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America's Past Master

Thomas Sully honored in a major exhibit at Milwaukee Art Museum

By Curtis L. Carter ([by-author-146-1.html](#))



It was not until the 1950s, when the likes of Jackson Pollock became known in Paris and elsewhere across the continent, that American artists began to gain the respect of Europeans. And yet no less accord was due such master artists as Thomas Sully (1783-1872), whose family emigrated from England to Virginia in 1792. In his time, Sully was widely appreciated both in America and Europe for his portraits and “fancy paintings” with everyday life scenes. Visitors attending the exhibition “Thomas Sully: Painted Performance” at the Milwaukee Art Museum (Oct. 11, 2013-Jan. 5, 2014), can decide whether to award high praise to Sully’s achievements as they view nearly 80 of the artist’s major works.

An indication of the regard shown Sully by his contemporaries is evident in the subjects of his portraits, which include not only prominent historical figures such as Queen Victoria (1838), Andrew Jackson (1845), George Washington (1820) and the *Study for the Portrait of the Marquis de Lafayette* (1826), but also leading figures from the theater of his time.

Perhaps the most important clue to the appreciation of Sully’s works lies with his engagement with the theater. Born into a family of actors and an occasional performer himself, Sully’s approach to composition and subject matter exemplifies his understanding of theatrical conventions. He does not simply paint portraits of live subjects. Rather, he presents them as a playwright might create a character for the stage. This is the case whether the subject might be an actual scene from a theatrical performance—as in *Portia and Shylock* (1835) or *Macbeth in the Witches Cave* (1840)—a portrait of a leading actor, or

simply a character from his many portraits and life scenes.

Sully's paintings are not limited to famous subjects. Indeed, some of his most compelling images are of unknown gypsies, such as *Gypsy Maidens* (1839). The gypsy paintings, along with *The Lost Child* (1837) and *Cinderella at the Kitchen Fire* (1843), all hint that the artist is aware of a broader social horizon. *The Torn Hat* (1820), depicting the pensive reflections of a young boy—one of his many paintings of children—is sure to be a favorite among the viewers of this exhibition.

Sully's artistic output was undoubtedly driven by a love of his craft, as well as an eye for the market. What is most remarkable about Sully is that his paintings are consistently beautiful renderings, whether they fall into the category of portraiture or of "fancy paintings," a type more defined by example than by explanatory text in the catalogue published by Yale University Press. Though perhaps not inventive by comparison to the developments of modern art, Sully was a master painter able to execute "beautiful, delicate glazes of pinks, grays, lavenders with exuberant brush work resulting in energetic painterly surfaces. They record the lives of people, imaginary or real, who remain in our distant past, with a visual power that invites our appreciation and curiosity."