

Artist Unidentified

United States

*Joseph Marriner Gerrish Family*, circa 1824

Oil on canvas

38 5/8 x 66 1/2 inches

Museum purchase with a matching gift from an anonymous donor.

Portraiture has been a tradition in American art since colonial times, when the merchants who were rising to prominence sought out the finest furnishings and art for their homes. For the members of this new middleclass, portraits represented their status in society and demonstrated their refined tastes and sensibilities. This tradition continued after the Revolutionary War as these merchants, now independent Americans, sought to identify themselves as patriotic and affluent members of the new nation. Despite America's independence, England and Europe remained important economic and artistic influences on Federal society. The courtly style of English portraiture with its painterly effects of brushstrokes, light, and modeling as seen in the work of Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough had an impact on American artists.

Federal period portraits were made for several reasons: to honor and remember a family member, to communicate one's wealth and social status through the fine details of clothing, objects, furniture, etc., and to express the personality and inner character of the sitter. Physiognomy (the form of a person's features and expression) and phrenology (the study of the size and shape of the skull as a supposed indication of a person's character) were both popular "sciences" in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. These ideas contributed to the belief that someone's portrait could also capture his or her inner character. The character of the American patriot was communicated through portraits of heroes and figures of national fame including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin, which became quite popular and were often reproduced as prints for wider dissemination.

Contemporary with the work of Federal period America's most famous portrait painter, Gilbert Stuart, the *Joseph Marriner Gerrish Family* portrait is an excellent example of portrait painting from this time. The painting is large, approximately 4 x 6 feet, and shows Joseph Marriner Gerrish on the right and his wife Barbara Scott Gerrish on the left framing their twin sons, Augustus and Frederick, between them. The family is linked together across the picture plane through the placement and connections of the bodies and hands. Joseph Gerrish was a successful Portland merchant and a co-publisher of *The Advertiser*. This portrait shows the Gerrish family with the accoutrements of their social status. They are all dressed in the height of fashion with Mrs. Gerrish's dress trimmed in exquisite lace. They are seated on a carved mahogany settee upholstered in a rich red fabric. Lush blue-green drapery falls behind Mrs. Gerrish as beautiful scrolled wallpaper serves as the backdrop for Mr. Gerrish. Sewing implements sit on the table next to Mrs. Gerrish: a fancy-footed silver pincushion, a bobbin, scissors, and a spool of thread. These items, while of high quality, serve to reinforce Mrs. Gerrish's role as mother and housewife.

The artist of the *Gerrish Family* portrait is unknown; earlier attributions have not withstood careful stylistic analysis. There has also been some confusion as to the identities of the children. There were 14 children in the Gerrish family, and a son and daughter had died at a young age leading some to believe that this painting was a memorial to them. However, close consideration of clothing style, the children's similar sizes and faces, and other details now indicate that the painting shows the twin boys. Additionally, the production of twin male heirs would have been a source of great pride for the family, which is one explanation for why Mr. Gerrish commissioned the portrait. The *Gerrish Family* portrait gives us a glimpse into the ideals and values of a prominent Federal period Portland family.