

Three recently discovered portraits by John Hesselius

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THE ART OF John Hesselius mirrors the principal stylistic influences found in colonial American painting of the third quarter of the eighteenth century. He received his earliest instruction in painting from his father, Gustavus Hesselius, who had been trained in his native Sweden before emigrating to America in 1712. However, the earliest known works by John Hesselius seldom reflect the rather straightforward style of his father. Instead, his art is an expression of the more elegant, fashionable, and flattering portraiture that characterized the general taste of the Colonies in the third quarter of the eighteenth century.

The earliest known signed and dated work by John Hesselius, a portrait of Lynford Lardner, was painted in Philadelphia in 1749 when the artist was twenty-one, and it reveals that he had already largely abandoned the sober, naturalistic style of his father in favor of the brighter, more decorative style of Robert Feke.¹ Feke, who worked principally in Newport, had visited Philadelphia on painting trips in 1746 and 1749, and thus it is even possible that the young Hesselius was acquainted with him personally.²

In 1750 John Hesselius felt secure enough to travel south and seek patrons in the vicinity of Annapolis and Williamsburg.³ Some of the portraits dating from the following year were painted in Maryland and Virginia, while others, depicting Philadelphia sitters, indicate that he had returned to his native city.

Following the death of his father in 1755, John apparently took a second painting trip, recording likenesses in New Jersey, Delaware, and on the Eastern Shore of Maryland between 1756 and 1759. During this time his art underwent a significant change, for he had come under the spell of the portrait style of John Wollaston, who arrived in America from England in 1749; worked for some years in New York; and then traveled south along the east coast, producing within a decade more than three hundred portraits before he left the Colonies for India. The art practiced by Wollaston is closer to society portraiture than that produced by colonial painters of the first half of the century. The rococolike elegance of abundant lace and ribbons, the sheen of satin, and the almond-shape eyes in Wollaston's portraits bespeak his intent to please the more genteel taste of colonial patrons in the quarter-century preceding the Revolution.

Among the works produced by Hesselius during his second painting expedition are three portraits that have only recently come to light, which depict members of the Clay family of New Castle, Delaware. The portraits are today in a private collection and have come down to the present owner through

Fig. 1. *Slater Clay* (1711-1767), by John Hesselius (1728-1778), 1759. Inscribed on the back, *Slater Clay Aged 47/1759/J. H. Pinx.* Oil on canvas, 35½ by 25 inches. Private collection; photograph by Helga Photo Studio.

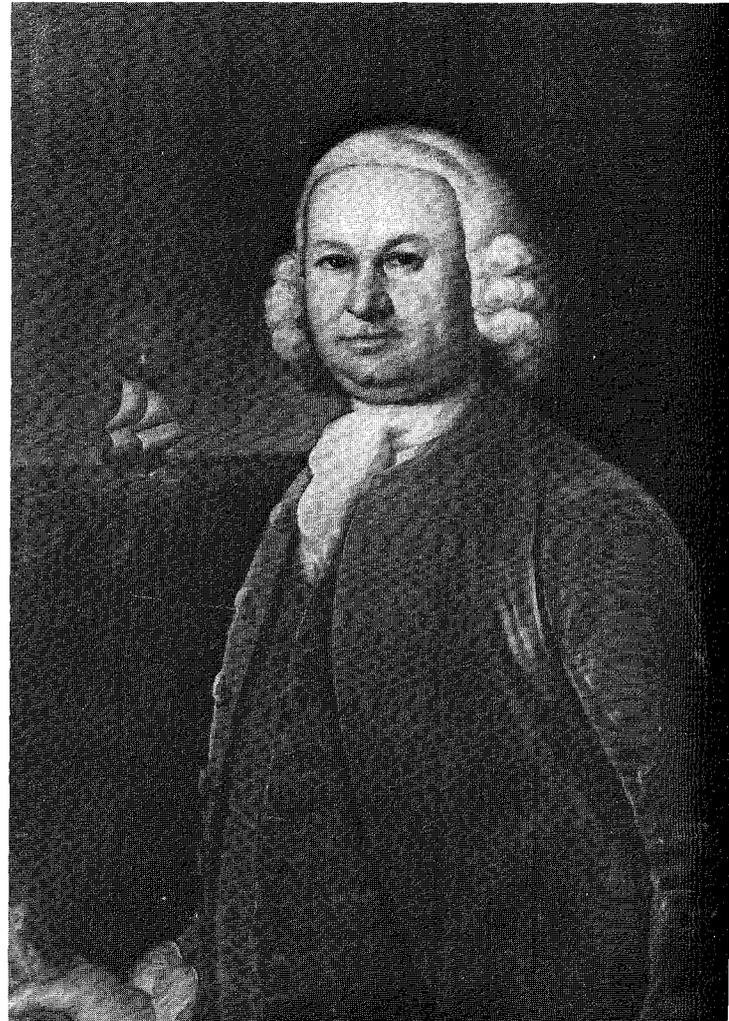




Fig. 2. *Ann Clay* (1723–1789) and *Mary Clay* (1758–1801), by Hesselius, 1759. Oil on canvas, 44 by 35 inches. *Private collection; Helga photograph.*

descendants of the sitters. Stylistically these portraits are especially interesting, for they were painted during the period when Hesselius was coming under the influence of Wollaston and leaving behind that of Feke. The head of the family, Slater Clay (Fig. 1), was the eldest son of the English-born sea captain Robert Clay and his wife, Ann Curtis Clay, of Kent County, Delaware. In the background of the portrait is a seascape with a single sailing ship, referring to the fact that in his younger days the sitter had followed his father's calling as a sailor. Perhaps a trace of the influence of Robert Feke lingers in this portrait, particularly in the long, sweeping curves formed by the edges of the coat, vest, and sleeve. Even though Clay was of substantial bulk, something of Feke's concern for pattern is suggested in the two-dimensional treatment of the torso. On the other hand, the strong, straightforward objectivity of the head and its obvious plasticity hark back even further into Hesselius' past, for they seem to echo the realism of his first training under his father.

The fact that Slater Clay's right hand and the document he holds in it are cut off by the frame of the picture suggests that the canvas was once larger,⁴ probably the same size as the likeness of Clay's wife, Ann Curtis Clay,⁵ and their daughter Mary (Fig. 2). Dressed in gold satin, with lace at her neckline and sleeves, Ann Clay helps support the infant Mary, who is seated on a table at her side. Wollaston's influence is particularly evident in this portrait: the slightly slanted, almond-shape eyes of the mother as well as the restless rococo pattern of the highlights on her dress are reminiscent of works by Wollaston, such as his portrait of Mrs. Daniel Carroll II and her son (Fig. 4), which dates from shortly after 1752.

The portrait shown in Figure 3 depicts Slater and Ann Clay's fourth son, Thomas, who was six years old at the time his likeness was taken. His is perhaps the most stylistically advanced of the three canvases, for it foreshadows the charming portraits of the children of the Calvert family of Maryland that Hesselius painted two years later (see Fig. 5).

The ages of Slater and Thomas Clay given in the inscriptions on the back of their portraits indicate that they were painted after July 17, 1759, when

Fig. 3. *Thomas Clay* (1753–1793), by Hesselius, 1759. Inscribed on the back, *Thomas Clay Aged 6 Yrs/1759/J. H. Pinx.* Oil on canvas, 28 by 23 inches. *Private collection; Helga photograph.*



Thomas turned six, and before November 2 of that year, when his father became forty-eight. It seems likely that while he was painting the three portraits shown here, Hesselius also painted Slater and Ann Clay's other children.⁶ Curtis Clay, the eldest child, was eleven years old in 1759; his brothers Robert, John, and Slater Jr. were ten, eight, and four or five, respectively. Two other sons, each named Jehu, had been born in 1756 and 1757, but both had died in infancy. The Clays' ninth child, Ann, was born on July 2, 1759, probably shortly before the family portraits were done. Although Hesselius' portraits of these children may still survive, none has yet come to light, reminding us that, like the three known Clay portraits, works of colonial art are still waiting to be discovered.

¹ *Philadelphia: Three Centuries of American Art* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1976), p. 48.

² For a discussion of indications that John Hesselius knew Feke personally see R. Peter Mooz, "Robert Feke: The Philadelphia Story," in *American Painting to 1776: A Reappraisal*, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1971), pp. 211–212.

³ It has been suggested that John Hesselius probably traveled south in the company of Robert Feke (see Richard K. Doud, "John Hesselius, Maryland Limner," *Winterthur Portfolio* 5 [1969], p. 130).



Fig. 4. Mrs. Daniel Carroll of Upper Marlboro II and her son, Daniel Carroll of Upper Marlboro III, by John Wollaston (fl. 1736–1767), after 1752. Oil on canvas, 50 $\frac{3}{8}$ by 40 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore; gift of Dr. Clapham Pennington.



⁴ The stretchers on all three paintings appear to date from the early nineteenth century. The portrait of Slater Clay was probably cut down when it was given its present stretcher. The portrait of Clay's wife and daughter (Fig. 2), although not cut down, was transferred to a stretcher smaller than the original simply by folding the painted edges of the canvas around the stretcher. During its recent restoration, this canvas was placed on a new stretcher, returning it to its original size. Only the portrait of Thomas Clay (Fig. 3) has always retained its original dimensions.

⁵ Apparently Slater Clay's mother and wife had the same maiden name and both were from the same county in Delaware (see Cecil Clay, *The Family of Clay of New Castle, Delaware, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania* [Washington, D.C., 1895]).

⁶ Hesselius did paint Ann Clay's mother, Mary Brinckle Curtis, of Kent County, Delaware, in 1757, at the beginning of the trip on which he painted the Clay likenesses discussed here (see Richard K. Doud, "John Hesselius: His Life and Work" [master's thesis, University of Delaware, 1963], p. 63).

Fig. 5. Elizabeth Calvert (b. 1753), by Hesselius, 1761. Inscribed on the back, *Elizabeth Calvert AE 8/John Hesselius Pinx Maryland/1761*. Oil on canvas, 30 by 25 inches. Baltimore Museum of Art; gift of Alfred R. and Henry G. Riggs.