



PORTRAIT OF A MAN (POSSIBLY CAPTAIN FITZHUGH GREENE) and PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN (POSSIBLY MRS. FITZHUGH GREENE)

Attributed to John Durand (act. 1765–1782)

New York, Connecticut, or Virginia; c. 1768–1770

Oil on canvas; 29 $\frac{5}{16}$ × 24 $\frac{5}{16}$ " each

Promised gifts of Ralph Esmerian, P1.2001.1, 2

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

These portraits are thought to depict Captain and Mrs. Fitzhugh Greene of Newport, Rhode Island. Mrs. Greene's aristocratic bearing, rich jewels, and beautiful silk dress suggest a level of wealth that is explained by the merchant vessel seen through the window of her husband's companion portrait. At the time her portrait was painted, the American colonies imported more English woven silk than all other export markets combined, and Newport was a major port of entry and distribution for the luxurious fabric. After the use of indigo was legalized in Europe in the 1730s, blue became one of the most commonly worn colors in England, France, and Germany. Light blues, once the colors of peasant work clothing, rose to the ranks of European court society.

The pale blue of Mrs. Greene's gown conveys several important attributes appropriate for a marriage portrait. Blue is the color of purity, and since the Middle Ages it has been used to enrobe the Virgin Mary. It is also a long-accepted symbol of fidelity. And through its relatively recent association with European aristocracy, blue confers status on both the subject and her husband.

RESOURCES

American Folk Art Museum:

www.folkartmuseum.org

Brilliant, Richard. *Portraiture*. London: Reaktion Books, 1991.

Hollander, Stacy C. *American Radiance: The Ralph Esmerian Gift to the American Folk Art Museum*. New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

Simons, D. Brenton, and Peter Benes. *The Art of Family: Genealogical Artifacts in New England*. Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society in association with Northeastern University Press, 2002.

Sloat, Caroline F. *Meet Your Neighbors: New England Portraits, Painters and Society, 1790–1850*. Sturbridge, Mass.: Old Sturbridge Village, 1992.

NEW WORLD ARISTOCRATS

QUESTIONS FOR CAREFUL LOOKING

- What is happening in these pictures?
- What clues do we have about when they were painted?
- What can we say about these individuals' places in society?
- What are some visual elements that reflect each sitter's individuality?
- What comparisons can we make between these two portraits?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- How do these portraits communicate information about the sitters? Can we learn about their achievements, personalities, and morals through the paintings?
- From these two portraits, what can we learn about social norms for upper-class men and women in the late eighteenth century? What gender differences are evident in the two paintings? What is missing in these paintings? What can we *not* tell by looking?
- The artist John Durand is known today as a painter of wealthy families in the second half of the eighteenth century. How does the artist communicate the wealth of these sitters?
- In many of Durand's paintings, women appear holding a single flower, petals turned toward the viewer. In the painting of Mrs. Fitzhugh Greene, what is the role of the flower?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- What was happening in American history when these paintings were created?
- At the time these portraits were made, what gender roles did men and women play in America?
- Why were painted portraits so important in the eighteenth century? What are the functions of portraits today?
- How would you like to be depicted in a portrait?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Before discussing the portraits, ask students to search through their belongings (bags, pockets, keys, notebook, etc.) to find an object that hints at an element of their identities or personalities. Collect all objects and redistribute them to students so that all participants have an object that is not their own. What can they learn about the object's owner? Is there truth in the inferences we make from a person's "telling" objects?
- Using collage, drawing, or photographic techniques, have students create self-portraits in response to the prompt "You wouldn't know just by looking at me that I . . ."
- Ask students to photograph their communities, focusing particularly on social norms. To extend the project, have students also photograph another community that supports different social norms.