

Joseph Wood (1778 – 15 Jun 1830)

The National Intelligencer, June 15, 1830

Death of a Man of Genius

Died, on Tuesday morning last, of dropsy in the chest, Mr. Joseph Wood, Miniature Painter in the 52d year of his age. His friends and acquaintances are invited to attend his funeral from his residence on Pennsylvania Avenue this morning at 10 o'clock.

Obituary Sketch



Genius is the inspiration of the Deity; "but (says Dr. Johnson) the brightness of the flame wastes its own fuel." Prudence is its guardian angel on earth, and should ever accompany it in its intercourse with man. Genius passes from the earth like the transient gleam of a meteor, and ascends to that Fountain of Light from which it emanated.

Let the pencil of truth portray a man of Genius as he was; let it delineate
"Those lights and shades whose well accorded strife
"Gave all the strength and color of his life."

Mr. Joseph Wood, the subject of this obituary sketch, was born near Clarkstown, Rockland county, New York in the year 1778, and came to this Metropolis in 1816. For a considerable time previous to his settlement in this place, his talents as a Miniature Painter had acquired for him merited celebrity in the City of New York. His fame found its way into every section of our Union. His company was courted by the first men of the Nation; but instability is a prominent trait in the human character; and those pleasing visions vanished and left a dreary waste in its stead -- and a mighty mind surrounded by its own desolation. The productions of his pencil were of a superior order, and the qualities of his mind were in unison with his extraordinary skill as an artist. How happy would it have been could he have preserved the even tenor of that felicitous life which he enjoyed 'mid the romantic scenes of his native mountains; when his youthful imagination indulged in every innocent reverie, when not a flower bloomed, when not a zephyr exhaled the meadows' fragrance; "when not a cloud imbibed the setting sun's effulgence," but served to excite and to animate his fancy. But, alas! the indiscretions of a maturer age; brought on by improper associations, embittered his latter days. Where were those pretended friends -- his companions of conviviality, who soothed his follies, palliated his errors, and encouraged him to excess? They vanished and left their half-murdered victim to the kindness of other friends; and, for ought they cared, to expire neglected and forgotten! Those associations in his cooler moments he despised; but, alas! how imperceptibly is man led from one folly to another! Company, for which his superior mind at times entertained the greatest contempt, by degrees, became pleasing and habits, at which he once shuddered, became familiar by convivial associations. Latterly he became convinced of the fickleness of what too many think "pleasure;" and he experienced the consequent bitterness of regret.

There was a redeeming spirit in Mr. Wood, and, for some time previous to his death, he expressed to the writer of this hasty sketch, the utmost abhorrence of former associates who had been instrumental in his injury; he had determined, in future, to renounce all connection with them and participation in their thoughtless course -- and he hoped all of similar habits would follow his example. Happy resolution! but, alas! made too late. The fatal seeds had been sown, and our Country has sustained a loss of one of her brightest ornaments, and Genius weeps over another immolated son!

Mr. W. always exculpated. Genius from the common, but mistaken reproach, of waywardness; and was of opinion, that bad habits, gradually imbibed, caused the unjust imputation.

Conscious of his powers in the line of his profession, he never depreciated the words of others to subserve his own purposes, but seemed ever pleased to make known the excellencies of all artists' performances."

Ingenuous, high-minded, and honorable, but for 'friends,' what a harvest of wealth might no Joseph Wood have reaped! but shall they be termed friends who courted his company in prosperity and deserted him in the dark hour of adversity? They were the vilest enemies, who administered the poisoned chalice to his lips, and made him the premature victim of their own deleterious habits. Truth; not what some men term "good," has been written of the dead for the benefit of the living; but would they profit by it, let them resist the first approach of speedy death -- vice.

A short time previous to his death, being asked what he wished most to communicate, he replied: That he hoped his son "would never do ought contrary to his own judgment" -- an admonition of the greatest value to those who are liable to be led away by others, by adopting their vices.

Against the stream of Reason's light,
Fate hurried him along;
Forever aiming to be truth,
And yet forever wrong!
Thus a mad comet hastens on;
Coursing the sky it darts;
Approaches nearest to the sun,
And furthest then departs.

Mr. Wood possessed his reason to the last. He called his family to his bed side, blessed them, and calmly resigned his spirit to Him who gave it. He has left us, it is confidently believed, for a better state of existence; for the Father of the Universe it is certain pities the infirmities of the repentant sons of misfortune -- of the children of sensibility. This imperfect sketch is given by one who nightly watched, with his family, the flickerings of genius expiring in the socket. This candid obituary, coinciding as it does with sentiments which Mr. W. ever entertained and expressed, and exhibiting his fate, may serve as a beacon for the admonition of others; yet, it is not intended to sully, in the least degree, the purity of that spirit which has ascended to its God.

A Printer.

Dale T. Johnson, *American Portrait Miniatures in the Manney Collection*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Joseph Wood (1778-1830)

A painter of miniatures and cabinet-sized portraits, and an engraver, Joseph Wood was born in Clarkstown, New York, the son of a farmer. Obsessed by the idea of becoming an artist, he ran away to New York City at the age of fifteen. Eventually he became apprenticed to a silversmith; in his spare time he copied miniatures that had been left in the shop for framing. In 1800 he married Margaret Haring of Tappan, New York, and the following year established himself as a portrait and miniature painter. In 1803 Wood went into partnership with John Wesley Jarvis in what quickly became a highly lucrative business; they painted silhouettes on glass and cut profiles in paper with the aid of a physiognotrace, at times taking in one hundred dollars a day. Reaping those rewards apparently led to high living, spawning rumors about Wood's licentious behavior.

Wood met Edward Greene Malbone in 1802 or 1803, shortly after Wood and Jarvis became partners; Malbone visited their studio and later instructed them both in various aspects of miniature painting. Malbone became a close friend of Wood, continuing to offer advice and assistance, as is

evident from his visible influence on Wood's work. The Jarvis-Wood partnership broke up in 1809, and in 1811 Wood took on Nathaniel Rogers as an apprentice. Wood left New York for Philadelphia in 1813, where he exhibited regularly at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. In 1818 he moved to Baltimore and worked both there and in Washington, D.C., perhaps also traveling through the South. During his last years, which were spent in Washington, his patronage declined; for a while he was reduced to making drawings for patent applications. He died in poverty. His notoriously dissolute life was the basis for a temperance tract published in Washington in 1834. Wood had three children with his first wife and one son with his second wife, Abigail Camp Wood.

In Wood's earliest known miniatures, which are all framed in similar gold cases, the background is an opaque dark gray and the signature and date are very finely incised. James Stuart (see below) is an extremely realistic likeness, linear in treatment and meticulous in execution. The painting is one of Wood's finest early portraits.

Subsequently Wood's miniatures show the strong influence of Malbone and are often mistaken for his work. The technique is similar to Malbone's, although Wood's brushwork is slightly grainier and the paint is applied in something closer to a wash technique. In Wood's mature work the backgrounds, like Malbone's are light and shaded by dark hatches or painted to resemble sky. However, Wood's portraits are more sharply defined than Malbone's, showing stronger contrasts and deeper shadows, with dark outlines around the eyes. Gum Arabic is used liberally, and at times the works are even varnished. The hair is brilliantly and airily rendered, often in the coup de vent style popular at the time. Heads are usually smaller than those by Malbone, and the subject is often placed off center or low on the ivory. Like Malbone's, Wood's subjects are self-assured; their presentations, however, are more varied and offer fuller characterizations.

Later works by Wood, although skillful, are not as forceful as those of his best period; the drawing is more hesitant, the brushwork is broader, and the backgrounds are somewhat darker.

Feist, Christian F., *"Lucas Vischer in Washington: A Swiss View of the District of Columbia in 1825,"* Records of the Columbian Historical Society, 1973-74, pp. 89

First visit, Jan. 20-21, 1825

"I visited the painter Wood who was formerly a goldsmith and became a painter of his own accord. His main field is miniature painting, but he also does sketchy portraits in watercolor and those I like pretty well. I find them spirited and tasteful, and have even greater estimation of the artist because he became everything he is on his own."

Dictionary of American Biography

WOOD, JOSEPH (c. 1778 - c. 1832), miniaturist, portrait painter, was born in Clarkstown, Orange County, N. Y., the son of a respectable farmer who was also sheriff of the county. Wishing his son to follow his own calling, the father frowned upon his artistic tendencies. Finally, at the age of fifteen, Joseph ran away to New York, hoping to become a landscape painter and to find a position that would help him improve his drawing. In both objectives he was bitterly disappointed, and spent several friendless years variously working and playing the violin for a livelihood. One day he saw some miniatures in a silversmith's window on Broadway and, persuading the proprietor to accept him as apprentice, was finally allowed to examine and copy one of the miniatures. For several years he worked as a silversmith, but about 1804, having made the acquaintance of another young artist, John Weslev Jarvis [q.v.], Wood went into partnership with him. The two young men started a flourishing business in eglomise silhouettes, sometimes taking in as much as a hundred dollars a day. William Dunlap [q.v.], who visited the two young men, describes them as artists who "indulged in the excitements, and experienced the

perplexities of mysterious marriages; and it is probable that these perplexities kept both poor, and confined them to the society of young men, instead of that respectable communion with ladies, and the refined circles of the city, which Malbone enjoyed" (post, II, 214). These "mysteries and perplexities" are also cited as possible causes of the none-too-friendly dissolution of the Wood-Jarvis partnership about 1809. Through Jarvis, Wood met Edward Greene Malbone [q.b.], one of the foremost American miniaturists of the day, and received instruction from him in the art of the miniature from the preparation of the ivory to the finishing of the picture. Malbone also rendered Wood considerable assistance and was his friend so long as he lived.

Wood maintained a studio in New York until 1812 or 1813, having set up for himself after the break with Jarvis, but moved to Philadelphia and exhibited regularly at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts until 1817. By 1827 he was established in Washington. and it is possible that he painted also in Baltimore. He was a prolific worker, turning out innumerable portraits and miniatures as well as pencil sketches and silhouettes. Among his oils are a cabinet-size painting of Andrew Jackson and a portrait of Henry Clay.

A miniature of Jackson by Wood was engraved in 1824 by James B. Longacre, while his portrait of Clay was lithographed in 1825 by Albert Newsam. He also painted a miniature of John Greene Proud. A watercolor portrait of an unknown man is inscribed on the reverse, "presented to Edith McPherson by Mrs. Abby Wood, 1839." Whether or not the Mrs. Wood thus mentioned was his widow is unknown. In his later years, whether through dissipation or other adversity, Wood slipped into a state of poverty, in which he died in Washington about 1832 at the age of fifty-four (Ibid., II, 230). Nathaniel Rogers, who became his pupil in 1811 and was his paid helper for several years, is said to have befriended him and his children in their adversity (Ibid., III, 17).

[See "Sketch of the Life of Mr. Joseph Wood," PortFolio (Phila.), Jan. 1811 ; William Dunlap, A Hist. of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the U. S. (3 vols., 1918), ed. By F. W. Bayley and C. E. Goodspeed ; Theodore Bolton, Early Am. Portraits Draughtsmen in Crayons (1923). And Early Am. Portrait Painters in Miniature (1921), both of which give an incorrect date of death; H. B. Wehle and Theodore Bolton, Am. Miniatures, 1730-1850 (1927).] D. G.

McMahan, Virgil E. *The Artists of Washington, DC, 1796-1996*. The Artists of Washington, Washington, DC, 1995.

WOOD, JOSEPH

Painter and teacher born near Clarkstown, NY, ca. 1778. He went to New York City in 1794 and was apprenticed to a silversmith opening his own studio in 1801. He studied under Edward G. Malbone and also benefitted technically from his association with John Wesley Jarvis, with whom he had a partnership painting miniatures from 1802 until 1810. He thereafter had his own studio in New York City until 1813, when he moved to Philadelphia. Three years later he moved to Washington, DC, where he opened his studio in the Weightman Building on Pennsylvania Avenue. He was active in the District the remainder of his life. A prolific artist, he became one of the country's best known miniature portrait painters. He executed portraits of many important statesman and military leaders including George Washington, James Madison, Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, Daniel Webster, John Randolph, Commodore Perry, Henry Clay, Winfield Scott and John Marshall. His works are exhibited at leading museums and galleries, including the National Academy of Design. He is represented in numerous public collections, including the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, MD. His oil painting of Dolly Madison (1817), from the collection of the Virginia Historical Society, was included in the exhibition "The Capitol Image, Painters in Washington, 1800-1915" at the National Museum of American Art in 1983-83. He died in Washington in 1830. REFS: BENEZIT; COSENTINO 2; FIELDING; GROCE; GROCE JR; MALLET 1; THIEME.