



3: Unknown American Artist *Portrait of Colonel Nathaniel Rochester* (before 1831)

Peter Ogden Brown

The Memorial Art Gallery's portrait of Nathaniel Rochester (1752–1831) conveys the strength and character of this tough-minded real estate developer in his seventies. Colonel Rochester, the founder of the city that bears his name, is depicted in three-quarter view as a vigorous gentleman wearing glasses (with fashionable reading lens attachments) and dressed in a black, double-breasted coat, a white shirt, and a cravat.¹ Though unsigned, the portrait has long been attributed to the great naturalist John J. Audubon (1785–1851), owing to the inscription on its backing: "Nathaniel Rochester painted by J. J. Audubon."²

But this attribution, however tantalizing, turns out to be open to question. On stylistic grounds alone the work appears to be that of a far more accomplished portrait painter than Audubon. One of the artist's descendants, Lucy Winters Durkin, of the Memorial Art Gallery's Education Department, has pointed out that, although Audubon supported himself in his early years through portraiture, most of his successful renderings were done in crayon and chalk. Around 1822, he converted to oils in order to generate more revenue from his work, but his real skill lay in drawing, and he was never able to achieve the same level of accomplishment in the new medium. Indeed, there are few if any firmly attributed Audubon oil portraits from this period that would lend weight to the case for the Rochester work. Eventually he abandoned portraiture to devote his full time to nature studies. Working with a talented engraver and printer, he produced the epic *Birds of America*, upon which his reputation now lies.³

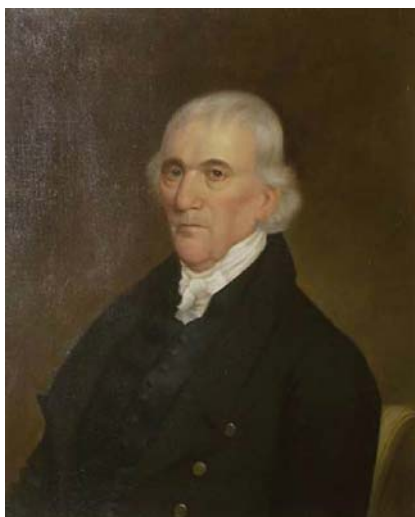
Unknown American Artist
*Portrait of Colonel Nathaniel
Rochester, before 1831*
Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in.
Gift of Thomas J. Watson, 34.1

The case for Audubon cannot flatly be ruled out. His diary indeed places him in Rochester for a few days in August 1824, during a trip on the recently completed Erie Canal:

*Rochester, August 22: Five years ago there were but few buildings here and the population is now 5000; the banks of the River are lined with mills and factories. The beautiful falls of the Genesee River, about eighty feet high and four times as broad, I have visited, and made a slight sketch of them. August 24th: Took passage for Buffalo.*⁴

So it is possible that during those two days in Rochester the Colonel sat for his portrait by Audubon. But if so, Audubon doesn't mention it in his journal, and there is no hard evidence that it ever happened.

Descendants of Rochester and students of Audubon have also long disputed the attribution to Audubon, which is based upon family tradition and on the written endorsement on the back of the canvas. At least one Rochester family member, Miss Helen Rochester Rogers, firmly believed that the inscription was in her distinguished ancestor's hand.⁵ But in 1969 another Rochester descendant, Charles Shepard, challenged both the attribution to Audubon and the identity of the subject as Rochester.⁶ Any doubt about the sitter's identity was dispelled in 2003 when a fourth-generation descendant of the Colonel, Wilson Rood, produced a miniature of the Memorial Art Gallery painting (also unsigned).⁷ If we then conclude that the Memorial Art Gallery's portrait is indeed that of Colonel Rochester, the question remains as to whether it was Audubon's work or that of another talented portraitist.



Unknown American Artist
Portrait of Nathaniel Rochester
Oil on canvas,
27 x 22 in. (unframed)
Rochester Historical Society,
Rochester, New York

That question may never be definitively answered. But if the family belief is correct that Audubon did paint a likeness of Nathaniel Rochester, is there then a case to be made for its being a portrait other than MAG's? Until quite recently that seemed to be so. A matching pair of portraits of Rochester and his wife Sophia, the originals of which are in the possession of their descendants and copies of which are in the Rochester Historical Society, thought to have been executed around 1822 (yet depicting a Rochester obviously older than that of MAG's), were considered likely candidates for attribution to Audubon. But new information has scuttled that hypothesis.⁸

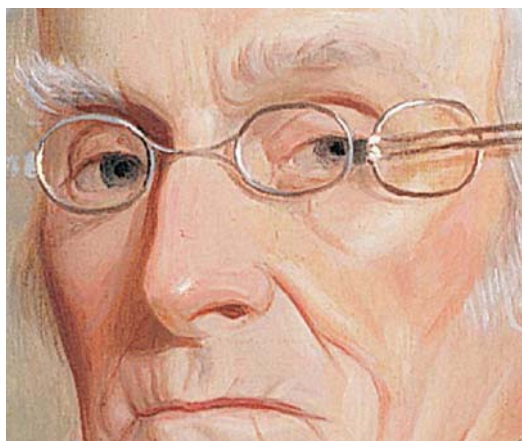
There is one other intriguing candidate for an Audubon attribution, however. An anonymous pastel done when Rochester was a much younger man (now hanging in the Campbell-Whittlesey House owned by the Landmark Society of Western New York) hung for years in the offices of the Hagerstown (Maryland) Bank, of which Rochester was the first president (1807–09).⁹ A partially visible notation on the back of the pastel suggests that it depicts the Colonel in his thirty-seventh year (1789), when Audubon would have been only four. But there is reason to doubt the accuracy of any written information appended to the various Rochester portraits, since all the notations were very

likely made years after the sittings.

In 1822, the year of Colonel Rochester's seventieth birthday (and a plausible date for MAG's oil portrait despite the inscription of 1824) the new Bank of Rochester was to be opened. As in the earlier situation at Hagerstown, the bank would have wanted a strong portrayal such as MAG's to inspire the confidence of its depositors, perhaps even entailing some "artistic license." As it happened, the bank did not open its doors until 1824, at which time it could have laid claim to the commissioned portrait to hang in its lobby. As its organizers had feared, the Bank of Rochester did not long survive the Colonel's death in 1831, its charter quietly expiring in 1840. At this juncture Nathaniel Rochester's portrait would logically have been returned to his widow, Sophia, who out-lived her husband by many years, dying in 1846.¹⁰ By then Audubon was nationally renowned, and it may be that Sophia's executors, in labeling the unsigned portraits for family distribution, and believing that their father had sat for the artist on some occasion (perhaps for the Hagerstown Bank's pastel, if that work's inscription about Rochester's age is also incorrect), mistakenly attributed the stronger painting to that artist.¹¹

Audubon cannot flatly be ruled out as the painter of the MAG portrait, but the technical skill displayed is not apparent in any other portrait attributed to him. But then who? Interesting cases can be made for both Grove S. Gilbert and Horace Harding,¹² both competent period portraitists with Rochester connections, as well as for the fine contemporary painter Rembrandt Peale (1778–1860) and a number of others.

In 1822, the same year in which Nathaniel Rochester was elected to the New York legislature, Peale moved his studio from Philadelphia to New York City in search of new portrait commissions. He painted Governor DeWitt Clinton and other notables, frequently traveling out of the city to accommodate his sitters. Rochester Historical Society



Unknown American Artist
Portrait of Colonel Nathaniel Rochester (detail), before 1831
Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in.
Gift of Thomas J. Watson, 34.1



William Home Lizars
1788–1859
The Village of Rochester,
from the book *Forty Etchings*
from *Sketches Made with the*
Camera Lucida, in North America,
in 1827 and 1828,
by Captain Basil Hall,
(Edinburgh, London, 1829)
Etching, 67/16 x 9 1/4 in.
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Frank
W. Lovejoy Jr., 84.36

The step-gabled building on the right is the first Monroe County Courthouse, built in 1822. The steepled church topped by a weathervane is the First Presbyterian Church, and St. Luke's Church, where the Rochester family worshipped, is to the right of the courthouse building.

records include a 1936 communication from a Mrs. Russell of New York City describing "a very fine portrait of Colonel Rochester done by Peale and given to (Rochester) Mayor Chas. Carroll," which was owned by her family.¹³ Certainly the MAG portrait of Rochester, with its three-quarter pose, clarity of features, technical skill in depicting glasses, monochromatic background, and humorless portrayal of the sitter's character, closely resembles Peale's earlier Philadelphia portraits, such as those of himself, Richard Peters, and William Tilghman.

Nevertheless, the case for Peale as the painter, as for the other candidates, is not entirely persuasive, and so the story of the painting's creation remains unfinished until further information comes to light. Yet even if we never learn the identity of the painter of this classic early nineteenth-century American portrait, its strength and posture of vigorous rectitude, so appropriate to its subject as well as the period, will always be arresting for contemporary viewers.

Peter Ogden Brown chairs the Art Committee of the Memorial Art Gallery and the board of the Rochester Historical Society.