



John Bigge Thornton

Date

1778

Primary Maker

George Romney

Medium

Oil on canvas

Description

This work entered the Wellin's collection as a portrait of the English economist, banker, philanthropist and parliamentarian Henry Thornton (1760-1815). Thornton was closely associated with William Wilberforce (1759-1833) and the campaign to abolish the slave trade, which is probably why the painting was purchased by Walter Beinecke, Jr., and gifted to the museum as part of the Beinecke Lesser Antilles Collection at Hamilton College in 1989. Although the painting continues to display a plaque identifying the subject as Henry Thornton, the work in fact depicts John Bigge Thornton (date of birth unknown - d. 1780), a lawyer, who was educated at Eton and Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where he

matriculated in 1762. The painting was commissioned by Thornton's close friend, the Romantic poet, biographer and patron William Hayley (1745-1820), who was also a friend of the fashionable English portraitist, George Romney (1734-1802). Thornton is recorded in Romney's daybooks as having sat for the painting five times between 28 February and 29 March 1778, and the portrait was not quite finished when Thornton died two years later in 1780. In his 1809 biography of Romney, Hayley wrote of the portrait: "Mr. Thornton, who had been one of my most intimate fellow-students in Cambridge, and was, at this time, rising to eminence in the law, died, before the painter could execute some finishing touches, that he intended to bestow upon his very interesting portrait, which had attained such a degree of excellence, that, unfinished as it is, I regard it as singularly complete in the highest charm of portraiture, I mean in the perfect expression of an amiable character. It is an image, that even strangers contemplate with pleasure, as a model of pensive benevolence." (p.72) Hayley subsequently further memorialized his friend in his lengthy poem, 'Epistle to a Friend, on the Death of John Thornton, Esq' (1780). At half-length, seated with his arms crossed, wearing a dark suit and powdered wig

Dimensions

Overall: 76.2 x 63.5 cm (30 x 25 in.) Frame: 93 x 81.9 x 5.4 cm (36 5/8 x 32 1/4 x 2 1/8 in.)