

MR. AND MRS. HENRY DOMINY

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(see images after text)

The paired portrait miniatures of a middle-aged couple identified as representing a Mr. and Mrs. Henry Dominy and dated circa 1820, are part of a collection of artwork and letters that was donated to Library and Archives Canada by a descendant of the Montreal painter Robert Auchmuty Sproule (1799-1845). Although this collection contains numerous miniatures by Sproule, it also includes miniatures by other artists from the same period, and it should not be automatically assumed that the Dominy portraits are also by his hand. Indeed, if one compares the portrait of Henry Dominy to the signed Sproule portrait miniature depicting Navy Lieutenant Thomas Sproule, one is immediately struck by the superior technical virtuosity of the latter work.

On the other hand, both images are dated to a period when Sproule would have been in his early twenties, an age at which an artist's abilities are likely to progress quite rapidly. If we ascribe to the Dominy miniatures an earlier production date than that of the Thomas Sproule portrait, thus placing their creation firmly within the early 1820s or late 1810s, we must then also assume that they were created in Sproule's native Ireland, as the artist did not leave that country for Canada until 1826. However, several clues suggest that the paired portraits were instead executed in North America. An inscription on the original wooden frame backing of the male portrait reads, "Henry Dominy. Grand father of Mr. Louis Auldjo. On his mother's side, + her property." The Auldjos were a prominent Montreal mercantile family during the first decades of the nineteenth century. A Louis Auldjo was born in that city circa 1826, which would make him a likely candidate to have had a grandfather in his forties or fifties around the year 1820. We know, however, that Louis Auldjo's mother's maiden name was Richardson. Louis had a son also named Louis, but his wife's maiden name was Worth.

No record could be found of a Henry Dominy living in Montreal in the early nineteenth century.

There was a Henry Dominy who was born in Long Island in 1776, moved to Beekmantown, New York, and died there in 1834. Beekmantown is only about seventy kilometres away from Montreal, and it is easy to imagine this Henry Dominy having a family connection to Montreal. On the other hand, none of his three daughters married a man named Auldjo.

The exact identity of the sitters, like that of the artist, seems likely to remain a mystery. Let us turn now, therefore, to a more productive analysis of the works themselves. To begin with, the material: The Dominy portraits, like all the other miniatures in the Sproule collection, are executed on paper. Although the most common surface material for miniature portraits in the early nineteenth century was ivory, paper also appears to have been fairly popular, at least in North America.¹

As for the shape of the portraits, the even discolouration around the edges of their square cardboard surface would suggest that they were once bordered by similarly-shaped square frames. However, the unusually large expanse of empty, unpainted space around the figures, and the rounded edges of their truncated torsos may indicate that the majority of the surrounding surface was originally intended to have been trimmed away, and the figures placed within upright oval-shaped frames, which were very popular for portrait miniatures during the early nineteenth-century. It is also possible that a wooden covering with an oval-shaped opening was originally meant to be superimposed over the portraits, another widespread framing technique at this time.

Given the apparent age of the sitters, we can assume that they had already been married for many years when this double portrait was painted. Although miniatures were particularly associated with young lovers, who often exchanged such pocket-sized portraits while courting, they also served a more general purpose during this period, just prior to the invention of photography, as a

more intimate and less costly alternative to full-scale portrait paintings.² Among the reasons to commission such portraits would have been the desire to obtain an image of a loved one by which to remember them after they had passed away, or conversely, to leave a posthumous image of oneself behind. This motivation is made quite explicit in an 1805 advertisement placed in *The Montreal Gazette* by the miniaturist John Thompson, which addresses itself to “those who are desirous of transmitting to posterity a likeness of themselves or familiars,” as well as to those “parting with their relatives and friends, and wishing to take with them or leave behind a valuable remembrance [...]”³ The Dominy portraits may well have been born out of just such an impulse, either on their part or on that of their relatives.

From an iconographical perspective, the Dominy miniatures fit with a long tradition in Western art of depicting married couples in paired portraits, in which the husband and wife are posed in such a way that their respective likenesses may be placed so as to appear to face one another. Additionally, the couple’s sober but elegant costume could be interpreted as iconographical indicators of their upper-class status.

Erwin Panofsky, in his exposition of the iconographical method of art historical understanding, explains that an iconographical analysis of an artwork is always preceded by another, primary interpretation, which he calls the “pre-iconographical description”.⁴ This stage of analysis involves the apprehension of visual elements, such as line and colour, as well as their subsequent identification with concrete subject matter, drawing on one’s personal experience with objects and events. In the case of the Dominy portraits, for instance, a pre-iconographical analysis would involve the apprehension of a particular arrangement of lines and shapes in various shades of pink, black and grey, as well as the recognition that these visual elements are meant to represent a middle-aged man and woman in early nineteenth-century costume.

As Panofsky points out, however, even such a basic analysis must incorporate a certain familiarity with the history of representational conventions.⁵ If we were to interpret the Dominy paintings without any knowledge of the conventions of portraiture in Western art, we might take them to depict two sets of heads and torsos that have been strangely severed from their respective bodies and are now hovering, seemingly unperturbed, in the midst of a limitless white void.

While such extreme visual literalism is generally quite useless when attempting to uncover the intentions of an artist from a past era, I would argue that it nonetheless constitutes a valid and illuminating way of interpreting the impression that a work of art makes upon us, the contemporary viewer. Such an interpretation, moreover, which takes as its starting point what is essentially a cross-cultural miscommunication, is quite separate from what Panofsky identifies as the third level of art historical understanding, what he calls the “iconological interpretation,” involving the “symbolical” values and psychological and sociocultural aspects of an artwork.⁶

What impression, on a strictly subjective level, is made on the modern-day viewer by the sight of these two finely rendered little nineteenth-century heads, floating about in such an inordinately large expanse of blank space? Is there not some connection that is likely to be made, either consciously or unconsciously, between the fact that we know so little about these sitters and the way they seem to look out at us from a great surrounding void? Though the facts about their lives have largely vanished behind the thick enveloping mist of the past, these portraits remain, passing on to us across the vast distances of history a “valuable remembrance,” however faint, of the two individuals who sat for them.



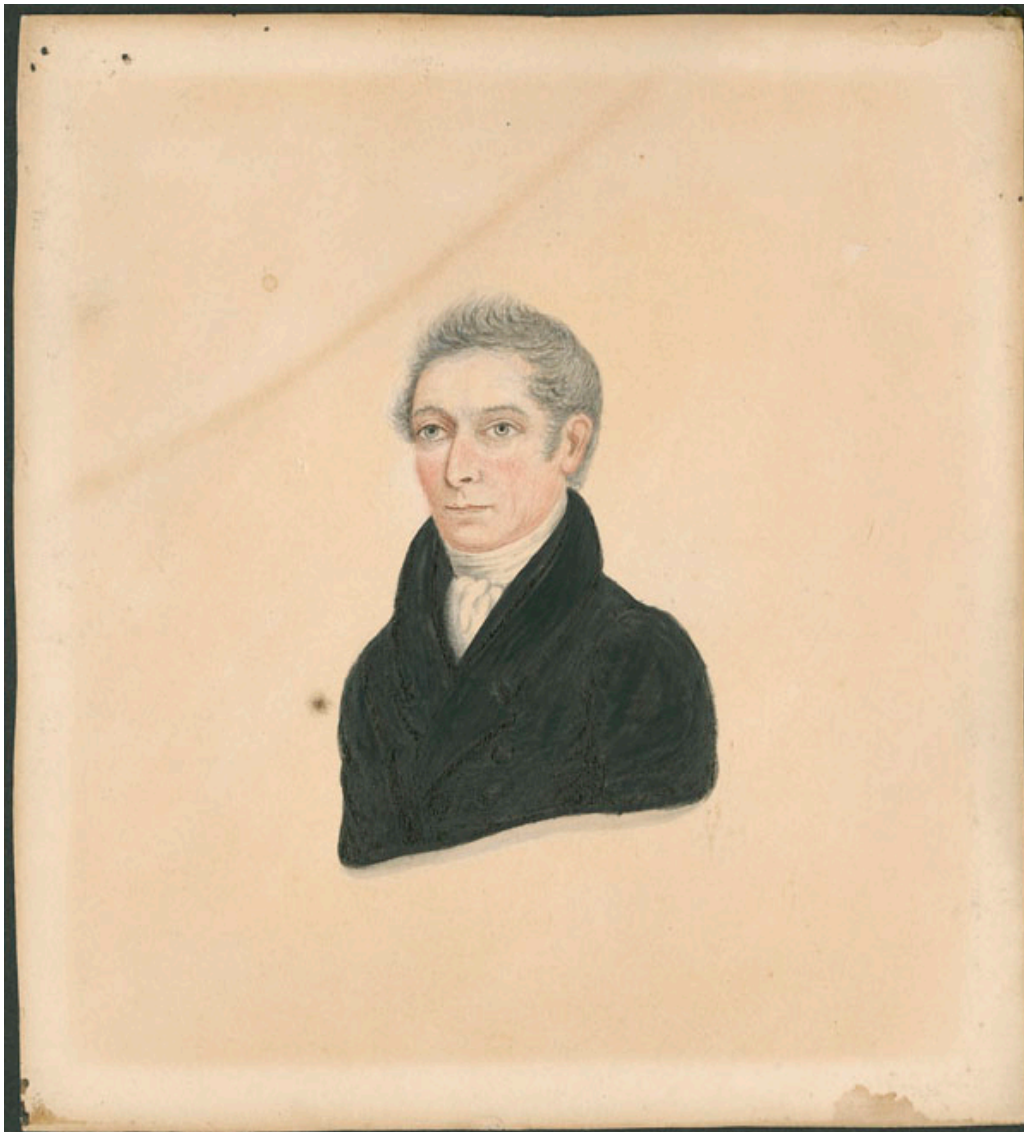
Mrs. Henry Dominy, ca. 1820

Unknown artist

Watercolour on paper, 14.3 x 12.5 cm

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 3960626

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3960626.



Henry Dominy, Circa 1820

Unknown artist

Watercolour on paper, 14.3 x 13 cm

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 3960619

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3960619.



Navy Lieutenant Thomas Sproule, ca. 1820

Robert Auchmuty Sproule (1799-1845)

Watercolour on paper, 23.5 x 19.5 cm

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 3960603

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3960603.



Unknown Elderly Lady, ca. 1830-1840

Unknown artist

Watercolour on ivory, oval 7.6 x 6.3 cm

Springhill Collection, County Londonderry, Ireland.

NOTES

¹Roslyn Margaret Rosenfeld, *Miniatures and Silhouettes in Montreal, 1760-1860* (MA thesis, Concordia University, Montreal, 1981) 5.

²Rosenfeld, 1.

³Rosenfeld, 2.

⁴Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972) 26-41.

⁵Panofsky, 33-36.

⁶In the case of the Dominy portraits, for instance, such an analysis might include the connection between portraiture and a more bourgeois ethos of individuality in early-nineteenth North American society, and the influence of an earlier portraiture tradition that was fostered by the similarly independent-minded merchant classes of seventeenth-century Holland. William Kloss, *Dutch Masters: The Age of Rembrandt* (The Teaching Company, 2006) DVD.

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