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Selling Andrew Jackson: Ralph E. W. Earl and the Politics of Portraiture

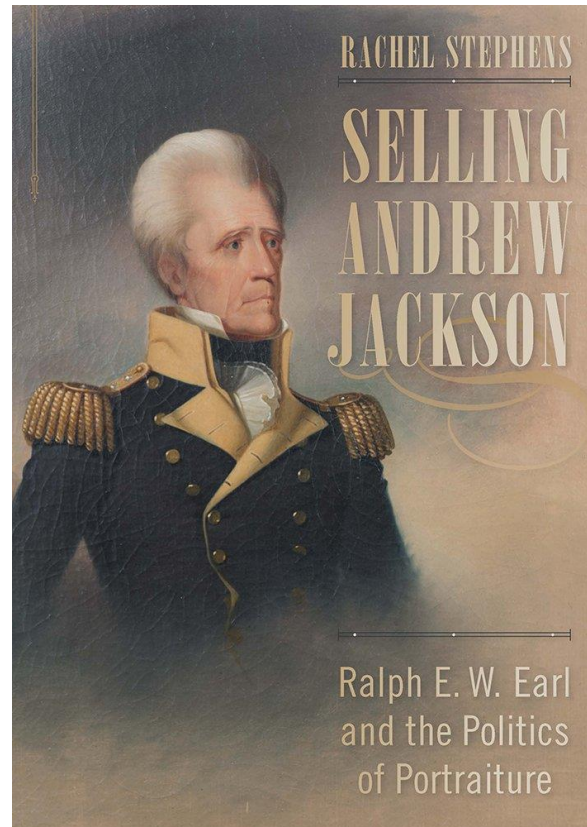
Rachel Stephens

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Rachel Stephens's *Selling Andrew Jackson: Ralph E. W. Earl and the Politics of Portraiture* tells the fascinating story of how an American artist who is little known today shaped the public image of a major political figure in early nineteenth-century America. In this well-researched monograph, Stephens focuses on artist Ralph Eleazer Whiteside Earl (1788–1838) and his portraits of President Andrew Jackson (1767–1845). Stephens demonstrates how Earl's portraits shaped Jackson's public image, and, she argues, helped the politician gain popular acclaim at key moments during his political career. Stephens analyzes Earl's portraits of Jackson across a twenty-year span (1817 to 1838); these include depictions of the president in different roles (genteel civilian, military hero, and dignified statesman), in different formats (paintings and engravings), and for different audiences (national and international). Jackson's complex public identity resulted from the tension between his assumed status as a gentleman and his actual background as a self-made man (3). As Stephens convincingly argues, it was Earl's reshaping of Jackson's public image into a "larger-than-life hero" that helped him win the presidency and maintain power (1, 13).

Stephens's work brings a fresh and nuanced perspective to the study of antebellum portraiture.¹ She productively frames the book within Southern art history, a field that has long been understudied within Americanist scholarship due to what Stephens defines as the region's cultural distinctiveness from eastern seaboard culture (7).² In situating her study in this way, Stephens brings attention to the impact of an artist who developed professionally



in the South while working on projects with a national scope, and she suggests that only by paying attention to the South can we fully understand and appreciate the entire cultural history of the United States (7). The lack of archival records or research material on “forgotten artists” that Stephens highlights presents serious challenges to scholars studying Southern art history and amplifies the important addition of her work to the field. Among the voluminous literature on Jackson, there has been scant attention paid to his portraiture, and studies discussing his representations, although thorough, survey various artists and media.³ In contrast, Stephens zooms in on the professional relationship between Earl and Jackson and the resulting painted portraits in an effort to understand how Earl’s visual characterizations functioned as political tools. Indeed, one of the key achievements of the book is to bring forth Earl’s role as the first professional public relations and media manager for Jackson’s political profile, a role that has become crucial in twentieth-century politics.

In chapters one and two, Stephens introduces Earl and Nashville, Tennessee, in order to set the stage for her later analysis of Jackson’s aforementioned campaign portraiture. The first chapter, “The Artist: Becoming The King’s Painter,” recounts Earl’s career before he moved to Tennessee, where he found success due to the nationwide demand for Jackson portraits. Stephens situates Earl as the product of his New England artistic education, which involved an itinerant lifestyle: first as an assistant, in 1798, to his artist father—the renowned portrait painter Ralph Earl (1751–1801)—and then as an independent portraitist, until 1809. During this early period of his career, Earl worked as a limner, a profession characterized by the quick production of portraits using props and formulae. Stephens stresses that, similar to his fellow limners such as Ammi Phillips (1788–1865) and Joshua Johnson (c. 1763–c. 1824), Earl shared an ability to adapt his work to different levels of detail and sophistication in order to satisfy a diverse clientele (16). Although at times Stephens’s abundant descriptions of New England portraiture practices read as a survey of the topic, her emphasis on Earl’s New England background helps establish him as a genuine product of this training. While Earl has been criticized in scholarship for “lacking in artistic ability,” Stephens profiles Earl as an early American artisan-entrepreneur who prioritized fulfilling market demands over quality (8). This also helps to explain the aesthetic change in his work when he moved South and developed an innovative and site-specific mode of portraiture that better fit his new locale. Earl spent from 1809 to 1815 in Europe but was enticed to return to the United States by the prospect of painting a series of history paintings about the Battle of New Orleans, in which Jackson had obtained a victory over the British Army and become a national hero. Her retelling of Earl’s formative period offers insight into the artist’s ambition and successes both at home and abroad before meeting Jackson.

The second chapter, “The City: Setting the Stage, Earl in Nashville,” reveals Earl’s instrumental role in advancing the social status of both the city of Nashville and his military hero, Jackson, who resided there. When he arrived in Nashville, the city was in the midst of transforming from frontier settlement to commercial center. Earl soon began promoting the cultural life of the city by discovering and preserving Tennessee history, planning several balls, and overseeing major construction and decorative work in Jackson’s residence. Stephens convincingly shows that Earl quickly became a cultural entrepreneur in the city and Jackson’s de facto protégé in the process.

Earl’s depictions of Jackson take center stage in chapter three, “The General: Earl’s Prepresidential Portraits of Jackson, 1817–1828.” This chapter illustrates how Earl’s work presented Jackson as “a new type of leader who exemplified the maturing nation and its change in leadership,” while stressing Jackson’s republican simplicity and



Fig. 1. Ralph Eleaser Whiteside Earl, *Andrew Jackson*, 1817? Oil on canvas, 30 1/8 x 25 5/8 in. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; transfer from the National Gallery of Art; gift of the A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, 1942

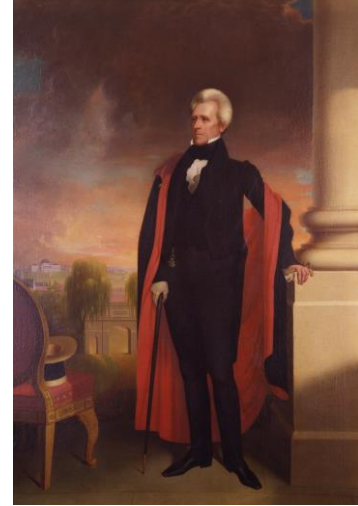
straightforwardness (81, 83). Stephens argues that Earl endeavored to recast Jackson, who had a reputation for being uncivilized, as a dignified figure. One of Earl's standard formats for portraits of Jackson—exemplified in the 1817 portrait at the National Portrait Gallery (fig. 1)—shows him in a half-length, frontal view, posing in military uniform on a battlefield (90–91). Earl introduced only minor changes to subsequent paintings in an effort to quickly produce canvases to meet the high demand for Jackson portraits from Jackson's friends and acquaintances. Stephens reminds the reader that Earl's prolific artistic production was due to his training in New England as a limner but contends that Earl transcended these artistic origins by producing [General Andrew Jackson \(1818; Tennessee Historical Society\)](#), also known as the "Tennessee State Portrait," in the tradition of

Grand Manner portraiture, characterized by full-length, life-size renderings with symbolic settings and props (93–101). Stephens discusses how Earl demonstrated his business savvy by commercially exploiting the uncommissioned Tennessee portrait: he sold the original in New Orleans, toured a replica throughout the South, and made smaller copies, which he later sold to Jackson's acquaintances. Essential to Earl's commercial success was Jackson's support as he provided Earl with letters stating the accuracy of the portraits (101–7). Notably, it is in this chapter that Stephens reveals the challenges that the mostly unsigned portraits of Jackson and lack of memorandum books present to the art historian who is attempting to ascertain which portraits resulted from life sittings and which were later replicas and, ultimately, trying to understand something of Earl's motivation behind creating Jacksonian imagery (82).

In chapter four, "The Election: Printmaking and 1828," Stephens shows how Earl used a wide array of visual strategies to secure Jackson's success in his 1828 presidential campaign. For example, Earl modified his standard portrait of Jackson to feature him in civilian attire (rather than military), looking gentlemanly and fit for the presidency. He then commissioned and oversaw the production of an engraving of the painting, which was used in a nationwide publicity campaign in an effort to counteract negative perceptions of Jackson expressed in contemporary political cartoons. Earl also aimed to reshape negative public opinions of Jackson's wife, Rachel. As Stephens explains, Earl repeatedly portrayed Rachel in the 1820s with a growing degree of idealized femininity and elegance as a riposte to the public perception of her as a woman lacking in manners and moral rectitude.

The culminating point of the book arrives with chapter five, "The President," which covers Jackson's election to the presidency of the United States and his desire for Earl to both counterbalance negative press and bolster his reputation. Stephens compellingly describes the different portraits created by Earl and outlines their purpose in furthering Jackson's

career, arguing that Earl's increasing involvement in politics necessitates a political interpretation of his paintings (160–61). For instance, as a response to specific criticism of the president, in 1830, Earl painted what he called the "Farmer Jackson" portrait (fig. 2). Here Jackson appears as both landed gentry (in the mold of previous presidents) and as a refined and intellectual figure, a dual concept that Stephens suggests constituted the ideal American man meant to appeal to the all-male electorate (148). The farmer portrait was also made into a lithograph to aid in Jackson's 1832 re-election campaign, which Earl managed. The *Tennessee Gentleman* portrait (1830; fig. 3) followed, in which Earl depicted the president as a gentleman and plantation owner in order to convey his role as patriarch of an estate and, by suggestion, the larger nation (156). After Jackson was reelected, Earl shifted his focus toward crafting an image of Jackson's enduring legacy, epitomized by the so-called "The National Picture" (1836–37) (fig. 4), a painting Earl considered to be his masterpiece. The artist set the scene at dusk to signal the end of Jackson's presidency and depicted him with the symbols of a president-civilian, referencing images of George Washington and linking Jackson to Washington's character and principles (174).



Figs. 2–4. Left: Ralph Eleaser Whiteside Earl, *Andrew Jackson at the Hermitage (Farmer Jackson)*, 1830. Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in. Jeanne Lee Sataloff, National Gallery of Art, L/NPG.5.2013. Photo: Wikimedia Commons. Middle: Ralph Eleaser Whiteside Earl, *The Tennessee Gentleman*, 1830. Oil on canvas, 30 x 20 in. The Hermitage, Nashville, TN. Photo: Wikimedia Commons. Right: Ralph Eleaser Whiteside Earl, *Andrew Jackson (The National Picture)*, 1836–37. Oil on canvas, 102 1/2 x 70 3/4 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from US District Court for the District of Columbia

The epilogue reminds readers of Earl's larger significance for American art. Earl was acquainted with the most renowned artists of his period, and owing to his intimacy with the president, he became the point person for other artists who requested sittings with Jackson (190). Stephens, however, keeps attention on Earl's multifaceted identity: he was a New Englander working in the South, characterized by professional residency during a period when itinerancy was a common strategy for portrait painters, trained both at home and abroad, and yet is commonly considered a naive artist. It is not only because of Earl's wide professional network and his prolific production of sought-after Jackson portraits but also because of Earl's self-made background and goal-driven attitude that Stephens ultimately posits that Earl was both "at the center of the American art world [and of the American experience] during his time" (190, 7).

Stephens offers several asides throughout the book that depart from the main focus on Earl and Jackson but that nevertheless create greater context for understanding these two figures. In a particularly incisive section of the book, she denounces the Ladies Hermitage Association Board of Directors' rejection and destruction in the 1940s of Earl's first portrait of Rachel Jackson on the grounds of poor quality. Stephens claims that such censorship was unique to Southern culture of the time and now prevents a transparent and complete study of its history (132). Stephens discusses judgments of quality more expansively in the introduction, making the case for a better appreciation of portraiture created outside of strict academic conventions. Earl altered his style to appeal to different regional tastes, something that scholars who have dismissed Earl's work for lack of skill have failed to recognize. Yet, in Stephens's analysis, Earl's oeuvre is admirable precisely for his fluidity of style. Stephens rightly remarks that Earl's contemporaries praised his creations as true-to-nature, and that both the commercial success and reception of Earl's work during his lifetime should be taken into account when discussing his legacy. Stephens brilliantly links the increasing availability of new printing techniques utilizing lithography at the time to the boom of political cartooning in the United States, a boom that started during Jackson's 1828 presidential campaign, and praises Earl's political savviness in using fine art prints to counteract negative press attacks on Jackson (115, 124–28, 148–55).

Race receives a somewhat ambiguous treatment in the book. Jackson has a reputation for cruelty as the result of his support of Indian Removal; he was also a plantation holder and enslaver. Stephens does explicitly address Earl's implicit participation in the institution of slavery. Jackson married into a slaveholding family and lived at his plantation, "Hermitage," which was run by the more than one hundred enslaved people that Jackson owned; he clearly benefitted from enslaved labor (59). It is only in passing, however, that Stephens—as justification for Earl's silence on enslaved people—mentions Jackson's human-trafficking activities and how they damaged his presidential reputation, leaving the reader in want of more information (60). In addition, her analysis of the Native American presence in the Jackson-Earl narrative needs further exploration, as she mentions Jackson's departure in December 1817 to fight the Seminole and Creek people but fails to connect this with Earl's and the Tennessee Antiquarian Society's efforts to preserve the Native American history of the region (96, 63, 70–71). The book therefore sidesteps the more disturbing aspects of Jackson's presidency and in doing so perhaps inadvertently excuses Earl's role in supporting such a figure.

While contributions from the field of Men and Masculinity Studies are a significant undercurrent in Stephens's study, the book misses a scholarly elaboration on this key matter, which could have helped create a better emotional understanding of Earl and Jackson.⁴ For example, in detailing Earl's itinerant experiences with his father, who provided him a network upon which to build, as well as in discussions of the intimacy that developed between Earl and Jackson, Stephens taps into a world of male affection in the antebellum period. The book describes poignant moments that punctuate these men's interactions, such as Earl's devotional vow to Jackson, Jackson's "desperate" call for Earl's company when he moved without him to the White House (1), and Jackson's tendency to weep every time he saw Earl's portrait of his deceased wife (137).

Overall, *Selling Andrew Jackson* is a book informed by trenchant research with much to contribute to the scholarship on American art, Southern art and history, and Jacksonian studies. Stephens's work is a fascinating examination of antebellum portraiture with a focus on stylistic influences, regional differences, and commercial strategies. Her rich visual

analysis convincingly connects portrait formats with specific moments of Jackson's career to establish an excellent model for art historians, as well as art critics, to study political propaganda. In sum, Stephens's thorough level of research and poignant critique of popular and scholarly misconceptions of Ralph Earl and Southern art history should not only "set the record straight," but become a turning point in the field.

Notes

I am grateful to Jennifer van Horn and my colleagues Christine Bachman, Anne Cross, and Sabena Kull, as well as to the book reviews editors of *Panorama* for their assistance with this book review.

¹ There is a clear scarcity of publications on antebellum portrait painting, a fact that reinforces the importance of Stephens's contribution to the field. My dissertation on the portraiture of George Peter Alexander Healy, covering the years 1830–71, is an attempt to address the gap in the literature. Some reference studies (arranged in chronological order) of antebellum portrait painting are William James Hennessey, *The American Portrait from the Death of Stuart to the Rise of Sargent*, exh. cat. (Worcester, MA: Worcester Art Museum, 1973); Leah Lipton, "William Dunlap, Samuel F. B. Morse, John Wesley Jarvis, and Chester Harding: Their Careers as Itinerant Portrait Painters." *American Art Journal* 13, no. 3 (1981): 34–50; William H. Gerdts, "Natural Aristocrats in a Democracy: 1810–1870," in Michael Quick, Marvin S. Sadik, and William H. Gerdts, *American Portraiture in the Grand Manner, 1720–1920*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1981), 27–60; Carolyn J. Weekley, "The Emerging Nation, 1790 to 1830," and Linda Crocker Simmons, "Growth and Development of the Old South, 1830 to 1900," in Donald B. Kuspit and David S. Bundy, *Painting in the South, 1564–1980*, exh. cat. (Richmond: Virginia Museum, 1983), 43–71, 72–103; and Valentijn Byvanck, "Public Portraits and Portrait Publics," *Pennsylvania History* 65, no. 5 (1998): 199–242.

² Stephens refers to W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Knopf, 1941), to evince the presence of publications stating the belief that the South presents a singular case within the United States. A more recent study that denounces the "long-standing assumptions about the cultural inferiority of the South" and discusses the reasons that have led to the development of these assumptions when considering Southern art history is Maurie D. McInnis, "Little of Artistic Merit? The Problem and Promise of Southern Art History," *American Art* 19, no. 2 (2005): 11–18.

³ See Susan Clover Symonds, "Portraits of Andrew Jackson: 1815–1845" (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 1968); James Barber, *Andrew Jackson: A Portrait Study* (Washington, DC: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1991) (this publication grew out of the exhibition catalogue by the same author: James Barber, *Old Hickory: A Life Sketch of Andrew Jackson*, exh. cat. [Washington, DC: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1990]); and Valentijn Byvanck, "The Jackson Figurehead." *Winterthur Portfolio* 35, no. 4 (2000): 253–67.

⁴ For more information on Men and Masculinity Studies, see Andrea Waling, "Rethinking Masculinity Studies: Feminism, Masculinity, and Poststructural Accounts of Agency and Emotional Reflexivity," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 27, no. 1 (June 2018): 89–107.