

By Jason Edward Kaufman

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When I heard that the National Portrait Gallery was organizing an exhibition drawn from private collections in the Washington area, I figured it would be a good one to miss. These sorts of community-based shows tend to be mediocre affairs. Institutions mount them in part to reach out to new patrons, and curators — against their better judgment — can be obliged to lower standards to comply with the exigencies of politics and fundraising.

But when I saw “Capital Portraits: Treasures from Washington Private Collections,” I realized that I had been dead wrong. It’s a wonderful show on many levels.

There’s no denying that it’s a miscellany. The mixed bag of American and foreign artists cursorily chronicles 250 years from the mid-18th century to the present. The only thing these 60 works have in common is that they are portraits whose owners have residences in Washington, Bethesda, Chevy Chase or Arlington.

Fortunately, the curators have stuck with museum-quality works, many by such top-notch artists such as John Singleton Copley and Gilbert Stuart, Mary Cassatt and William Merritt Chase and Andy Warhol, to mention a few. That’s reason enough to visit the show.

But “Capital Portraits” offers the added dimension of opening a window onto American society. The lenders are often descendants of the works’ original owners. And who among us is not curious about what’s behind the closed doors of some of our wealthy neighbors?

Cynosures of society

There's a glamorous full-length portrait of socialite Gwendolyn Cafritz, painted 1948 by a French artist who catered to the elite. It has an Art Deco chic that complemented the decor of the Foxhall Road home where she and husband Morris hosted the capital's power parties in the decades after World War II.

Arts patron Evelyn "Evie" Nef shows off a flamboyant Madame Gres dress in her portrait by Alex Katz, which her husband, John, commissioned for their 10th wedding anniversary in 1974. The painting, which hung in their Georgetown home, is destined for the Corcoran Gallery of Art, one of the late collector's many 2009 bequests to D.C. museums.

Austrian-born Ina Ginsburg became Andy Warhol's close friend and introduced him to Washington society. She also wrote for his "Interview" magazine, contributing articles about former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker and Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger, among others. She has lent a classic silkscreen painting Warhol made from a Polaroid he took of her at The Factory in New York in 1982.

There are plenty of Warhols in town, and the curators also chose four collage serigraphs of Sally Quinn, the longtime writer for The Washington Post. After she married the newspaper's executive editor, Benjamin Bradley, in 1978, Quinn penned a novel, "Regrets Only," about navigating the social byways of the capital. The book's success occasioned a 1986 profile in Washingtonian magazine, and these portraits, which she now owns, were commissioned for the cover.

Then there is David C. Levy, former director of the Corcoran Gallery and College of Art, who contributes a 1936 portrait of his mother, Lucille

Corcos, a welded-metal abstraction with a Picasso-inspired cubist head crafted by her friend, the great American sculptor David Smith, who happens to be Levy's godfather.

And who knew that President Eisenhower was an amateur painter? Here is his 1952 portrait of his wife, Mamie, (done from a 1941 photograph) while he was NATO commander based at Versailles. I wonder if Ike ever traded works with Churchill, another Sunday painter of note.

Reaching beyond D.C.

Despite the capital connections, only six works were painted in the city. One of the earliest is Charles Bird King's 1815 portrait of Sarah Weston Seaton and her children. Seaton's husband and brother co-owned the National Intelligencer, a newspaper covering Congress that printed floor debates and legislative proceedings — a forerunner of the Congressional Record and C-SPAN. Both the Seatons and the artist lived just blocks from where the National Portrait Gallery stands.

The oldest pictures take us back to the Colonial era, represented by works lent by the Oliver family that portray their New England forebears. A 1755 portrait of Massachusetts judge Andrew Oliver Jr. by the English artist Joseph Blackburn shows the bewigged Oliver with a prosperous belly, fingers tucked decorously into an embroidered silk waistcoat, and with a grass-roofed dovecote in the background, indicating his land ownership and perhaps a taste for roast squab.

His uncle Peter Oliver, another judge, was painted by Copley, the greatest American portraitist of the time who is known for the iconic picture of Paul Revere now in Boston. The judge peers from the murky background like a character from a Hawthorne story. He presided at the Boston Massacre

trial in 1770, and exonerated the British soldiers who killed five civilians. He was named chief justice but fled to England in 1776.

Copley, another Tory, returned to his native England, where he portrayed Myles Cooper, a fellow loyalist who was president of King's College (now Columbia University) in New York until a mob drove him from his house in 1775. The distinguished portrait is from the collection of Teresa Heinz, wife of Massachusetts Sen. John F. Kerry.

The Copleys would be worthy additions to the national collections, but so would many other works in the show. Another is Rembrandt Peale's 1827 portrait of Catherine Peabody Gardner. The canvas's superb condition preserves the vibrancy that Peale gave to the wasp-waisted girl's pearly flesh and blue-gray eyes, her tresses of chestnut hair, and the silvery satin dress and orange velvet shawl in which she nests. Her son Jack Gardner would later marry Isabella Stewart, the collector who founded the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston.

One of the few African American subjects is an unidentified woman painted by Eastman Johnson in 1859, the year that the abolitionist-leaning artist completed "Negro Life at the South," a scene in which a white girl visits 12 African Americans in an urban backyard. The picture became known as "Old Kentucky Home," but the setting is on F Street in the District, where Johnson lived.

Contemporary characters

Four of the five works in the show by African American artists are associated with the Washington, D.C., dealer Alonzo Aden, whose Barnett Aden Gallery at 127 Randolph St. NW was among the first with an integrated stable of artists and patrons. Of special note are 1940s self-

portraits by Washingtonian John N. Robinson and Atlantan Frederick Flemister, part of the Aden collection of African American art owned by Black Entertainment Television billionaire Robert L. Johnson.

Then there is an eye-dazzling work by New York-based artist Kehinde Wiley, who portrays his African American friends in compositions based on Old Master paintings. A 2005 canvas lent by D.C. collector Henry L. Thaggert presents Robert Reynolds in a green camouflage coat against a background of red and gold acanthus leaves — a rhapsody in hip-hop bling.

Every portrait has stories associated with it, and most are lost to the ages. But D.C. collector Anita Reiner has an amusing one about her 1971 acquisition of Chuck Close's eight-foot portrait of his father-in-law, Nat Rose. After leaving the New York gallery, she ran into someone who looked like Rose and stopped him on the street. "Did you ever have your picture painted by Chuck Close?" she asked. "Yes," he replied. "Well, I just bought it," she informed him.

Capital Portraits: Treasures from Washington Private Collections

Through Sept. 5 at the National Portrait Gallery, Eighth and F streets NW.
202-633-8300

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