

Henry Laurens

(1724-1792)

Henry Laurens, a patriot and statesman, was born in Charleston, South Carolina. A leading merchant in that city, Laurens later owned and managed several plantations. He got his start in politics when he was elected to the commons house of assembly in 1757. Laurens lived in London beginning in 1771, but returned to South Carolina three years later. There he was elected a delegate to the first provincial congress and later became its president. He served in the Continental Congress from 1777 to 1780 and succeeded John Hancock as its president.

In August 1780, en route abroad to negotiate a treaty and loan with Holland, Laurens was captured off Newfoundland by the British and was confined for 15 months in the Tower of London. Because he was held on suspicion of high treason, Laurens could not be exchanged as a military prisoner of war. During his difficult confinement, he wrote two pro-British petitions, although he maintained his commitment to the patriot cause. These submissive petitions were sharply criticized in America.

Laurens was eventually released—in exchange for Lord Cornwallis—and he joined Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Jay in Paris to negotiate the articles of peace with Great Britain. Laurens then acted as unofficial minister to England until 1784, when he returned to New York and reported to Congress. In declining health and suffering heavy wartime property losses, Laurens retired to his home on South Carolina's Cooper River until his death in 1792.

This painting of Henry Laurens depicts the statesman as he appeared in 1781 during his 15-month political imprisonment in the Tower of London. Inscribed in the upper left corner of the canvas are the words “Hon: Henry Laurens, / Pres: of the American Congrefs. / (Painted 1781. while in the Tower.)” Officials at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., brought the painting to the attention of the Joint Committee on the Library in 1886. The committee acted to acquire the picture from London dealer Henry Stevens & Son after the Corcoran's founder, William W. Corcoran, declined to do so.

In this accomplished portrait, Laurens looks away from the viewer and slightly upward while holding a letter in his left hand, his arm resting on a table. A dark red curtain hangs diagonally behind him, opening to a view over his left shoulder of a castellated building that represents the Tower, where the portrait was painted. The face is convincingly and expressively modeled. The dignified, sober expression befits Laurens's political importance and his unpromising situation, both of which are concisely stated in the inscription in the upper left corner of the painting. The letter that Laurens holds in his hand contains these words:

I have acted the part of a fait[hful] / subject. I now go resolved still to labour for / peace at the same time determined in the / last event to stand or fall with my country./ I have the honour to be / Henry Laurens

When acquired for the U.S. Capitol in 1886, the portrait was ascribed to John Singleton Copley. That attribution, however, is not compatible with the style of the small, full-length portrait of Laurens—now in the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.—that Copley painted just after Laurens was released from prison in 1782. Instead of Copley's crispness of contour and strong impasto, the Senate's portrait is distinguished by softness, both in the free contours of the coat and in the broad, malleable planes of the face.

It is known from Laurens's correspondence that he was painted while in the Tower by one “Mr. Abbot [sic]” of 20 New Cavandish Street, Portland Place—certainly Lemuel Francis Abbott. During this period, Abbott was indeed active in London, where he specialized in half-length portraits of diplomats and military figures. His style, as known especially from numerous paintings in the National Portrait Gallery in London, is so close to the style of the Senate painting that there is little doubt that Abbott painted it.

Henry Laurens

Lemuel Francis Abbott (ca. 1760–1802)

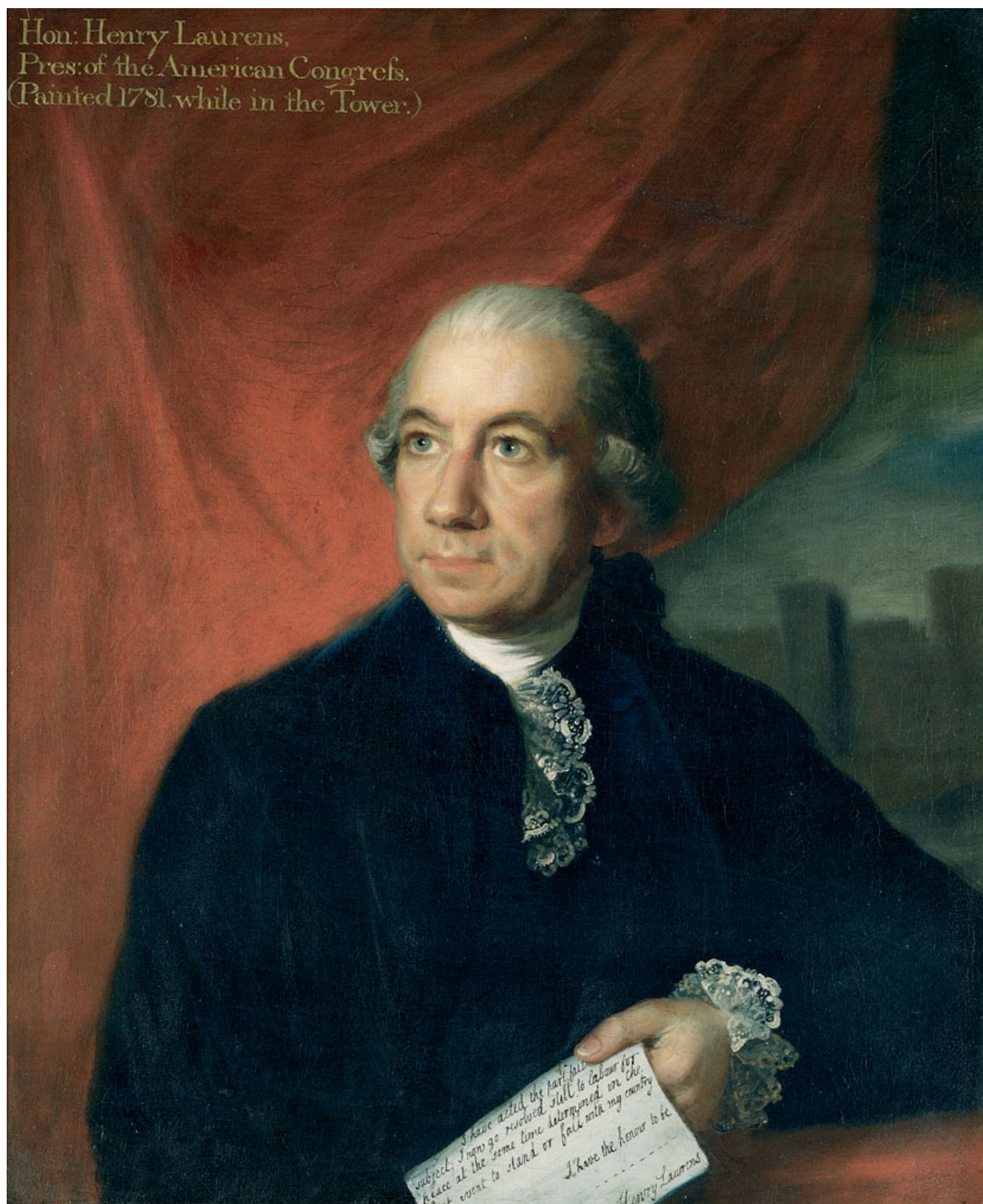
Oil on canvas, 1781 or 1784

31 x 25 inches (78.7 x 63.5 cm)

Inscribed (upper left corner): Hon: Henry Laurens, / Pres: of the American Congress. /
(Painted 1781. while in the Tower.)

Purchased by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1886

Cat. no. 31.00010



A complication is introduced by another letter that Laurens wrote in June 1784 before his return to America. He tells his daughter that his agent, Mr. Bridgen, “intends to get a Copy of the painting by Mr. Abbot [sic]” and “has called upon me for the fragment of the Letter which was *or is intended to be* [emphasis added] marked on the picture. Enclosed you will find it as accurately penned as memory serves at the distance of near ten years.” It may be inferred that Abbott had not added the text of the letter to his 1781 Tower portrait—or that Laurens was not sure that he had. Since he then asks his daughter to take a copy of this inscription to Abbott “and speak to him respecting the copy of the picture,” he surely means to commission Abbott to paint a replica of his 1781 life portrait. There is no reason to doubt that the Senate portrait is an original by Abbott—either his 1781 painting from life or his 1784 replica.

The enclosure that Laurens sent to his daughter has not survived. Obviously, the quotation recalled after a decade referred to something Laurens had written before the American Revolution, something of which he remained proud. Like many colonials, particularly in South Carolina, where the British ties remained strongest, Laurens was torn by conflicting loyalties. In the same passage in his letter to his daughter, Laurens makes that clear:

If I have a desire of transmitting my memoirs to Posterity, it is in shewing [sic] that I acted a faithful part to my King that I labored for continuing Peace and Friendship with my Brethren and fellow Subjects that at the hazard of my Life and Fortune I rejected all Temptations to abandon my Country in the day of her distress, but I had no thought even of this till it was called for.

In the headlong, unpunctuated rush of Laurens’s words of 1784, something of the passionate conflict that the statesman felt as revolution approached is reborn. That he chose his pre-Revolutionary words as his motto on a portrait representing his darkest hour is both a patriot’s creed and a reminder of how the choice between king and conscience had been thrust upon him.

