

## Taking note of slavery's shadow at the Worcester Art Museum

By **Graham Ambrose**

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At the time of his death, in 1675, John Freake had amassed a large estate: land holdings, partial ownership of six ships, and a human being — “one Negroe named Coffee,” who was valued at 30 pounds. Like many contemporaries, Freake, a wealthy Bostonian, maintained a privileged way of life with slave labor.

Until late last year, that history would not have been known to patrons of the Worcester Art Museum. Now a wall label next to his portrait informs viewers that Freake owned a slave.

“It allows the visitors to see American history in a new light,” said Elizabeth Athens, a former curator of American art at WAM now at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Athens led the effort last year to append 11 wall signs in the WAM’s American galleries explaining how the subjects of portraits benefited from slavery.

“We have a tendency to have a valorizing, celebratory narrative of American history,” Athens said. “One way to balance that, to nuance that, is to show a much larger story that’s there.”

The new wall labels — wide and rectangular, dark gray with white text — hang above the extant ones. Athens said she intended for the new labels to be straightforward sourced statements of fact, without analysis or interpreta-

tion.

Jeffrey Forgeng, interim director of curatorial affairs at WAM and a specialist in medieval art, said that although he loves Massachusetts, “there’s an unclean past that we need to recognize.” He believes that a more nuanced understanding of the painted subjects does not negate their achievements or tarnish their legacy.

“To say that these people were complicated and lived in a complicated world is different than saying that they were demons for having been soiled by the institution of slavery,” Forgeng said.

In Massachusetts, America’s “peculiar institution” ended practically in 1783, when the chief justice of the Supreme Judicial Court ruled that “slavery is in my judgment as effectively abolished as it can be,” thanks to constitutional “rights and privileges wholly incompatible and repugnant to its existence.” The 1790 federal census listed no slaves statewide, and in the 19th century Massachusetts became a leader of the abolition movement.

Forgeng said that reactions to the new labels have been largely positive, and strong. “People are a little bit startled by it,” he said. “But that’s exactly why we do it.”

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WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

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