



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

WASHINGTON ALLSTON (1779–1843)

Head of a Jew

Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in.

Painted in 1817

RECORDED: Washington Allston, “Received of ... the Boston Athenaeum One hundred dollars for the Study from the Jew’s head...”, *Archives* (Boston Athenaeum, December 10, 1829) // *Treasurer’s Report* (Boston Athenaeum, December 30, 1829) // Josiah Quincy, “Minutes,” in *Trustee’s Records, Annual Report* (Boston Athenaeum, January 4, 1830), p. 209, as one of the “Jew’s heads” // “Report, committee on Fine Arts,” *Archives* (Boston Athenaeum, January 4, 1830), acknowledges purchase of “head of a Jew” // Sarah Clarke, “Our First Great Painter, and His Works,” *Atlantic Monthly* XV (February 1865), p. 135 // *Trustee’s Records* (Boston Athenaeum, 1865), as lent to Albert Bierstadt for exhibition in Buffalo (no record can be found that this exhibition was actually held) // Moses F. Sweetser, *Allston* (1879), p. 187 // Mabel Munson Swan, *The Athenaeum Gallery, 1827–1873* (1940) as either p. 17 *Head of a Jew*, or p. 60 no. 75 *Sketch of a Jew* // Edgar Preston Richardson, *Washington Allston: A Study of the Romantic Artist in America* (1948), pp. 116, 201 no. 95 (purchase date given as 1833 [sic]) //

American Paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (1969), vol. I, p. 13, no. 60 // David Dearing, "Washington Allston," in Stanley Ellis Cushing and David B. Dearing, *Acquired Tastes: 200 Years of Collecting for the Boston Athenaeum*, exhib. cat. (Boston Athenaeum, 2007), p. 212 n. 3.

EXHIBITED: Boston Athenaeum, Massachusetts, 1828, *Exhibition* (nos. 146, 148, and 171 have interchangeable titles) // Harding's Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts, 1839, *Exhibition of Pictures Painted by Washington Allston*, p. 5, no 20, as "Sketch of a Polish Jew" // Apollo Association, New York, 1841, *March Exhibition*, no. 55, as "Portrait of a Polish Jew, a Sketch" // Boston Athenaeum, Massachusetts, 1850, *Exhibition*, no. 75, as "Sketch of a Jew" // Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, 1881, *Exhibition of the Works of Washington Allston*, p. 13, no 221, as "Sketch of a Polish Jew" // Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida, 1975, *The Paintings of Washington Allston*, p. 23, no. 15, 38 illus. // Hirschl and Adler Galleries, New York, 1976, *The American Experience*, (n.p.) no. 16 illus. // Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 1979–80, "*A Man of Genius:*" *The Art of Washington Allston, 1779–1843*, p. 193 no. 45 illus. // Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York 1982, *American Art from the Colonial and Federal Periods*, p. 46, no 33 illus.

EX COLL.: the artist; to the Boston Athenaeum, Boston, Massachusetts, purchased in 1829; on deposit with the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1879–1976; to [Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York]; to private collection, to [Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York]; to private collection, until the present

During the years that Washington Allston lived in Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston, from his return from England, in 1818, to his death in 1843, he was “esteemed with a veneration as the living spirit of the great masters of the past; ... the one artist whom all agreed in venerating as a genius.” The sculptor Horatio Greenough called Allston “a father” who “kindle[d] me, making me no longer myself, but as it were, an emanation of his own soul.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the English poet, declared that Allston was “gifted with an artistic and poetic genius unsurpassed by any man of his age,” while for William Wordsworth, Allston’s portrait of Coleridge was “the only likeness that ever gave me pleasure.” Washington Irving wrote of Allston that he was “a man whose memory I hold in reverence and affection, as one of the purest, noblest, and most intellectual beings that ever honored me with his friendship.” (The most comprehensive and accessible discussion of Allston is William H. Gerds and Theodore Stebbins, Jr., “*A Man of Genius:*” *The Art of Washington Allston, (1779–1843)*, the catalogue for the 1979 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston exhibition cited above. The source for the quotes is Eliot Clark, *History of the National Academy of Design* [1954], pp. 43–44, and 190.) Allston’s art expressed the apotheosis of romantic yearning in antebellum America. But clearly, from these tributes, his character was as valued by contemporaries as his brush and pen.

Washington Allston was a scion of a wealthy and sprawling family, prominent in South Carolina politics and society for decades. The Allstons and Alstons (they spelled it both ways) were indigo and rice planters in the Georgetown region, who escaped the lowland cholera season with fine homes in Charleston. The future artist was born in All Saints Parish, Waccamaw, one of three surviving children of William Allston (1736–1781) and his second wife, Rachel Moore Allston (1757–1839). Washington’s father, William, was a colorful figure known locally as “Gentleman Billy.” Both he and

his cousin, also William Allston, distinguished as “King Billy” (perhaps in deference to his greater wealth), served under General Francis Marion, the “Swamp Fox,” in the Revolutionary War campaigns around the Pee Dee River. (“King Billy” Allston changed the spelling of his name to Alston, reflecting the original spelling of the name in England, but mostly in a largely futile attempt to avoid confusion.) After William Allston died, Rachel Allston married Dr. Henry Collins Flagg (1742–1801), a Newport, Rhode Island native. (Through this connection Allston subsequently became uncle to a family of Flagg painters, the sons of his half-brother, also Henry Collins Flagg [1790–1863].) In 1787, Washington Allston left his childhood home in South Carolina for the healthier climate of Rhode Island, where he attended school and first studied art. He continued to draw and paint during his undergraduate days at Harvard College. Allston graduated from Harvard in 1800 and returned briefly to South Carolina. Determined, by this time, to be an artist, he sold his interest in the family plantations in order to finance his study in Europe.

Allston remained in Europe for eight years, spending four years in Rome from 1804 until 1808 where he established a lifelong friendship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He returned to America where he married Ann Channing, the sister of his boyhood Newport friend, William Ellery Channing, in 1809. The couple sailed for England in 1810. Ann Channing Allston died in 1815. During this second period in England, Allston established his reputation in Europe, enjoying the company of a society of artists and poets. When Allston returned to settle permanently in Boston in 1818, he left behind him a coterie of devoted friends and admirers and the likelihood of a distinguished career in England. He was elected an associate of the Royal Academy of Art in 1818, shortly after he left, and there is speculation that had he remained, he might have been elected to succeed his teacher and fellow countryman, Benjamin

West, as President of the Academy. (See the interesting discussion of Allston's abrupt departure from England in Gerdts and Stebbins, pp. 109–12.)

Washington Allston settled in Cambridgeport, where he spent the remaining twenty-five years of his life struggling to realize his vision of his historical/biblical subject, *Belshazzar's Feast*. (Two studies for this work, both executed in England in 1817, are in Boston at The Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The large unfinished canvas is in the collection of The Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan. These are illustrated in Gerdts and Stebbins, pp. 191 nos. 42–43, 108 fig. 45, respectively.) Allston's second wife, whom he married in 1830, was Martha Remington Dana, sister of the writer, Richard Henry Dana (1815–1882). Though his American career was marked by the frustration attendant on the Belshazzar project, Allston continued to paint portraits and landscapes. He received a steady stream of visitors to his home and studio in Cambridgeport, which became a kind of pilgrimage site for aspiring young American artists to whom Allston was invariably welcoming and encouraging. In addition, he was the object of reverential affection from a wide circle of intellectuals as well as a faithful cadre of supportive patrons.

The present work, *Head of a Jew*, was painted in England and came back to America with Allston on his voyage home. It is a product of the period when Allston was flush with enthusiasm for his Belshazzar theme and is one of a series of paintings and sketches all identified as heads of Jews. Of this series Gerdts writes:

At the time Allston was first working on *Belshazzar's Feast*, he painted a series of four studies of Polish Jews (nos. 44–47), whom he had observed in the streets of London. Interest in and

appreciation of venerable exotic types are common enough in art..., but Allston's choice of Polish Jews is significant, for it allies him especially with Rembrandt, both in subject and in interpretation. The four bust-length, life-size studies are similar to and are often related to *Belshazzar*. Although they constitute prototypes for the group of soothsayers at the right of the canvas, they are not models for any of them, nor would this have been Allston's reflective methodology. Rather, they provided the basic raw material for his development and rumination.

Three of the four figures in the series are unfinished, but one of them is complete, with the inclusion of a hand with a ring, holding a staff. There seems to be no explanation for this difference, but Alston may have intended to finish all four and then have either decided against this or become diverted toward other projects.... All four were brought back to America and were shown in the 1839 exhibition of Allston's paintings at Chester Harding's Gallery (Gerdtz and Stebbins, p. 109).

The present picture is the only one in this series that Allston completed.

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