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## The Merging of Ornamentation, Artistic Competence, and Social Structure in the Portraiture of Jeremiah Theus in Charleston, South Carolina

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THE MERGING OF ORNAMENTATION,  
ARTISTIC COMPETENCE,  
AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE  
IN THE PORTRAITURE OF JEREMIAH THEUS  
IN CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

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Louisiana State University and  
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in

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by  
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## **Abstract**

Previous research into the art of Jeremiah Theus has often left much to be desired. A common choice of historians is to discuss how he differs from artists of his time, or discuss him solely in the context of other artists. However, it is important to study Theus within his own framework. A study of his particular location, time period, family history, the subjects he elected to portray and the way he chose to portray them all help in understanding and recognizing what makes Theus unique as an artist. This thesis aims not only to address the research undertaken by previous scholars but also strives to approach the artist from a more subjective direction. Hopefully, this will discourage future scholars from rapidly attributing the primitive works of eighteenth century Charleston to Theus and from unjustly assuming more skillful works as being too advanced to belong to his oeuvre.



## Introduction to Jeremiah Theus, Limner of Charlestown

Jeremiah Theus often referred to himself as the “limner of Charleston” in the advertisements he placed in the *South Carolina Gazette* advertising his services in the 1740s. The term “limner,” as well as the profession it describes, is derived from “illuminators,” the artists who painstakingly decorated medieval manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> Though typically a limner specializes in watercolor miniature portraits, Jeremiah Theus’ attention to detail when capturing the character of his subjects and the detail of their ornamentation in his full size oil portraits classifies him in this group. Miniatures were fashionable status symbols in the British Colonies and Theus’ client records in South Carolina show that he created a great many of them.<sup>2</sup> However, due to their size and their personal significance, many of Theus’ miniatures are now lost or linger unidentifiably in private collections. Although Theus created miniatures, they were hardly his specialty.

Jeremiah Theus, one of the most notable portrait painters of the Early American South, was born in Felsberg, west of Chur, Switzerland, on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1716.<sup>3</sup> It was a time of great religious unrest. The Thirty Year’s War ended six decades before Jeremiah Theus was born, but not before the city of Chur had been completely destroyed and large segments of the population had succumbed to plagues. The war may have lasted thirty years but it took Chur over a century to recover.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere in Switzerland, the

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Louise Roark, *Artists of Colonial America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2003), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Simons Middleton, *Jeremiah Theus; Colonial Artist of Charles Town* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1953), 146.

<sup>3</sup> Leo Schelbert, *Historical Dictionary of Switzerland* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2007) 76.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

battle between Protestants and Catholics continued. In 1656 and 1712, there was the First and Second Villmergen War followed by various rebellions across the Old Swiss Confederacy.<sup>5</sup> Then, in the summer of 1735, the Protestant Theus family arrived in South Carolina.<sup>6</sup>

Jeremiah, his brothers Christian and Simon, along with their parents, Simeon and Anna Walser, settled in Orangeburgh Township after paying off their passage on the ship of Capt. Hugh Percy.<sup>7</sup> Christian quickly became closely involved with the Protestant Church and went on to become a highly regarded Reverend. The second brother, Simon, served as a bookkeeper to a merchant for fourteen years and then went on to open his own store and tavern. Each of the Theus brothers made a name for themselves in their respective circles. Although they led very different lives, they were all known for their kindness towards others and their closeness with each other.<sup>8</sup>

Previous scholarly research has focused extensively on the naïve aspects of Theus' art and dwelled on comparisons with other, more prominent colonial portraitists. In 1834, Art Historian William Dunlap wrote a short description of Theus' style.<sup>9</sup> Dunlap was an artist, not a historian, and at this time there were less than thirty works attributed to Theus. All of the portraits identified up until 1834 were commissioned for people of a lower social status in the Charleston community and utilized Theus' more primitive and cost effective techniques. As a result, no one

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Middleton, *Jeremiah Theus*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>9</sup> William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (New York: G. P. Scott, 1834), 38.

believed Theus was capable of more advanced portraiture and Dunlap's critique developed into a harsh visual analysis of Theus' unsophisticated style. In 1899, while conducting research on an unrelated topic, Dr. Robert Wilson nearly doubled the number of portraits attributed to Theus.<sup>10</sup> That number doubled once again in 1924, with the additional survey conducted by Lawrence Park, a researcher who travelled the South updating records for the Frick Art Reference Library.<sup>11</sup>

The author of his most thorough biography to date, Margaret Simons Middleton, was able to locate and attribute 181 portraits by Theus. Unlike previous research on the artist, her primary purpose was to find and identify as many portraits by Theus as possible and to give more insight into his family history. Middleton relied on placing ads in magazines requesting information from strangers as well as doing research in libraries around the South Carolina area.<sup>12</sup> Conducting research in the 1950s limited Middleton's potentials, she did not have the technological advancements that are available today. Now, there are more databases and sources across the country and abroad that help to gather information from places a researcher cannot always physically visit. Through the use of these techniques, this method of research resulted in the discovery of approximately a dozen additional works by Theus (see appendix).

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Wilson. D.D, "Year Book, City of Charleston," *South Carolina Gazette* (1899):137-147.

<sup>11</sup> John Hill Morgan, "Notes on Jeremiah Theus and his portrait of Elizabeth Rothmaler," *Brooklyn Museum Quarterly* vol XI (1924): 47-54.

<sup>12</sup> Anonymous, "Notes," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 54.2 (1953): 112.

Unlike previous scholarship, this thesis aims to rediscover Jeremiah Theus' individuality through a study of his contemporaries, potential influences, clientele, and a formal analysis of his works. The context surrounding his work is just as important as the resulting work itself.

### **Charleston in Context**

There is little to no reliable information about his training as an artist, but Charleston is where Theus' artistic career began. The unique social and artistic atmosphere of Charleston made it an ideal location where his occupation as a Limner could thrive. Had he decided to reside in any of the other colonies, he might not have been so fortunate. There were no other residential portraitists competing for work in Charleston during his time in the city.<sup>13</sup> Charlestonians favored one portraitist at a time; Henrietta Johnston directly preceded Theus, and John Wollaston whose popularity in Charleston peaked soon after Theus' death.<sup>14</sup> Artists, like John Wollaston, would have paid temporary visits, which sometimes lasted several years and during which they produced many paintings.<sup>15</sup> However, these visitors do not appear to have conflicted or hindered with the popularity of Theus' work.

The city of Charles Town, established in 1670, was a hub for agriculture, mercantilism, and immigration during the eighteenth century. Its placement near the coast and at the southernmost point of the British colonies in the seventeenth century

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<sup>13</sup> William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

left the city exposed to many enemies, such as Spanish and French colonists who were trying to expand their own influence in America. The site of the capital of the Carolina colony also ensured that Charleston would become a bustling port town. As a result of the influx of many European Protestants to the area and the concurrent boom triggered by trade, Charleston quickly became the wealthiest and largest city south of Philadelphia.<sup>16</sup>



Detail of a map by Thomas Kitchen

The Southern Colonies' social structure was primarily based on various prejudices relating to a person's ethnicity or religion. At its summit was a class whose standing paralleled that of the English landed gentry. When Josiah Quincy, a highly influential Northern propagandist and lawyer, visited South Carolina in 1773 for health reasons, he noted that "the inhabitants may well be divided into opulent and lordly planters, poor and spiritless peasants and vile slaves."<sup>17</sup> At the very bottom of the social pyramid were the slaves working the fields to grow the rice and indigo that kept

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, "The Aristocracy in Colonial America," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 74 (1962): 6.

Charleston's agricultural wealth flowing. On the next tier were the domestic slaves whose job it was to cook, launder and serve for their masters and their master's family. These particular slaves could also hold jobs as blacksmiths or other forms of skilled labor.

During the seventeenth century, slaves made up nearly half of South Carolina's population and included not only imported Africans, but also Native Americans. By the eighteenth century, African slaves made up seventy percent of South Carolina's population.<sup>18</sup> Charleston, being a major port city for the Southern Colonies, was the chief location for slave sales and distribution.

The slave trade to South Carolina was significant in scale. Some 93,000 slaves were imported into that colony in the period 1706 – 75, with about 35,000 entering before 1750 and more than 58,000 coming in the quarter-century leading up to the American Revolution. This was a modest number of slave imports when compared with the Caribbean, especially Jamaica, but a higher volume than that for any other North American mainland colony.<sup>19</sup>

Free blacks who owned property made up the next level of the social pyramid. These men and women may have been prominent members of their community, owned property, and worked proper jobs, but they were still seen as well beneath their white peers. The people found above this point in the hierarchy of colonial society were typically not of African, Latino or Native American decent, the ethnicities of the enslaved.<sup>20</sup> The majority of these people were poor farmers. These farmers may have owned slaves but generally they depended on their own families to help grow crops.

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<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Morgan, "Slave Sales in Colonial Charleston", *The English Historical Review* 113.453 (1998): 905.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> William L. Ramsey "A Coat for 'Indian Cuffy': Mapping the Boundary between Freedom and Slavery in Colonial South Carolina," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 103.1 (2002): 48.

The members of society found at the bottom levels of the social hierarchy were not represented in the oeuvre of Theus. This neglect of portraying the slaves and lower classes of society is clearly intentional. Upon arriving in the colonies, Theus and his family worked as a kind of indentured servants called “redemptioners” to pay off their passage to America, so he understood the lifestyles and desires of these people.<sup>21</sup> Yet, he chose to ignore them. Could this omission be due to their inability to pay the costs of a portrait? Theus’ career and social status greatly rose in prestige once he moved to Charleston and quickly purged all signs of his underprivileged past life.

Theus surrounded himself not only with the top tier of society, the gentry, but also the newly-formed group of citizens known as the middle class. The middle class, an invention of the eighteenth century, was made up of individual businessmen, such as lawyers, doctors, shopkeepers, blacksmiths, and millers. The gentry was made up of governing individuals, such as governors, councilmen, and those with prominent positions in the church. Typically, these people lived comfortable lives that did not require any form of daily or strenuous labor, but they had a heavy impact on the larger Charleston community.<sup>22</sup> They owned vast amounts of land and possessed numerous slaves. Thomas Jefferson was intimately familiar with the upper hierarchy of the South. He broke these distinctions down further by stating that,

at the top [is] ‘the great landholders’; next, ‘the descendants of the younger sons and daughters of the aristocrats, who inherited the pride of their ancestors, without their wealth’; thirdly ‘the pretenders, men, who, from vanity or the impulse of growing wealth, from that enterprise which is natural to talents, sought to detach themselves from the plebian ranks’;

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<sup>21</sup> Middleton, *Jeremiah Theus*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Martha Zierden, “A Trans-Atlantic Merchant's House in Charleston: Archaeological Exploration of Refinement and Subsistence in an Urban Setting,” *Historical Archaeology* 33.3 (1999): 75.

next, 'a solid and independent yeomanry, looking askance at those above, yet not venturing to jostle them'; and, finally, the 'degraded' and 'unprincipled' overseers, the smallest group.<sup>23</sup>

For members of the Charleston gentry, it was enough to own land and have money, but to truly be a member, business partnerships had to be made, political appointments had to be achieved, and marriage into an established family had to take place.<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, many (if not nearly all) of the people identified in Theus' portraits are connected either through business or blood.

### **Career and Personal Life**

As an artist, Jeremiah did not make his debut until September 6, 1740, when he placed an ad in the *South-Carolina Gazette*.

Notice is hereby given, that Jeremiah Theus Limner is remov'd into the Market Square near Mr. John Laurans Sadler where all Gentlemen and Ladies may have their Pictures drawn, likewise Landskips of all sizes, crests and Coats of Arms for Coaches or Chaises. Likewise for the Conveniency of those who live in the Country, he is willing to wait on them at their respective Plantations.<sup>25</sup>

This was Jeremiah's initial foray into Charleston society, and he was not only welcomed but also quickly became an artistic success. It is likely that his quick rise in popularity was due to his kind-hearted nature. He frequently opened his home to those in need of a place to sleep or worship.<sup>26</sup> Given how regularly this hospitality took place, word of this openness would have surely spread, making him more endearing to patrons. His

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<sup>23</sup> Schlesinger, "The Aristocracy in Colonial America," 6-7.

<sup>24</sup> Zierden, "A Trans-Atlantic Merchant's House in Charleston," 75.

<sup>25</sup> Middleton, *Jeremiah Theus*, 33.

<sup>26</sup> Gilbert P. Voigt, "Cultural Contributions of German Settlers to South Carolina," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 53.4 (1952): 189.



thoughtfulness in his personal life undoubtedly translated to his professional life as well. He did not require his sitters to sit for long, tedious hours. He avoided this by painting their faces first and then adding their bodies later. Moreover, by copying elements from contemporary English and French prints, he allowed his subjects to live out their dreams of donning the latest European fashions.<sup>27</sup> By 1744, his confidence as an artist had grown exponentially and he began to teach as well as create, opening himself up to new possibilities in society.<sup>28</sup>

Later that year, Jeremiah was elected to the South Carolina Society. “This organization, today the third oldest of its kind in Charleston, was a social, charitable, and educational society.”<sup>29</sup> This was just another sign of his rising importance in the community. As Charleston was the fourth largest city in the new America and by far the richest, it was an attractive community in which an artist like Jeremiah could prosper.<sup>30</sup> Its affluent citizens were desperate to display their social status, and having their portraits painted by Jeremiah Theus became another way to prove one’s standing.

### **Colonial Portraiture**

John Smibert, a Scottish artist and Professor of Art and Architecture, moved to the Northern Colonies in 1730 after a failed attempt at establishing a college meant to “educate” and convert Indians in Bermuda. He settled in Boston and opened a gallery

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<sup>27</sup> Carrie Rebora Barratt, “Faces of a New Nation: American Portraits of the 18th and Early 19th Centuries,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 61.1 (2003): 12.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Francis Seybolt, “South Carolina Schoolmasters of 1744,” *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, 31.4 (1930): 315.

<sup>29</sup> Middleton, *Jeremiah Theus*, xv.

<sup>30</sup> Barratt, “Faces of a New Nation,” 12.

featuring European paintings. Smibert's collection became the colonies' first solid tie to academically trained European painters, and many American-born artists, like John Singleton Copely, visited his gallery. Consequently, the portraits made in the colonies took on the Baroque and Rococo characteristics of European portraits, including a penchant for affluent flourishes meant to convey an aristocratic status and lifestyle.

Among the paintings in Smibert's gallery was one of his own American group portraits entitled *The Bermuda Group* (1728 - 39). This group portrait was one of the paintings that helped set a precedent for future colonial portraits.<sup>31</sup> In 1987, Richard H. Saunders and Ellen G. Miles published a study of American Colonial Portraits and concluded that "as many as 7,400 portraits were commissioned by or for Americans between 1700 and 1776; of these two-thirds were painted after 1750. Only a relative few were public commissions; few were casual commissions. Most were intended for the domestic environment and to commemorate a family milestone."<sup>32</sup>

### **Influence and Inspiration**

The only in-depth biography on Jeremiah, written by Middleton, fails to pinpoint any influences on his style as a portrait painter. Instead, the author chose the negative approach, pointing out why various famous contemporaries could not have filled the position.<sup>33</sup> Franz Lippoldt (fig. 1) too often exaggerated the racial features for effect.

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<sup>31</sup> Richard H. Saunders, *John Smibert: Colonial America's First Portrait Painter*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), 121.

<sup>32</sup> Richard H. Saunders, and Ellen G. Miles. *American Colonial Portraits: 1700-1776* (Washington City: Smithsonian Institution Pr., 1987), 44.

<sup>33</sup> Middleton, *Jeremiah Theus*, xv.



Figure 1 - Franz Lippoldt, *Portrait of a Lady*, ca. 1700s. Oil on canvas, 85.5 x 65.5 cm. Christie's, New York.

Balthazar Denner (fig. 2) created works that too closely resembled the work of Dutch and Italian portraitists. Enoch Zeeman (fig. 3), Jonathan Richardson (fig. 4), Jan Kupetzky (fig. 5), Francis Hayman (fig. 6), and Stephen Slaughter (fig. 7) were all a little too “English.”<sup>34</sup>



Figure 2 - Balthazar Denner, *Portrait of Georg Friedrich Handel*, ca. 1726-1728. Oil on canvas, 74.9 x 62.6 cm. National Portrait Gallery, Washington D.C.

Middleton’s biography on Theus was written in 1953, and a few modern authors have taken a more helpful approach in trying to understand Jeremiah’s artistic origins.<sup>35</sup> Instead



Figure 3 - Enoch Zeeman, *George Brudenell 3rd Earl of Cardigan*, ca. 1700s. Oil on canvas, 124.5 x 99 cm. Sotheby's, New York.

of discussing how he differs from artists of his time, they worked to find those who shared more visual and stylistic similarities with Theus than they did differences. Through their efforts, we can tie his styles to American painters

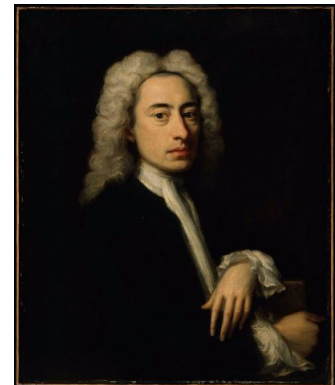


Figure 4 - Jonathan Richardson, *Portrait of Alexander Pope*, ca. 1736. Oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

like John Wollaston (fig. 8), Robert Feke (fig. 9), John Hesselius (fig. 10), and Joseph Blackburn (fig. 11).<sup>36</sup> It would be

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Harry B. Wehle, “Some Portraits from South Carolina,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 26.8, (1931): 188-189.

<sup>36</sup> Fintan Cullen, “Charles Carroll of Carrollton: Painting the Portrait of an Irish-American Aristocrat,” *Eighteenth-century Ireland / Iris an Dá Chultúr*, 25 (2010): 157.



Figure 5 - Jan Kupetzky, *Portrait of Leopold d'Autriche*, ca. 1740. Oil on canvas, 48 x 38.5 cm.



Figure 6 - Francis Hayman, *Portrait of Francis Hayman*, ca. 1700s. Oil on canvas, 104 x 101.5 cm. Tennants Auctioneers, North Yorkshire.



Figure 7 - Stephen Slaughter, *Sir George Lee*, ca. 1753. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm. Tate Gallery Collections, London.



Figure 8 - John Wollaston, *Portrait of William Holmes*, ca. 1763/1769. Oil on canvas, 63.8 x 76.5 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.



Figure 9 - Robert Feke, *Portrait of a Woman*, ca. 1748. Oil on canvas, 125.4 x 100.5 cm. Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn.



Figure 10 - John Hesselius, *Mrs. Richard Brown*, ca. 1760. Oil on canvas. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.



Figure 11 - Joseph Blackburn, *Portrait of Mrs. David Chesebrough*, ca. 1754. Oil on canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

presumptuous to assume that he specifically looked to these other American portraitists for stylistic ideas, but they are all characteristically known for having Theus-style square jaws, almond eyes, and awkward stances.<sup>37</sup> However, the almond eyes were more a characteristic of the Rococo portrait style introduced by foreign artists like John Wollaston, as were the smirk-like upturned lips and sumptuous fabrics.<sup>38</sup>

Repeatedly, historians like Middleton and Wehle insisted on a distance between Theus and his European predecessors, but that seems unfounded. We know Jeremiah used fashion prints from plates from Europe to design the clothes donned in his portraits.<sup>39</sup> Why could he not also use these fashion plates (as well as mezzotints of European paintings often imported to the colonies) as visual aids for self-training and inspiration like many of his contemporaries did? John Singleton Copley is one of these contemporaries. He made a career painting portraits of the middle-class in New England and Europe alike. His portrait of Mrs. Jerathmael Bowers, completed in the 1760s, references a mezzotint by James Mcardell of the painting by London portraitist, Sir Joshua Reynolds, of Lady Caroline Russell. Clear parallels can be drawn based on the pose, costume, and accessories in both portraits.<sup>40</sup> Copley also used mezzotints of paintings by Thomas Hudson and Godfrey Kneller during his career.

Theus' portrait of Mrs. Peter Manigault (fig. 12), born Elizabeth Wragg, is even further proof that historians should not dismiss the impact of Theus' contemporaries

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Coleman Sellers, "Review of *Jeremiah Theus: Colonial Artist of Charles Town*," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 11.2 (1954): 309.

<sup>40</sup> Louisa Dresser, *The Background of Colonial American Portraiture* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1966), 25.

and possible British influences. According to a journal kept by Elizabeth Manigault's mother-in-law, the portrait was meant as a companion to a portrait of Elizabeth's husband painted by Allan Ramsay in England.<sup>41</sup> This connection between the two portraits is not discreet or subtle and shows many visual correlations. The main difference between the two is that Theus tailored Elizabeth's prop to be more representational of her as a woman. Where there is a clock in Ramsay's portrait of Mr. Manigault (fig. 13), Theus placed a vase of flowers instead.<sup>42</sup> These flowers, which are documented as having been in the painting as late as the 1960s, for one reason or another, no longer appear in the painting today.



Figure 12 – Jeremiah Theus, *Elizabeth Wragg Manigault* ca. 1757. Oil on canvas, Charleston Museum, South Carolina.



Figure 13 – Allan Ramsay, *Peter Manigault* ca. 1751. Oil on canvas.

Although not as overtly as with the portrait of Mrs. Peter Manigault, the other likenesses in Jeremiah Theus' oeuvre still noticeably demonstrate similarities with various eighteenth century European artists, such as the aforementioned Allan Ramsay

<sup>41</sup> Middleton, *Jeremiah Theus*, 146.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.





Figure 14 - Allan Ramsay, *The Lost Portrait of Charles Edward Stuart*, ca. 1745. Oil on canvas, 30.5 x 25.4 cm. Gosford House, East Lothian.



Figure 15 - Johann Rudolf Huber, *Portrait of a Lady*, ca. 1710. Oil on canvas, Historical Museum of Bern, Berne.

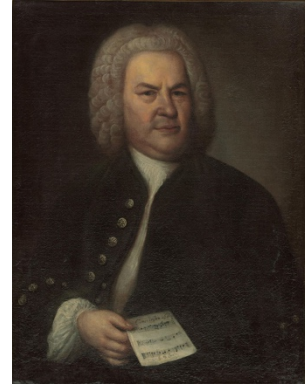


Figure 16 - John Smybert, *Self-portrait*, ca. 1728-1739. Oil on canvas, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

Figure 17 - Elias Gottlob Haussmann, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, ca. 1747. Oil on canvas, 78 x 61 cm. Stadtgeschichtliches Museum, Leipzig.

of Scotland (fig. 14), Johann Rudolf Huber of Switzerland (fig. 15), John Smybert of Scotland (fig. 16), and Elias Gottlob Haussmann of Germany (fig. 17).<sup>43</sup> These artists were successful in their native locales. On many occasions, prints were made after their paintings and circulated abroad. Denying the similarity between their works and that of Theus would be misguided. Nevertheless, like Louisa Dresser realized during her studies on the similarities between untutored colonial painters and those found in Europe, "it is [easy] to mistake similarity of costuming and pose for a real basic likeness."<sup>44</sup> Of the various artists mentioned before, it would appear that Jeremiah shares the greatest commonalities with these three painters: John Wollaston, Johann Rudolf Huber, and Elias Gottlob Haussmann. Of course, some of the similarities with

<sup>43</sup> Maurie D. McInnis "Little of Artistic Merit?: The Problem and Promise of Southern Art History," *American Art* 19.2 (2005): 11-18.

<sup>44</sup> Louisa Dresser, *The Background of Colonial American Portraiture* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1966) 27.

these artists can be attributed to coincidences based on similar technique or environmental influences. However, it is still important to note these similarities.

### Jeremiah Theus and John Wollaston

John Wollaston was born in England, but his exact place of origin remains unknown. However, it is known that his father was also a portrait painter. Wollaston is credited with helping introduce English Rococo portraiture to Colonial America. He arrived in New York in 1749 and travelled around the colonies painting numerous portraits. His most productive stays were in Virginia and Maryland. He spent time in Charleston, South Carolina, between 1765 and 1767 and there is little doubt that he must have come across Jeremiah Theus during his travels. Not much is known about his training, but his skill with detailing life-like fabrics and the similarities he shares with the artist Thomas Hudson imply that Joseph Van Acken (who frequently painted the

costumes and backgrounds in Hudson's paintings) might have trained him.<sup>45</sup>

Among the main similarities we see in the works of John Wollaston (fig. 18), Jeremiah Theus (fig. 19) and a few other Southern artists is a phenomenon called the saurian look. It is characterized by "the set expression of



Figure 18 - John Wollaston, *Ann Langdon (Mrs. Richard Ayscough)*, ca. 1750. Oil on canvas.



Figure 19 - Jeremiah Theus, *Mary Broughton (Mrs. Isaac Motte)*. Oil on canvas.

<sup>45</sup> Middleton, *Jeremiah Theus*, 16.



the mouth; the erect carriage; the use of spandrel frames; the attention to ribbons, gold galloon, and other effects dear to the costume painter.”<sup>46</sup> Like many Southern portrait painters concerned with time and the comfort of their sitters, Wollaston and Theus both chose to paint the bodies first and then added the faces when the sitters came to have their portrait prepared. Apparently, this approach was also a popular technique in London at the time. Historian James W. Lane gave three reasons why he believed Theus used this technique. “1. The discovery that many costumes are identical... 2. Indications that, by a line at the base of the throat, a head has been added to a previously painted body, and 3. That necks in many cases appear very long.”<sup>47</sup>

### Jeremiah Theus and Johann Rudolf Huber



Figure 20 – Johann Rudolf Huber, *Markgraf Carl III. Wilhelm von Baden-Durlach*, ca. 1710. Oil on canvas, private collection.

Not much research has been conducted on Johann Rudolf Huber (fig. 20), despite his many artistic accomplishments. He was born in Basel, Switzerland, in 1668 and began training in 1682. During his decade or so of art education, many artists, both mediocre and impressive, mentored him. While in Switzerland, he worked with Conrad Meyer and Joseph Werner II. From there he moved to Italy, where he worked with Cavaliere Tempesta (Pieter Mulier the Younger), adding figures to landscapes, as well as with

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<sup>46</sup> James W. Lane, “Review of *Jeremiah Theus: Colonial Artist of Charles Town*,” *College Art Journal* 15.1 (1955): 77.

<sup>47</sup> Lane, “Review of *Jeremiah Theus*,” 76.

Giandomenico Tiepolo and Carlo Maratti.<sup>48</sup> He returned to Basel in 1694 and completed a large family portrait for the Marquis of Baden Durlach. The Duke of Württemberg, Eberhard IV, soon appointed him Principal Painter, after which his career remained relatively steady.<sup>49</sup>

His knowledge of several artistic techniques and notational conventions made him exceedingly popular amongst his clients. Without the assistance of a workshop or other painters, he completed over five thousand paintings, including portraits, miniatures, allegorical paintings, mythological paintings, historical representations, still lifes, animal paintings, gouache portraits and panels. If one includes title pages, heraldries, town seals, watches and other related items, his total number of works soars over twelve thousand.<sup>50</sup>

When comparing his compositions to those of Jeremiah Theus (fig. 21), similarities immediately emerge. Most notably, these characteristics are the high foreheads, elongated prominent noses, the slight smirk, and the attention to detail in the clothes contrasting with the somewhat simple faces of the



Figure 21 – Jeremiah Theus, *Gabriel Manigault*, ca. 1757. Oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

sitters. The women of these portraits often have unnecessarily long necks, but it is possible that this was a result of a widely accepted ideal of female beauty. Conversely,

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<sup>48</sup> Vincent Lieber, "Huber, Johann-Rudolf (1668 - 1748), Painter," *Grove Art Online* (1998), Oxford University Press.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Anonymous "Huber, Johann Rudolf (the Elder)." *SIKART Artist Database*, Historical Dictionary of Switzerland.

as Historian Lane pointed out, it could be an indication that both artists painted the head and body at different times. A few of Huber's early pieces share Jeremiah's affinity for protruding almond eyes, but this feature is not pronounced enough to solidify itself as part of his early style.

### Jeremiah Theus and Elias Gottlob Hausmann

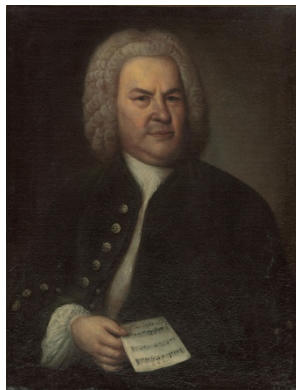


Figure 17 – Elias Gottlob Hausmann, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, ca. 1747. Oil on canvas, 78 x 61 cm. Stadtgeschichtliches Museum, Leipzig.

Elias Gottlob Hausmann was born in Germany in 1695 and was trained as a painter solely by his father, Elias Hausmann. Anna Wells Rutledge, who wrote the introduction for Margaret

Simons Middleton's book, while generally not convinced Elias Gottlob Hausmann (fig. 17) and Jeremiah Theus (fig. 22) shared any noteworthy parallels, believed

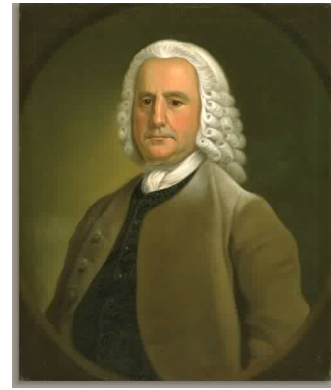


Figure 22 – Jeremiah Theus, *Portrait of a Man (Probably Isaac Holmes)*, ca. 1755. Oil on canvas, Worcester Museum.

they had the most in common out of any portrait painter previously compared to Jeremiah.

I feel that the work of the younger Hausmann and Theus could be said to be distinguished by obvious modeling and hard shadows; that the poses were conventional; that presentation of hands varied in ability; that both were competent drapery painters and painters of accessories, although it seems Theus was seldom commissioned to do them. The subjects of Theus' and Hausmann's portraits seem to have had the same temper and mannerisms; and, did one not know that it were impossible, one would say that they employed the same tailors and manteaux makers and went

to the same hairdressers. Undoubtedly they ate the same diet and suffered from the same diseases.<sup>51</sup> Overall, however, she believed Theus was a better artist than Hausmann because of how he arranged his portraits and his insistence on maintaining his style despite having apparent knowledge of the progression of artistic styles in Europe.

### **Modern Attributions of Work by Theus**

There are nearly two hundred portraits currently attributed to Theus, but, according to implications found in primary references, there are countless more not yet identified. These undiscovered portraits most likely reside within private collections not open to the public but are regularly appearing in auction houses across the United States and abroad. Theus did not consistently sign his work leaving these paintings in need of being distinguished from works by unknown artist or other known artists whose style is not yet well defined.<sup>52</sup> The most effective way to accomplish this is to develop a well-rounded understanding of Theus, the circumstances of his life and his intentions.

Many buyers have fallen prey to the incorrect attributions of work to Jeremiah Theus. One such case, although likely not the only one, even occurs in the most up to date book on his life and work. The publication by Margaret Simons Middleton, entitled *Jeremiah Theus: Colonial Artist of Charles Town*, attributes a portrait of Peter Porcher of Peru Plantation to Theus. When Samuel Gallard Stoney, a descendent of Porcher who had recently acquired the portrait conducted further research, it was determined that

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<sup>51</sup> Middleton, *Jeremiah Theus*, 16.

<sup>52</sup> Dresser, *Background of Colonial American Portraiture*, 27.

the painting was in fact not by Theus and was possibly not even a painting of Peter Porcher.<sup>53</sup> The original canvas had been lost or stolen long ago and the owners overeagerly mistook a similar painting for the original when they came across it in a Charleston bookstore.<sup>54</sup>

When trying to classify potential portraits by Jeremiah Theus, it is essential to take into account his influences as well as patterns of choices across his oeuvre. Either by virtue of his talents or because of a fluke occurrence, Theus was allowed a great amount of artistic license and freedom when producing his portraits. The artist's personal choice to exaggerate certain physical features and aesthetic qualities occur habitually in his various portraits regardless of the sitter's age or gender. These choices added a sense of drama and prominence to the sitters and thus were greatly welcomed and accepted by the subjects and viewers alike. By breaking down patterns within his collection of works, it is possible to separate the choices that are a reflection of the sitter's desires. This separation of the sitter's desires from the painter's choices will help in identifying the artist's distinguishing characteristics and will, in turn, aid in finding these features in unattributed portraits.

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<sup>53</sup> Samuel Gaillard Stoney, "Review of *Jeremiah Theus, Colonial Artist of Charles Town*," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 55.3 (1954): 181.

<sup>54</sup> Middleton, *Jeremiah Theus*, 154-155.

## **Discerning Patterns of Artist's Choice and Progression of Style**

Whether he was painting women or men, Jeremiah Theus had a penchant for heavy-lidded eyes, exaggeratedly flushed cheeks, prominent noses, slight grins, and long elegant necks connected to downward sloping shoulders. The bright red of the women's cheeks often clashed with the pale whiteness of their necks and décolletage. At the same time, he bestowed considerable care on depicting the long narrow noses of the sitters, which he often accentuated with a bright glare along the bridge, causing the remainder of the face to feel inadequate.

There is no discernable progression of style amongst the work of Theus. In his early years, there are signs of a complex knowledge and understanding of painting techniques. Likewise, in his mid to late years, there are still portraits that some would describe as simple or crude. Based on the identity of the people sitting for these portraits, it is feasible to assume that these discrepancies in what should be a pattern of growth can be attributed to how much time and money the sitters were willing to commit to the portrait. By this rule, the wealthier the patron the more polished the finished portrait.

## **Portrait Shape and Size**

The defining characteristics of a portrait begins with the shape of the canvas. This aspect influences all consequent aspects of the painting such as size, background, and possible usage of props. Other than the ivory portrait miniatures Theus painted throughout his career, the majority of his paintings were half-length portraits done

nearly life-size (on average, around thirty to forty inches in height). The width of the paintings varied according to the desire of the sitter. The most commonly selected canvas shape was the classical rectangle with the portrait itself painted within an oval border like in the portrait of Mrs. Gabriel Manigault (fig. 23). Very rarely was the canvas itself fashioned in the shape of an oval, such as Theus' *Boy of the Jacob Family* (fig. 24). To have an oval border painted within a rectangular canvas was likely the more affordable option. The third option was to have a painting fill the entirety of the rectangular canvas. In these portraits, the extra space was used to include props that defined the personality of the sitter in the painting or to emphasize their role as prominent members of society through the inclusion of symbols of wealth, such as the opulent fabrics and accessories in the portrait of Mrs. Barnard Elliot, Jr. (born Mary Elizabeth Belinger) (fig. 25). This extra space around the sitter also allowed Theus to experiment with various backgrounds.



Figure 23 – Jeremiah Theus, *Mrs. Gabriel Manigault*, ca. 1757. Oil on canvas, Brooklyn Museum.



Figure 24 – Jeremiah Theus, *Boy of the Jacob Family*, Charleston, South Carolina, ca. 1750s. Oil on canvas, 70.48 x 56.2 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 25 – Jeremiah Theus, *Mary Elizabeth Bellinger Elliott (Mrs. Barnard Elliott, Jr.)*, ca. 1766. Oil on canvas, 127.6 x 102.2 cm. Gibbes Museum.

At the time Mrs. Barnard Elliot's painting was completed, she had recently married her first cousin, a very prominent land owner in Charleston who possessed two sizeable plantations. He was noted as an "intimate friend" of the royal governor, Lord Charles Greville Montagu, and was heavily involved in strategizing activities during the American Revolution.<sup>55</sup> By marrying Mr. Barnard Elliot, Jr, she was able to rise to his social standing, making her worthy of such a skilled painting. The choices of size and shape overtly establish a link with the sitters' wealth and social status. Mrs. Barnard Elliot Jr.'s portrait, along with that of her husband, is one of Theus's largest paintings. Its size and grandeur match her standing within Charleston society but initially led historians to mistakenly believe it was a product of Allan Ramsay.<sup>56</sup> The work of Jeremiah Theus is commonly associated with a primitive or unskilled artistic talent; however, for his more affluent sitters, Theus took care to complete portraits on par with those of trained artists. The changes in skill level amongst his works relative to the sitter implies a relationship between the social status of the sitter (and the price they are willing to pay) and the effort spent on the painting.

Unlike Mrs. Barnard Elliot, Jr., Mrs. Gabriel Manigault (born Ann Ashby) was not a member of the top-tier of society. A descendent of wealthy English merchants, she married, in 1730, Gabriel Manigault, the son of Huegonot refugees. In the eighteenth century it was considerably easier to rise in wealth and social standing than it was in modern America, a circumstance of which Gabriel Manigault took full advantage. He

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<sup>55</sup> Charles Greville Montagu, and John Drayton Grimké, "Letter from Lord Charles Greville Montagu to Barnard Elliott," *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 33.4 (1932): 259.

<sup>56</sup> Walter B. Edgar, N. Louise. Bailey, and Alexander Moore, *Biographical Directory of the South Carolina House of Representatives* (Columbia: U of South Carolina, 1977), 218



became Treasurer of the Province, a member of the Commons House of Assembly and made his wealth as a successful merchant. He was not involved in the events of the American Revolution like Barnard Elliot, Jr. , but he solidified his importance by loaning the state over two hundred thousand dollars to support the war effort.<sup>57</sup> The difference between the portrait of Mrs Gabriel Manigault and Mrs. Barnard Elliot, Jr. is quite clear. Given her higher standing in society, more prestigious family history, and larger fortunes, Mrs. Barnard Eliot, Jr. was able to acquire a better quality portrait than Mrs. Gabriel Manigault could.

### Miniatures

Portrait miniatures in the colonies descended from a tradition of medallion portraits rooted in illuminated manuscripts as well as portrait medals dating as far back as 400 BCE.<sup>58</sup> Although the miniatures measure but a fraction of the size of a full-fledged oil painting, usually just over an inch in height and diameter, they still follow the same parameters as Theus' full-size works. The clothes and the hairstyles are repetitive of those Theus had painted before. The main difference, other than the obvious difference in size, is the pale ghostly effect resulting from the use of watercolors on ivory as seen in the miniature of Mrs.



Figure 26 – Jeremiah Theus, *Elizabeth Martin (Mrs. Jacob Motte)*, ca. 1755. Watercolor on ivory, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

<sup>57</sup> Dorothy Middleton Anderson, and Margaret Middleton Rivers. Rivers Eastman, *St. Philip's Church of Charleston: An Early History of the Oldest Parish in South Carolina* (Charleston: History, 2015), 213.

<sup>58</sup> Dale T. Johnson, *American Portrait Miniatures in the Manney Collection* (New York: Metropolitan Museum on Art, 1990), 14.

Jacob Motte (fig. 26). These small portraits were usually attached to a wristband or some other strap and were meant to be worn like a locket in commemoration of a life event, such as marriage or death. Due to their size and their personal significance, many of Theus' miniatures are now lost or in private collections.

As with Theus' full-sized portraits, there appears to be a correlation between the miniature's complexity and resemblance to the sitter and the social standing of the person depicted. Mrs. Jacob Motte (born Elizabeth Martin) and Isaac Mazyck II (fig. 27) both had miniatures made after Theus' portraits. Mrs. Jacob Motte had several children who went on to become prominent members of society, but at the time of her death, her social rank was established by the work of her husband, whom she married at the age of fifteen. Jacob Motte was born in Dublin, as the son



Figure 27 – Jeremiah Theus, *Isaac Mazyck II*. Gouache on ivory, Gibbes Museum, South Carolina.

of emigrant Huguenots. A moderately successful merchant, Jacob founded The Friendly Society for the Mutual Insuring of Houses against Fire, an insurance company that failed after it ironically burned down in 1740.<sup>59</sup> After that, Jacob Motte served as Public Treasurer of the Province.

The miniature of Mrs. Jacob Motte, completed using watercolor on ivory, appears flat and “ghostly,” which resulted from a lack of modelling of the subject's face and neck. This is a complete shift from Theus' miniature of Isaac Mazyck II. Isaac Mazyck II was the son of Isaac Mazyck I, “a young man of great piety,” who emigrated

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<sup>59</sup> George C. Rogers, *A South Carolina Chronology, 1497-1970* (Columbia: Published for the South Carolina Tricentennial Commission by the University of South Carolina, 1973), 21.

from France to South Carolina and became a merchant trader between the colony and the West Indies.<sup>60</sup> He was so successful that soon after arriving, he “possessed of more land in and about Charleston than any person in South Carolina.”<sup>61</sup> The miniature of his son reflects these accomplishments. Where Mrs. Jacob Motte’s miniature appears shallow and stark, Isaac Mazyck II’s is fully developed and contains the same fine sense of depth as Theus’ full-size portraits. The gouache helps add shadow and depth to achieve dimension but there is also a sense of time and careful attention to detail that does not appear in the miniature of the less privileged Mrs. Jacob Motte.

### **Color Scheme and Background**

Either as a result of tarnish over time or a direct choice by Theus, the colors of his portraits always consist of muted tones. These muted colors give the paintings a subdued gentle nature, but it is impossible to tell if this effect was intentional or a result of dust buildup until conservation work has been completed on Theus’ oeuvre. However, it is doubtful that these tones are all due to dirty varnishes, especially since the glowing pale skin and alluring clothes seem to be unaffected.

The muted tones come out most strongly in the backgrounds of his portraits. The backgrounds of Theus’ portraits typically came in five varieties. The rarest of the five styles depicts as a backdrop a fully decorated room (fig. 28). The portrait of Maurice Keating, one of Theus’ earliest sitters, was perhaps utilized as a demonstration of his artistic competence and to attract clients interested in the more lavish aspects of the

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<sup>60</sup> Middleton, *Jeremiah*, 147.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.



Figure 28 – Jeremiah Theus, *Maurice Keating*, ca. 1748. Oil on canvas, 125 x 102.87 cm. Gibbes Museum, Charleston.

portrait. Backdrops for the atypical full-length portrait may include flowing curtains, tassels, architectural columns, marble flooring, or even a small sliver of a nature scene. Generally speaking, his treatment of nature was unimpressive considering the detail he put into capturing his sitters and their wardrobes.

Full nature scenes were another type of background choice Theus offered to his sitters, like in the case of young Barnard Elliot, Jr. (fig. 29). The details of the nature scene were taken from other backdrops instead of from observing a real

landscape, which results in a flatness that contradicts the intended illusion of depth. The brushstrokes of the nature scenes are ill-defined and focus more on overall ideas rather than specific details. The portrait and its background were treated as independent entities. Overall, this style is reserved for clients found in the top tier of society. Barnard Elliot, Jr., mentioned, earlier but seen here as a child, therefore fits this typology and is one of the few subjects important enough to force Theus to create work that was unusual for his oeuvre. The three remaining background options are the most common and all rely on same idea of standard practical simplicity.



Figure 29 – Jeremiah Theus, *Barnard Elliot, Jr.*, ca. 1750. Oil on canvas, 49.53 x 44.45 cm. Gibbes Museum, South Carolina.

In his later years, Theus used increasingly plain, solid backgrounds. This option was the one most often chosen by men, like Captain James Skirving, Jr (fig. 30), but the plain backgrounds could also be seen as a money-saving option for women who wanted more elaborate outfits. What makes these backdrops distinct in the context of Theus' style is the harsh contrast of the glowing effect that seems to emanate from just behind the sitter's neck, forming a dramatic vignette and mirroring the oval frames seen repeatedly in his work.

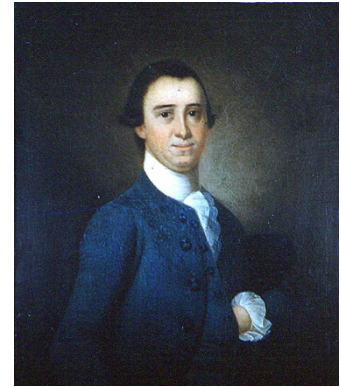


Figure 30 – Jeremiah Theus, *Captain James Skirving, Jr.* ca. 1766. Oil on canvas, 77.47 x 64.77 cm. Gibbes Museum, South Carolina.

Another possible background choice combines a nature scene with a plain solid background. The sitter is placed in front of a solid background, but to the far left or right there are spaces where Theus offered a glimpse of a landscape scene complete with trees and clouds. Similar cloud formations also appear in the final background in Theus' repertoire. In this final case, the clouds filled up the entire background. This solution was most likely reserved for female sitters only.

As is to be expected, the more complex the background, the more influential and prominent the sitter's family seems to be. Here, Captain James Skirving, Jr. is presented in front of a solid background, implying an upper-class standing. Like his father before him, Captain James Skirving, Jr, worked in the lower courts as a Justice of the Peace.<sup>62</sup> In the Colonial South, members of the gentry needed to be "directors" of society,

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<sup>62</sup> J. H. Easterby, R. Nicholas. Olsberg, and Terry W. Lipscomb, *The Journal of the Commons House of Assembly* (Columbia, 1951), 328.



Figure 31 – Jeremiah Theus, *Polly Ouldfield of Winyah*, ca. 1761. Oil on canvas, 76.5 x 63.8 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, New York.

creating rules as opposed to enforcing them, thereby making Captain James Skirving, Jr.'s position in society less critical.<sup>63</sup> Polly Ouldfield, who stands in front of a mixed background merging both the solid and landscape background choices (fig. 31), also comes from a family involved in government affairs. However, her family maintained jobs as Commissioner of Land Grants and Members of the Commons House of Assembly, positions of a higher prestige than Justice of the Peace.<sup>64</sup> At the next level, there is Mrs. Charles Lowndes (fig. 32) posing in

front of clouds. Her background is more visually complex than the solid background of Captain James Skirving, Jr. and the mixed background of Polly Ouldfield but is not quite as exhaustive as Barnard Elliot, Jr. This added complexity is to be expected since her family stands higher than the two former but not quite as high as the latter. There is not extensive family history available on Mrs. Charles Lowndes (born Sarah Parker) but the family of her husband was well known in South Carolina. They were considered "among the leading families of South Carolina... a junior branch of an old and very numerous English family which attained its



Figure 32 – Jeremiah Theus, *Mrs. Charles Lowndes (Sarah Parker)*, ca. 1758. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm. Gibbes Museum, South Carolina.

<sup>63</sup> Schlesinger, "The Aristocracy in Colonial America," 7.

<sup>64</sup> Anonymous, *Journal of the Commons House of Assembly of South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: Historical Commission of South Carolina, 1962), 489.

highest honors in the mother country during the reign of Queen Anne.”<sup>65</sup>

Unfortunately, his father lost a significant percent of his wealth before coming to South Carolina but Charles still managed to become a successful planter while his brother Rawlins went on to become Provost Marshal and President of South Carolina.<sup>66</sup>

### **Personalization**

When beginning a portrait painting, Theus provided each sitter with a variety of choices. These choices allowed the sitter to live out their dreams within their portrait. The sitters could wear the latest European fashions, have perfect health, flawless skin, be transported to exotic southern landscapes or be depicted on a grand estate. These choices also allowed the sitter to immortalize real aspects of their personalities and daily lives through the inclusion of certain props and pets. The sum of these choices defined each sitter’s individuality. No two portraits were exactly the same, but many aspects appear repeatedly across various paintings. However, there are some aspects of each of Theus’ paintings that follow a generic pattern for portrait work shared across all limners. These characteristics are unaffected by the sitters’ tastes and desires and define the general composition of the portrait as well as in the lighting, poses, hair, and accessories. These features extend beyond personal attributes and include the symbolic meaning of certain props, as well as the fondness for certain hairstyles, garments, and accessories.

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<sup>65</sup> George B. Chase, *Lowndes of South Carolina, an Historical and Genealogical Memoir* (Boston: A. Williams, 1876), 2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



In all of his portraits, Theus included stricter more individual and specific qualities of the sitter's identity within their face. It is the face which allowed Theus to make the portraits visually accurate as opposed to idealized. He recorded the wrinkles, slight discoloration, crooked noses, awkward mouths, or double chins. As a result, there is often a harsh discrepancy between the face and the features on the rest of the body. The body is usually paler, more youthful, smoother, and more delicate (fig. 33).



Figure 33 – Jeremiah Theus, *Mrs. Martha Vinson*, ca. 1766. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm. Gibbes Museum, South Carolina.

### Family Portraits and Portraits of Couples

Either by necessity or by good fortune, Theus specialized in the painting of the friends and the families of the elite. This web of social connections kept him busy not only in South Carolina, but it also led him to other southern states, such as Georgia, where he painted the portrait of the Governor, Captain John Reynolds, and his family in the 1750s (fig. 34). This referral method to find clients ensured a steady flow of work for Theus, as well as a steady cash flow of payments.



Figure 34 – Jeremiah Theus, *Captain John Reynolds*, ca. 1754 - 1758. Oil on canvas, National Maritime Museum, London.

Theus did not execute group portraits of entire families or double portraits of the married couples he painted. Each member of the family was granted his or her own portrait, highlighting personal interests and desires. He treated



each member as an individual. Therefore, there was not much of a common denominator linking the clothes, backgrounds, or props even when the portraits were painted around the same time for a single family. Unless the identity of the sitter is already known, it can be hard to determine whether the portraits belong to the same family or were commissioned at the same time; however, most, if not all, of the portraits by Theus were made as part of a group or as a pair.

The likenesses of newlyweds and married couples he painted do not follow this same pattern. Often, these portraits were meant to be hung next to each other to form a symmetrical arrangement. Consequently, it makes sense that this symmetry was established through a coordination of complimentary colors, backgrounds, clothes and props. When identifying these portrait pairs, it is helpful to take note of these compliments within the two portraits as well as the tendency for the two sitters to be facing one another as in the case of Dr. and Mrs. Lionel Chalmers (fig. 35 and fig. 36).



Figure 35 – Jeremiah Theus, *Mrs. Lionel Chalmers (Martha Logan)*, ca. 1756. Oil on canvas, 41.91 x 36.19 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

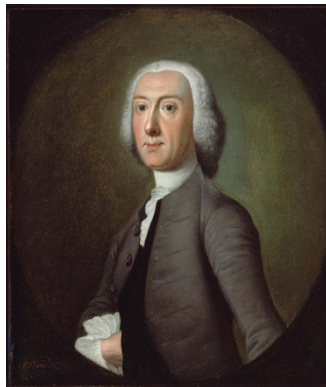


Figure 36 – Jeremiah Theus, *Dr. Lionel Chalmers*, ca. 1756. Oil on canvas, 41.91 x 36.19 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

## Lighting and Poses

The lighting in all of Theus' portraits originates from the sitter's upper right hand side. It is a sharp light that tends to cast harsh shadows across the face and neck, especially around the nose, chin and left temple. This lighting choice is constant throughout Theus' oeuvre, implying that this is one aspect in which the sitters had no influence, a wise decision considering the overall impact light has on his work. The drama of Theus' shadows was at his highest and most impressive in the garments of the sitters, particularly when it came to the reflective fabrics and lace of the women's dresses. The consistent choice of lighting strength and direction also created a unifying element that connects all of the portraits Theus completed. Theus experimented with a variety of poses for his sitters, but the uniform lighting joins these portraits together. The poses, however, vary according to gender and age and can thus be broken down into three groups: men, women and children. Each set of poses can occur with the sitter oriented toward the left or the right.

For the men, there are three main, consistent poses that can be encountered throughout Theus' work. The first is a three-quarter view with no hands shown in the frame. The second variation is almost exactly the same as the first except with an additional hand-in-waistcoat feature. Here, the men have placed a hand between the buttons of their shirt, resting on their stomachs. This was a standard eighteenth-century gentlemen's pose. The final pose forced Theus to expand his usual half-length portrait to one that was nearly full length. In these portraits, the male sitter was often seen leaning against a mid-sized object, such as a pedestal.

Just like the men, the women are often featured with their hands cropped by the frame, but there are a handful of alternative solutions, many of which also mirror the men's poses. The female variation of the single hand-in-waistcoat pose portrays the woman in a half-length view with one hand stretched across her body either holding a prop or caressing a piece of fabric. A second pose, where the male sitter leans against a pedestal, is replicated and slightly altered for women. The view of the women stays zoomed in at a half-length cropping. The women appear to be sitting, most often with an arm resting on the pedestal with her hand directed downward or grazing her chin.

The portraits of children do not follow the same general guidelines as that of the older sitters of Theus' portraits. For the most part, male and female children are treated in the same fashion. The portraits that were not depicting the children from a bust-only view regularly show them standing up and interacting with various props or animals. Despite the small size of the children, these portraits are not more likely to be shown in full length than their adult counterparts. Instead, these portraits were painted with more marginal space left empty around the child; this space was utilized to include larger props. In other cases, the portrait was painted on smaller canvases and Theus opted to skip the common oval canvas or border within the frame.

## Hair

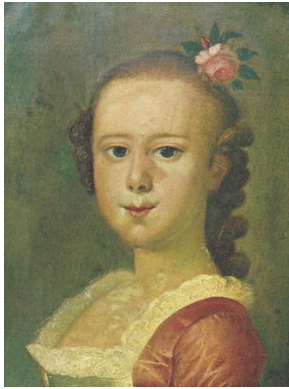


Figure 37 – Jeremiah Theus, *Eleanor Ball*, ca. 1741. Oil on canvas.



Figure 38 – Jeremiah Theus, *Anne Livingston (Mrs. John Champneys)*, ca. 1765. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Texas.

The hair, although tailored to the individual, is styled in a fairly predictable way depending on the age and gender of the sitter. Adolescent girls almost always have their hair pinned behind the ears, slicked back at the crown of the head, or have a flower placed anywhere around this same area (fig. 37). Young women, hoping to emphasize their youthfulness, may include flowers in their hair as well. Otherwise, they normally kept their faces clear of any stray hairs or bangs. The hair was slicked back at the crown with the remainder of their hair to fall down the back of their neck and behind the shoulders or in a low pinned up-do (fig. 38). The older women preferred to have their hair tied up into a bonnet (fig. 39). The men,



Figure 39 – Jeremiah Theus, *Mary Trusler*, ca. 1760. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm. Dallas Museum of Art, Texas.

regardless of age, sported variations of the same hairstyle. This hairstyle consisted of horizontal rows of curls around the ears ranging anywhere between one and several rows (fig. 40). The older men often have gray hair but the older women do not, although it is possible that both wore



Figure 40 – Jeremiah Theus, *Colonel Samuel Brailsford*, ca. 1750. Oil on canvas, Private Collection.

wigs. Theus' attention to the hair could, at times, be described as delicate or wispy due to the way he detailed individual hairs around the hairline and around the curls. This approach applied to both women and men alike.

### Jewelry and Accessories

Jewelry and accessories are additional elements used to personalize the portraits of Jeremiah Theus. Jewelry was introduced as a sign of wealth and prestige, but it can also help to differentiate a woman's popular dress choice from those of her peers. Earrings are a rare occurrence among the women in Theus' portraits. They do make an appearance once or twice, but not with enough frequency to draw any significant conclusions about a pattern of use (fig. 41). On the contrary, strings of pearls were incredibly common. Regardless of age, women wanted to be



Figure 41 – Jeremiah Theus, *Mrs. John Smyth (Susanna Moore)*, ca. 1757. Oil on canvas, San Antonio Museum of Art, Texas.



Figure 42 – Jeremiah Theus, *Mrs. James Skirving*, ca. 1766. Oil on canvas. Gibbes Museum, South Carolina.

painted donning their pearls. These were typically multiple, stranded pearl necklaces worn higher up on the neck like a choker. Sometimes they were tied at the back of the neck with a string that coordinated with the sitter's dress. The necklaces could also feature several strands that hang nearly to the sitter's cleavage, or the necklace could incorporate a hanging pendant (fig. 42). The pearls also make an appearance as part of the garment of the sitter. They appear attached to a bow between



her breasts draping down toward her waist or simply left hanging about the lace around the neckline of her dress (fig. 43 and fig.44). Little girls in their infancy and toddler years wore coral necklaces, arranged like a choker, similar to those of their mothers (fig. 45).



Figure 43 – Jeremiah Theus, *Mary Mazyck*, ca. 1770. Oil on canvas, 74.93 x 61.6 cm. Gibbes Museum.



Figure 44 – Jeremiah Theus, *Elizabeth Wragg Manigault* ca. 1757. Oil on canvas, Charleston Museum, South Carolina.



Figure 45 – Jeremiah Theus, *Colonel Jones' Grandchild*, ca. 1770. Oil on canvas, 76.8 x 63.5 cm.



Figure 25 – Jeremiah Theus, *Mary Elizabeth Bellinger Elliott (Mrs. Barnard Elliott, Jr.)*, ca. 1766. Oil on canvas, 127.6 x 102.2 cm. Gibbes Museum.

Theus also mixed and matched sashes and coats in his portraits, but certain styles occurred with a much higher frequency, implying that there may have been fewer options within this category. The sashes were found tied around the waist or draped around the arms (fig. 23 and fig. 46). Either way, the sash was either held or caressed by the woman who wore it or simply used to fill up the frame of the portrait.



Figure 46 – Jeremiah Theus, *Portrait of a Lady of Quality*, ca. 1770. Oil on canvas, Private Collection.

## Clothes and Fabrics

The female sitters are frequently seen wearing dresses that repeat many times throughout the artist's oeuvre. This is to be expected, considering he had the women choose their wardrobes from fashion prints and catalogs. Nevertheless, he approaches each dress as if it were different. No two dresses ever occur in exactly the same way. At times, Theus changed the color, rearranged pleats and wrinkles, or added a broach or various other accessories (figures 47 and 48). The dresses are adjusted with considerations for the woman's weight and bust size; thus, the dresses may often appear different at first glance due to added features varying from woman to woman (figures 49 and 50).



Figure 47 – Jeremiah Theus, *Elizabeth Holmes Brailsford*, ca. 1753. Oil on canvas, Private Collection.

Figure 48 – Jeremiah Theus, *Elizabeth Savage Branford*, ca. 1751. Oil on canvas, 62.23 x 73.66 cm. Gibbes Museum, South Carolina.

Figure 49 – Jeremiah Theus, *Mrs. Thomas Lynch*, ca. 1755. Oil on canvas, 73.7 x 61 cm. Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Texas.

Figure 50 – Jeremiah Theus, *Elizabeth Clifford Wayne*. Oil on canvas, 80.01 x 67.31 cm. The Johnson Collection, South Carolina.

Extra adornments and specific tailoring to the sitter affected the overall cost of the portrait. The subjects who exhibit these extra refinements in their portraits had to be willing to spend their funds on the extra costs. Elizabeth Holmes Brailsford, daughter of the Honorable Isaac Holmes, already had some standing in Charleston society when she married Colonel Samuel Brailsford. Colonel Brailsford was a successful merchant, with prosperous businesses in Charleston and England alike, who helped found the Charleston Library Society.<sup>67</sup> Mrs. Brailsford is seen here wearing the same dress as Elizabeth Savage Branford except that Mrs. Brailsford has the privilege of including not only a sash but also multiple strings of pearls as well. Mrs. Branford was not so fortunate. Her dress, though impressively represented, appears plain and unembellished, much like her history. Originally from Bermuda, Mrs. Branford (born Elizabeth Savage) married William Branford III, a third generation South Carolina plantation owner.<sup>68</sup>

The same pattern appears with the portraits of Mrs. Thomas Lynch (born Elizabeth Allston) and Elizabeth Clifford Wayne. Although, she wears more jewelry than Mrs. Lynch, Mrs. Wayne's dress appears ill-fitting and her facial modelling comes across as unconvincing and cartoonish. Perhaps Mrs. Wayne, the wife of "Mr. Richard Wayne Merchant... an amiable young lady, with a genteel fortune," exchanged the possibility of receiving Theus' highest level of artistic skill and accuracy in order to

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<sup>67</sup> James Raven, *London Booksellers and American Customers: Transatlantic Literary Community and the Charleston Library Society, 1748-1811* (Columbia: U of South Carolina, 2002), 37.

<sup>68</sup> Carter L Hudgins, *The Vernacular Architecture of Charleston and the Lowcountry, 1670-1990: A Field Guide* (Charleston, SC: Historic Charleston Foundation, 1994), 107.



receive these additional accessories.<sup>69</sup> Mrs. Lynch was a close relative of various Governors and signers of the Declaration of Independence. Her position in society, while not at the highest level, was solid in comparison to Mrs. Wayne's social standing and the way the same dress fits Mrs. Lynch better is a testament to this role. Moreover, the depth and modelling of the portrait is much more accurate and worthy of her.

As a sign of the times and their position as gentlemen in proper society, the male sitters are always depicted wearing the same combination of garments. This combination includes a coat, a waistcoat, a linen shirt, a cravat to cover the neck, and possibly a hat cocked on three sides. The coat and the waistcoat may change color or style according to the sitter's personal preference, a desire to coordinate with his wife's attire, ranking in the military or government, or his desired level of formality.



Figure 51 – Jeremiah Theus, *Dr. James Skirving*, ca. 1766. Oil on canvas, Gibbes Museum, South Carolina.



Figure 52 – Jeremiah Theus, *Governor James Habersham Sr.* ca. 1770s. Oil on canvas.

This can be seen in the portraits of Dr. James Skirving (fig. 51) and Governor Habersham (fig. 52). Dr. James Skirving, a former surgeon or a British regiment and justice of the peace, is portrayed modestly in a monochromatic outfit. Meanwhile, Governor Habersham, a philanthropist, lawyer and successful merchant in Georgia, the Northern Colonies, the West Indies and England, is portrayed in a more complex set of clothes. His coat and waistcoat are both

<sup>69</sup> Alexander A. Lawrence, *James Moore Wayne, Southern Unionist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1943), 4.

embroidered, and varying colors are used in the different components of the outfit. In these cases, the clothing is a greater representation of the man's position in society. The clothes of the children typically mirrored that of their adult counterparts but the attire of the smaller children are harder to predict. It is within this category that one finds what is possibly Theus' only nude and only portrayal of feet. This exceptional portrait depicts Mary Habersham, one of the ten children born to Governor Habersham and his wife Mary Bolton (fig. 53). In this portrait, we once again see Theus willing to create work outside of his normal style in order to accommodate the desires of the Southern Gentry.



Figure 53 – Jeremiah Theus, *Portrait of a Child, purportedly Mary Habersham* ca. 1771 - 1772. Oil on canvas, 76.5 x 63.8 cm., Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia.

As seen in Mary Habersham's portrait, Theus' approach to the iridescent fabrics and neat embroidery is highly refined and impressive, considering there is no proof of him having any formal training.<sup>70</sup> The sitters, though stiff, fit into their garments seamlessly. The drama of the lighting accentuates the form of the garments and adds balance to the composition. It is obvious that great care and attention to detail were of the highest importance to Theus.

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<sup>70</sup> Middleton, *Jeremiah Theus*, xiii.

## Props and Animals

Props were the perfect way to add an extra personal touch to portraiture. Unlike many of the other components of the painting, the prop had specific personal connotations like a connection to the person's hometown, favorite hobby, social or occupational ranking. In the case of Peggy Wagner (fig. 54), the peach is meant as a symbol of youth much like the flowers seen in the portraits of young women. The coral necklace is intended to protect the child against sickness and death that so often plagued the colonies, most often Yellow Fever which raged through Charleston countless times in the eighteenth century.<sup>71</sup> John Faucheraud Grimke (fig. 55) is seen playing with a battledore and shuttlecock, a game popular among the gentry which later evolved into badminton.<sup>72</sup> In the portrait featuring Colonel Barnard Elliot, Jr. (fig.



Figure 54 – Jeremiah Theus, *Peggy Wagner*. ca. 1750 - 1760. Oil on canvas.



Figure 55 – Jeremiah Theus, *John Faucheraud Grimke*, ca. 1762. Oil on canvas, John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Florida.



Figure 56 – Jeremiah Theus, *Portrait of a Man (Probably Isaac Holmes)*, ca. 1755. Oil on canvas, Worcester Museum.

<sup>71</sup> John Duffy, "Yellow Fever in Colonial Charleston," *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 52.4 (1951): 189.

<sup>72</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Sports and Pastimes of American Boys: A Guide and Text-book of Games of the Playground, the Parlor, and the Field: Adapted Especially for American Youth* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1884), 141.

56), discussed previously, one notices the sitter dressed in uniform holding his tri-cocked hat, all symbols of his rank within the military. Props could also be used as a visual representation of a person's personality traits. For example, a woman may want to pose with a book to signify her intelligence, like in the portrait of the well-to-do Mrs. Rawlins Lowndes (fig. 57) (born Sarah Jones), sister-in-law of Mrs. Sarah Lowndes, who was mentioned earlier. Flowers were repeatedly used to imply youthfulness and fertility, much like the peach. In this last case, it would make



Figure 57 – Jeremiah Theus, *Mrs. Rawlins Lowndes (Sarah Jones)*, ca. 1773. Oil on canvas, 61 x 45.7 cm. North Carolina Museum of Art.



Figure 58 – Jeremiah Theus, *Portrait of Elizabeth Allen Deas (Mrs. John Deas)*, ca. 1755. Oil on canvas, 76.7 x 64.1 cm. Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia.

sense that a bride would want her wedding portrait to include numerous flowers (fig. 58).

The only examples of pets used as props occur in conjunction with children's portraits; possibly they were introduced in an attempt to tie into their innate playfulness and dependent nature. The inclusion of these pets and props in general also functioned as a marker to the social status of the child's parents. Children whose portraits included animals were the offspring of parents who could

afford the significant costs these additions would inevitably incur. Three examples of animals in Theus' portraits of children can be cited: Catherine Elliot (fig. 59), Sarah Jones, grandchild of Colonel Jones (fig. 45), and Maurice Keating. All three were the



Figure 45 – Jeremiah Theus, *Colonel Jones' Grandchild (Sarah Jones)*, ca. 1770. Oil on canvas, 76.8 x 63.5 cm.

children of families holding important positions within the community. Catherine Elliot was the sister of Barnard Elliot, Jr. and shares many similarities (including a substantial nature scene in the background); however, where Barnard Jr. has a fishing line, Catherine holds a bird. Sarah Jones was the daughter of Noble Wymberley Jones, the “Morning Star of Liberty” and granddaughter of Colonel Noble Jones one of the first settlers of Georgia.<sup>73</sup>



Figure 59 – Jeremiah Theus, *Catherine Elliot (Mrs. William Percy)*, ca. 1760. Oil on canvas, Gibbes Museum, Charleston.



Figure 28 – Jeremiah Theus, *Maurice Keating*, ca. 1748. Oil on canvas, 125 x 102.87 cm. Gibbes Museum, Charleston.

Not much is known on the history of Maurice Keating, Jr. (fig. 28) other than the fact that he and his sister Mary both died in early childhood.<sup>74</sup> His father died young and without heirs. Their mother remarried and passed down the portrait of Maurice Jr. to her second family. However, based on the link between status and portrait complexity, it is safe to assume that the Keating family, at one point, held substantial prominence and wealth. In this portrait, one can identify several examples of optional features that would have cost the commissioner of the portrait extra. It is the rare full-length view of the sitter, which included an animal, curtains, a

<sup>73</sup> William H. Bragg, "Noble W. Jones (ca. 1723-1805)," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*.

<sup>74</sup> Middleton, *Jeremiah Theus*, 143.

column, and a sliver of a landscape view. The clothes are fitting, the modelling of the face and hands of the subject as well as the sense of depth within the portrait all imply more extensive commitment by Theus, evoking a status within or near the gentry of society.



## **Conclusion**

Jeremiah Theus died on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1774, two years before the American Revolution. Despite his many accomplishments as one of the greatest eighteenth-century artists of the Colonial South, few people remember his contributions. This may be due to their lack of a distinctive innovative style or their scarcity of circulation throughout the country. Even so, when he is mentioned, people usually refer to the few portraits that exaggerate his most simplistic and primitive characteristics. When he wanted to, Jeremiah could create portraits that rivalled those of his more competently trained competitors. Although there are admittedly a few flaws and false attributions in Margaret Simons Middleton's book, it undoubtedly altered how he was perceived by art historians.

These observations on Theus' history, influences, and painting habits can help in attributing as of yet unidentified portraits by him through the identification of typologies as well as the presence of his unique strengths and weaknesses. The specific choices he made as an artist, particularly in disregarding certain realities and his visual reinforcement of the social hierarchy of the Colonial South, helped him to create a more dynamic portrait. Due to Theus' repetition of his more popular choices, there are several cases in which portraits are near identical, with the exception of facial features, jewelry or props. Some of these duplications are so exact that they leave no doubt that they were done by the same artist within a short timeframe. By finding these patterns within his collection of works, it is possible to identify the artist's defining traits and will, in turn, aid in finding these manifestations in previously unattributed portraits.

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## Appendix: Newly Attributed and Updated Works By Jeremiah Theus



Figure 1 – Jeremiah Theus, *Mrs. Gardner Greene*, ca. 1770. Oil on canvas, 73.7 x 61.6 cm. Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota.



Figure 2 – Jeremiah Theus, *Portrait of a Lady of Quality*, ca. 1770. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm. Private Collection.



Figure 3 – Jeremiah Theus, *Portrait of a Lady with Pearls and Pearl Pendant*, ca. 1760s. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 62.2 cm. Private Collection.



Figure 4 – Jeremiah Theus, *James Cuthbert*, ca. 1765. Oil on canvas, 75.3 x 62.3 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Figure 5 – Jeremiah Theus, *Mary Cuthbert*, ca. 1765. Oil on canvas, 75.5 x 62.6 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Figure 6 – Jeremiah Theus, *John Faucheraud Grimke*, ca. 1762. Oil on canvas, 76.7 x 58.9 cm. John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota.

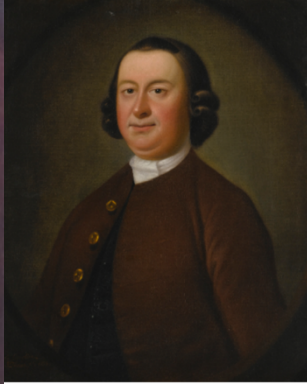


Figure 7 – Jeremiah Theus, *Boy of the Jacobs Family, Charleston, South Carolina*, ca. 1750s. Oil on canvas, 70.48 x 56.2 cm. National Portrait Gallery, Washington D.C.

Figure 8 – Jeremiah Theus, *Portrait of Miss Jacobs, Charleston, South Carolina*, ca. 1750s. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm. Private Collection.

Figure 9 – Jeremiah Theus, *South Carolina Gentleman*, ca. 1754. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm. Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia.

Figure 10 – Jeremiah Theus, *Captain John Reynolds*, ca. 1754 - 1758. Oil on canvas. National Maritime Museum, London.

## **Vita**

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Tania Inniss began studying photography while attending Fiorello H. LaGuardia HS of Music and Art in Manhattan. In 2013, she received her BA in photography and museum studies from Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. It was here, thanks to various internships with museums and galleries, that her focus shifted from creating art to studying its history. She is currently pursuing her MA in Art History with a focus on Art of the Early American South from Louisiana State University.