Episode 710, Story 2: George Washington Minature

Wes: Our next story takes us to the heart of Manhattan to investigate a tiny portrait which may lie at the center of some very big history. Its spring, 1789. 20,000 Philadelphians pack the streets to catch a glimpse of their nation’s leader en route to New York. First in war and first in peace, George Washington has been elected President. And as his inaugural procession forges north, America celebrates freedom from British rule. But for the thousands of enslaved African Americans watching the parade, liberty is nowhere in sight. If President Washington won’t pave their way to citizenship, who will? 220 years later, Dave Cox of Greenville, Ohio stumbled onto a tiny painting, which may shed light on the young nation’s struggle for freedom.

Dave: I came looking for a drawing, but I found something that may be a whole lot more exciting.

Wes: Dave has asked me to meet him at the nearly 250 year old Fraunces Tavern in Lower Manhattan – upstairs houses a museum where he made his discovery. Hey Dave great to see you. Dave and two buddies had travelled from Ohio to Manhattan to find a historic map of Fort Greenville. They were hoping to find it in the archives of Revolutionary War Lieutenant Henry Burbeck, kept here at the Fraunces Tavern Museum.

Dave: Unfortunately we didn’t find that, but we came up with something else.

Wes: Wow! That is a fabulous portrait!

Dave: I could see it says G. Washington across this ribbon at the bottom, and I said hey guys, it might be significant.
Wes: Dave says that the museum staff had no idea the portrait was in their collection, but they gave him the ok to do further research. Have you taken it out of the frame?

Dave: Yes, there’s something right back here.

Wes: “Property of White Matlack, 1790, New York. Okay, so who’s White Matlack?

Dave: We don’t know who he is. I know that Burbeck and Washington were together at Valley Forge, so, uh, they may have known each other quite well, but I don’t know who this guy is.

Wes: What is it that you want me to find out?

Dave: Well we’d like to know if this is an original painting of George Washington from that time period. And we’d also like to know who White Matlack is.

Wes: Well Dave, if this is a previously unknown “from life” portrait of George Washington, it’s a national treasure. I’ll let you know what I find out. Suzanne Prabucki is the curator of the Fraunces Tavern Museum.

Suzanne: This is the long room, and in 1783, Washington actually invited his generals to this room to bid them farewell and thank them for their service in the Continental Army. And right down the street at Federal Hall is where Washington was inaugurated.

Wes: Wow. So Washington really had a special connection to this place?
Suzanne: Yeah, he did.

Wes: Suzanne was just as surprised as Dave to see the portrait.

Suzanne: We’re run by the Sons of the Revolution. And somewhere along the line, the Henry Burbeck boxes were put into the sons’ archives instead of the museum’s archives. So they were very recently rediscovered, and the painting was in those boxes.

Wes: Suzanne’s not familiar with White Matlack and says there’s no mention of him in the inventory Burbeck’s papers. It’s this beautiful gem of a miniature portrait. It’s painted on paper though, which is unusual because most miniatures of this period were painted on a thin little sheet of ivory. I don’t even know that it’s as old as the date that’s written on the back of it. In 1790 Washington would have been in the second year of his Presidency, and New York was the US capital. The banner reads G. Washington, and the face certainly looks like him, but whoever painted this chose an unusual perspective for the portrait. This is the portrait that we’re most familiar with when we think of the father of our country. Almost all of these famous portraits show the classic head-on, or three-quarter, pose. There’s some faint writing on the back. I can make out maybe A L Washington. And, this looks like White M-a-t, that must be White Matlack, but there’s something else above it, which I can’t make out. At the Thaw Conservation Center at the Morgan Library and Museum, Director Margaret Holbin Ellis has offered to give our object some close scrutiny.

Margaret: Let’s have a look and see what we see. It’s painted in the style of a miniaturist painting.
Wes: She explains how miniature's such as this became popular as portable mementos in the 1700s. But ours is not as finely painted as other miniatures she's examined.

Margaret: I think we might be seeing something else. I just caught it from the light at this angle, these very distinct embossed lines. It looks to me as though it’s a plate mark.

Wes: A plate mark is an indentation made when an engraved metal plate is pressed against a sheet of paper. If that’s what we’re seeing, it means that this is not an original painting, but a black and white print that had been painted over. Margaret uses infrared light to reveal what’s beneath the paint. It is as she suspected.

Margaret: We can now see the printed lines below the paint layer.

Wes: Margaret says this print is called a dry point etching. Dry points are made by scratching a design onto a copper plate with a needle, and then smearing it with ink. The plate is sandwiched between a damp sheet of paper and a rolling mill.

Margaret: And when you peel the paper off of that plate, the ink is transferred to the paper and that’s your design. And that’s what we’re seeing underneath this now transparent watercolor.

Wes: Is there any way to make the lettering on the back of the frame more readable?

Margaret: We'll just try to adjust the contrast a little bit.
Wes: Well I can make out an A L and then Washington. I guess that would be General Washington.

Margaret: I see b-y…

Wes: By j-o. I can't make that out.

Margaret: I-g-h-t… so I guess that's probably the last name of the artist.

Wes: so – White Matlack isn't the artist. Who is "i-g-h-t"? The New York Public Library holds a large collection of etchings and prints from the Revolutionary War period. I emailed a photo of our image to Alvaro Gonzalez Lazo, a print specialist at the library. This miniature belonged to a guy named White Matlack and you can see it says New York, 1790.

Alvaro: This looks very familiar. Look at this.

Wes: And when was this print made?

Alvaro: 1790.

Wes: And this is by who?

Alvaro: Joseph Wright.
Wes: Okay, so that’s gotta be the i-g-h-t from the back of our print. Alvaro tells me that Joseph Wright, the son of a New Jersey sculptor, learned his printmaking in Europe, where his drawings caught the eye of Benjamin Franklin. Through that connection, Wright secured an appointment to paint George Washington.

Alvaro: The first one was done in on the fall of 1783 in New Jersey. The next one is in winter of 1784.

Wes: Okay. So he would have had a number of paintings to draw on for this print?

Alvaro: Oh definitely. He was able to draw Washington when he was sitting for him.

Wes: How many copies of Wright’s original print were made?

Alvaro: No more than 30.

Wes: Alvaro says the grooves in the etching plate would wear out after that many printings. He believes this is only the 7th known original print. The size and details are identical. Most telling, he says, are the plate marks, which line up exactly. Alvaro shows me several imitations inspired by Wright’s work.

Alvaro: All of these prints were made after 1790.
Wes: Alvaro explains their small size made them perfect for mailing. For many around the globe this was their first look at the new American leader. Our print is the only colored Wright etching he’s ever seen.

Alvaro: But one thing I know about it is that was done by an amateur….

Wes: Why by an amateur?

Alvaro: Because it doesn’t look like a really fine quality.

Wes: Who painted our print, and who is this guy White Matlack, who owned one of the most influential images of the 18th century? I’m searching a database of historic New York papers. Getting a lot of hits here but they’re almost all ads. Matlack is advertising as a watchmaker during the 1770s. Then he ran a brewery not far from the Fraunces Tavern. By the 1780’s he’s moving into steel manufacturing. Here’s the first entry that’s not an ad. It’s from 1786 and looks like he signed a letter to the Senate and assembly of the State of New York. This is interesting. The industrialist is taking a political position against the shipping of African slaves through the port of New York.

“We view the pain which those unhappy people experienced from being shipped like cattle to the West Indies and the southern states….”

Wes: Matlack demands New York politicians take action.

“…pass an act to prevent the further exportation of Negro slaves from this state.”
Wes: Three years later he’s a member of an abolitionist group called the “society for promoting the manumission of slaves.” And uh, he was sharing this society with some impressive company; John Jay, James Duane, George Bond, John Bleecker. Almost every guy on this list has a New York City street named after him. I think I’d like to try to see if I can find out a little bit more about Matlack. I’m meeting Anna Mae Duane, at the New York Historical Society. She’s a University of Connecticut professor, and she’s studied early Manhattan abolitionists. Recognize the signature?

Anna: I’ve researched White Matlack and I think it’s fascinating that he would have owned this. Washington represented, among other things, the revolutionary promise, right? That we are not who our fathers are, that we’re not determined by blood-line. And that’s the great promise of equality in America. But for Matlack also that promise caused him personal trauma.

Wes: Anna Mae explains that Matlack was a Quaker. But he and his brothers broke with the pacifist tenets of the Quaker faith to support the American Revolution.

Anna: His brother was an actual colonel in the Revolutionary Army and White Matlack was a big supporter of the Revolution. And for that the Quakers disowned both brothers, which is something they found extremely painful. This is actually a petition that they sent, trying to get some justice.

Wes: “What people of any age or country have ever yet been found who would suffer the houses of their worship, and the bones of their ancestors to be violated and torn from them without the most desperate resistance? We know of no one.” Wow. So what do you think this would have meant to Matlack? This drawing of Washington.
Anna: I think it would have represented both the promise of the revolution, the promise of equality and the sacrifices he had made for that equality. And I think that he may have shared this with his students at some point.

Wes: What students are you talking about?

Anna: The students at the NA - New York African Free School. Which is a…

Wes: Now I haven’t heard of that, the African Free School? Anna Mae says that the school for emancipated slaves opened in New York in 1787 – that’s three years before the date on our portrait. A proposal for the school is outlined in the manumission society’s records. “Anxious to promote the happiness of the poor Africans, we are of opinion that a committee should be appointed for establishing a free school in this city for the education of Negro children.” Wow, so this is the seed of the Free School. That means that Matlack was right there at the beginning.

Anna: Yes. It was his brain child.

Wes: Despite the support of elite New Yorkers such as Matlack, she explains that the school faced opposition from those who believed that educated blacks were likely to incite slave revolts. This would be pretty risky for him to become involved with.

Anna: I think it was, I think he really risked alienating some of his clients and connections.

Wes: How many students were taught there?
Anna: There were 40 in the beginning. By 1835 they were teaching up to 4 or 500 at a time.

Wes: Anna Mae has an idea about a possible connection between the free school and our etching.

Anna: From the beginning they wanted this to be training in citizenship. So they taught these students what white students were learning. Reading, writing, arithmetic. There was also an emphasis on public speaking and on art. Actually let me show you something…

Wes: What Anna Mae shows me next will certainly be of interest to Dave. You know, Dave, this little portrait took me down avenues that I’d never imagined. This was a portrait that really introduced the nation and the world to what George Washington looked like.

Dave: That's great.

Wes: And the print is incredibly special because of who owned it. White Matlack had been a revolutionary in many different arenas – turning from his Quaker faith to fight the British, building new industries in Manhattan, and battling slavery from the earliest days of the new nation.

Dave: Sounds like he sacrificed quite a bit to be a patriot.

Wes: Just as importantly he was one of the founders of a school for freed slaves here in New York City. And it was at this school where our image may have taken on added significance.
Anna: This is actually student work from the New York African Free School. This portrait was almost certainly copied from an artifact or a document brought in by one of the founders. Founding fathers were absolutely part of the curriculum and someone the students were taught to emulate and look up to.

Wes: That drawing of Ben Franklin is a copy of one of the most famous drawings of Franklin, right?

Anna: Right.

Wes: Who did this?

Anna: Would you believe this is a 13 year old boy who drew this picture? He was James McCune Smith, the son of a slave mother here in New York.

Wes: There are no records from the school before 1817 – but Anna Mae says it’s possible students copied this etching, and may even have colored it.

Anna: I can’t say for sure, but knowing what we know about White Matlack’s role in that school and what this portrait likely meant to him, I think it’s very likely that it would have shown up at some point in the African Free School.

Wes: So how does this make you feel now?
Dave: Couldn’t have been a popular thing to start a school for blacks in New York at that time. It means a lot to me.

Wes: Dave this was a great story. Thanks for letting me be a part of it. In 1827 slavery was abolished in New York, and in 1834 the African Free School was absorbed into the public school system, but remained segregated. The young student who drew Benjamin Franklin - James McCune Smith, became America’s first African American to obtain a medical degree. Other alumnae included prominent black abolitionists Alexander Crummell and Henry Highland Garnet, and the celebrated black actor Ira Aldridge. The portrait is now back at the Fraunces Tavern Museum, correctly filed in the archives.