

Martyn Gregory Gallery -- 2013 Catalog

80. Spoilum (fl. c.1774 - c.1805)

Portrait of William Read of Philadelphia

Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 ins

Provenance: Dr George Clymer (1883-1953), great-great-grandson of the sitter; his widow, Mrs George Clymer; her son, W.B. Shubrick Clymer, Harrisville, N.H., d.1972

Last recorded by the Frick Art Reference Library in the 1970s, this portrait is an outstanding example of the distinctive work of the Cantonese artist Spoilum. The sitter, William Read (1767-1846), made several voyages to China. His father, George Read, was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence; he served as President of Delaware, then U.S. Senator and finally Chief Justice of Delaware until his death in 1798.

In 1789 William Read sailed to Canton on the ship *Union* belonging to Mordecai Lewis & Co. In 1792 William applied to return to Canton as supercargo aboard the ship *Samson*; his father recommended him as being 'of the best disposition, strict integrity and probity' (*Life and Correspondence of George Read* by William T. Read, Philadelphia, 1870, 530).

In 1805 William Read became a pioneer of the American opium trade with China, sailing to Canton via Batavia as supercargo on the *Bingham*. Imports of American opium from Smyrna to China had been initiated the year before by the ship *Pennsylvania*. The Historical Society of Philadelphia holds letters written by William Read in Canton in November 1805 and January 1806: these record that the *Bingham* was carrying opium (from Smyrna), but two opium vessels had arrived shortly before her, and others followed soon after, resulting in a something of a glut on the market for Turkey opium. The price of opium in Canton fell sharply, but Read was still able to make a profit of over \$11,000 on the opium in his charge (see Jacques M. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto*, 1997, 114-15).

In this venture William Read was in the employ of the well-established Philadelphia firm of Willings and Francis. The families of Willing, Meredith, Read and Clymer, all linked by marriage, constituted an influential Philadelphia-based political and mercantile grouping; the present portrait was passed down by the descendants of George Clymer, another signatory to the Declaration of Independence.

This was not Read's last voyage to the East. According to his nephew, 'after several successful voyages to India as supercargo, he established himself, with his brother-in-law, Matthew Pearce, in Philadelphia, as merchants in the East India trade, but by failure of a firm for whom they had indorsed, and capture of one of their

ships on her return voyage from Canton by a French privateer, off the capes of Delaware, after several years of prosperous business they were obliged to suspend, and my uncle, to retrieve his fortunes, to sail again to India, where he remained for several years trading to several ports' (*Life and Correspondence*, 539n).

In Philadelphia William Read enjoyed the post of Consul-General for the Kingdom of Naples. His nephew suggested that 'mild William' would be a suitable nickname for his uncle: 'His wife, losing her own temper at his imperturbableness, once exclaimed, "Mr. Read, why will you not be angry?" He was much devoted to books, but too modest to display the extensive knowledge he had acquired' (*Life and Correspondence*, 540). William died in Philadelphia at the age of 78; he was outlived by his elder brother, George Read jr, who built the Read House in New Castle, now the property of the Historical Society of Delaware.



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