

NEWS RELEASE

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James Monroe Museum Acquires Previously Unknown Portrait of Fifth President

A previously unknown portrait of James Monroe—Revolutionary War hero, legislator, diplomat, Virginia governor and fifth president of the United States—is the newest addition to the collection of the James Monroe Museum in Fredericksburg.

Museum director Scott Harris brought the portrait to the April 16, 2015 meeting of the Board of Visitors of the University of Mary Washington, the museum’s governing authority, which approved accession of the artifact into the museum’s collection. The Board’s action followed a recommendation by the museum’s Board of Regents made at its meeting earlier the same day.

The unsigned oil portrait depicts Monroe ca. 1820, roughly halfway through his two-term presidency that was called the “Era of Good Feelings.” Monroe was an immensely popular chief executive who was reelected with only one dissenting Electoral College vote. Highlights of his administration included the acquisition of Florida from Spain, recognition of emerging republics in South America, and the Missouri Compromise, the act of Congress signed by Monroe that was a major milestone during the sectional crisis over slavery leading to the American Civil War. His most famous legacy is the Monroe Doctrine, a statement opposing European intervention in the affairs of the Western Hemisphere that was a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy for much of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Harris explained that the painting was sold at a New Jersey auction in 2013 as a “portrait of a stately gentleman,” not identified as Monroe. It was purchased by Michael Meyer, owner of Meyer Fine Art in Yonkers, New York, along with an unsigned portrait of a woman in the same lot. Mr. Meyer recognized the male image as that of James Monroe, and thought that the female image might have been that of Monroe’s wife Elizabeth. Both portraits were brought to the James Monroe Museum late in 2014 for analysis and consideration of purchase.

The museum staff consulted a variety of experts to confirm the identities of the two subjects, and whether they were works of Monroe’s era or products of a later time. Among those consulted were former directors and curators of the James Monroe Museum, two Fredericksburg area antiques dealers, and curators at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation. The paintings were also analyzed by curatorial and conservation staff of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. The consensus opinion was that both paintings are characteristic of portraits from the early 19th century. While the female image was determined not to be that of Elizabeth Monroe, the male image was confirmed to be that of James Monroe.

Based on this research, in March, 2015 the museum purchased the Monroe portrait from Meyer Fine Art for \$16,000, using private funds administered by the University of Mary Washington Foundation. To offset this expenditure the museum is seeking institutional and individual donors, all of whom will be recognized as sponsors of the purchase.

James Monroe sat for portraits by many of the most renowned artists of his era, including Samuel F.B. Morse, Gilbert Stuart, and Charles Willson Peale. Peale’s son Rembrandt painted two portraits of Monroe that are in the collection of the James Monroe Museum. Several portraits of Monroe known to have been painted during his lifetime are not currently accounted for. Whether the museum’s acquisition is one of these, or the work of an artist not previously identified, remains to be determined.

The portrait will be exhibited in the museum for the first time during the celebration of James Monroe's 257th birthday on Saturday, April 25, from 1:00 to 3:00 PM. Admission is free, and the event features birthday cake, punch, and live music.

The James Monroe Museum is a National Historic Landmark owned by the Commonwealth of Virginia and administered by the University of Mary Washington. Founded in 1927, it is the nation's largest repository of artifacts and documents related to the fifth President of the United States. For hours of operation, directions, and other information, call (540) 654-1043, or visit www.jamesmonroemuseum.org.

The University of Mary Washington is a premier, selective public liberal arts and sciences university in Virginia, highly respected for its commitment to academic excellence, strong undergraduate liberal arts and sciences program, and dedication to life-long learning. The university, with a total enrollment of nearly 5,000, features colleges of business, education and arts and sciences, and three campuses, including a residential campus in Fredericksburg, Va., a second one in nearby Stafford and a third in Dahlgren, Va., which serves as a center of development of educational and research partnerships between the Navy, higher education institutions and the region's employers. In recent years, the university has seen its academic reputation garner national recognition in numerous selective guidebooks, including Forbes, the Fiske Guide to Colleges and the Princeton Review's edition of 150 "Best Value Colleges" and "The Best 376 Colleges."

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News release prepared by: Scott Harris