

# THE STAMFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## BEST FACE FORWARD

### PORTRAITS FROM THE SOCIETY'S COLLECTION

Since early Colonial times American portraits have been commissioned to record the likenesses of prominent families, military heroes, important public servants, merchants and other prosperous individuals. Pairs of portraits were commissioned by husbands and wives to hang in the entrance hall or the finest room in the house for the admiration of all who entered. Only the wealthy could afford the fees of highly trained and skillful artists, many of whom had studied in Europe. Less prosperous citizens could have their portraits painted by itinerant, self-taught artists or by lesser-known painters.

In addition to rendering a true likeness, the artist frequently attempted to give a clue as to the sitter's occupation, social standing, or locale. Ralph Earl, a famous Connecticut artist in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, often incorporated such clues in his portraits. For instance, he would put a window in the background revealing a pastoral landscape or landmark building to identify the surrounding environment of the sitter. Objects, such as a stylish piece of furniture, leather bound books, account books, needlework, or a vase of flowers, also added to the viewer's impression of the sitter. The Society has no 18<sup>th</sup> century portraits in its collection but, does have three full-size digital photographs of Ralph Earl portraits of Davenport family members which are owned by Yale University. You may view these copies hanging in the Society's office.

The portraits in this exhibit span a time period from the 1830s to the 1970s and present a panoramic view of changing costumes, hairstyles, facial hair and degrees of formality. With few exceptions the subjects were Stamford residents. With the coming of the railroad to Stamford in 1849 and the resulting influx of immigrants, the town became the site of flourishing new industries and of more people who could afford to commission a portrait. Some of these portraits were painted by local artists. Of key importance was the ability to capture the likeness of the sitter, although a slight enhancement was not looked upon unfavorably.

Despite the advent of photography, there was a great surge in portrait painting during the Gilded Age in Stamford and throughout the country. Many artists had worried that portraiture would become a dead art. What the popularity of photography *really* did was to free portrait painters from their traditional need to render a true likeness and focus instead on the sitter's psyche. This freedom was especially witnessed in the portraits of

the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by such avant-garde European painters as Pablo Picasso, Gustav Klimt and Marcel Duchamp, whose portraits bore little resemblance to the person, but left much room for interpretation.

Traditional portraiture did continue to flourish in this country. As Stamford grew to become a highly recognized center for national and international corporations, the CEOs, bankers, lawyers, public servants and wealthier residents wanted portraits to hang in the lobbies of new headquarters, boardrooms, and above the mantel. Portraits are a symbol of achievement and a captivating way to be remembered by future generations.

The portraits seen in this exhibit are especially valuable as a historic canvas of the development of Stamford. Many have not been shown publicly before. As you go through the gallery, study these likenesses to get a better insight into the lives and times of the era in which they were painted.