sharples Family of Artists,” which will be published in a forthcoming history of the Royal West of England Academy. Dr. Meschutt is grateful to Ms. Stoddard for sharing with him a draft of her essay. He also thanks Dr. Carrie Rebora Barratt, curator of American paintings and sculpture, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for taking the time to show and discuss with him the Museum’s pastels attributed to the Sharples.

3. As listed in Avery et al., American Drawings and Watercolors in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, pp. 341-42: no. 300, Abigail Smith Adams; no. 301, Albert Gallatin (fig. 1 here); no. 302, John Adams; no. 303, Mlle.-Louis-Elie Monnet de Saint-Mery.

4. As listed in ibid., p. 342, the portraits and their current attributions are: no. 304, Alexander Hamilton; no. 306, Josiah Ingersoll, Master-Warden of the Port of New York; and no. 307, Noah Webster, all currently attributed to James Sharples or Ellen Wallace Sharples; and no. 308, George Washington, currently attributed to James Sharples Jr.


7. The portrait of Thomas is in the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. For reproductions and information on the portrait, see AAS Online Exhibitions; Portraits/ http://www.americanantiquarian.org/Exhibitions/Portraits/is aahandmarythomaspastels.htm.


10. No inscription can be found today on the verso of either the support or any of its present backings. The quotation is recorded on the original Museum catalogue card prepared about the time the pastel was acquired, in 1935. The stated age of the sitter is evidently erroneous, since Dorothy Hart would have been sixty-two in 1809.


13. This information, initialed HM (Hope Mathewson), appears on the photo mount of Labagh’s portrait in the Frick Art Reference Library (157-3/4). Kevin Avery is grateful to Lydia Dulouf, chief of Public Services, Frick Art Reference Library, New York, for identifying Hope Mathewson and Mary Rotan.

14. TMS database, Department of American Paintings and Sculpture, MMA.