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PRESS RELEASE

Historic Deerfield Receives Gift of Rufus Porter Art

Works by artist, inventor, and publisher Rufus Porter include nearly thirty miniature portraits, fifteen murals, and more.

(Deerfield, MA) — [Historic Deerfield](#) is pleased to announce an exciting new addition of Rufus Porter (1792-1884) material to its collection, thanks to the gift of Julie and Carl M. Lindberg.

This large-scale acquisition includes several components related to Rufus Porter's career as an artist, inventor, and publisher. A significant portion of the gift comprises close to thirty miniature portraits attributed to Porter and illustrates his entire career as an artist. The donation also contains early editions of *Scientific Mechanic* and *Scientific American* (Porter was founder of *Scientific American*), several editions of *A Select Collection of Valuable and Curious Arts*, and *Interesting Experiments* by Porter, and artifacts related to him, including both versions of his patented Plumb & Level Indicator and a desk with ornamental grain painting documented to Porter. Finally, the generous donation comprises fifteen murals on lath and plaster, signed by Porter, from the two-story stair hall of the Dr. Francis Howe House, West Dedham (now Westwood), Massachusetts, from 1838. Donor Julie Lindberg commented that these additions will make the museum "a center for information on Porter's life with a major collection of miniature portraits spanning 1816 to 1838, original *Scientific American* newspapers and several inventions."

Once called a "Yankee Da Vinci," Porter explored various professions, including painting, inventing, and publishing. His work coincides with the United States as an emerging republic and the increasing early nineteenth-century interest in the material world. As a component of his career, Porter completed a large number of portraiture miniatures in the 1820s and 1830s, up until the advent of photography. This gift includes examples of single sitters, couples' pendant portraits, families, children, and a family group in a single frame. As an itinerant artist traveling across New England, Porter offered miniature profile and frontal portraits of sitters. He would advertise his portrait and murals in local newspapers and note the length of his stay in

town. Unlike ivory miniaturists, he utilized the inexpensive materials of paper and watercolor to complete these likenesses, though paint analysis shows he used the highest quality paint in portraits and murals. Portrait miniatures in early America were more readily available to middle-class clients, and Porter's work fit the market for rising New Englanders seeking likenesses. Several sitters in the donation include identifiable New Englanders, including the Plummer family of Haverhill, Massachusetts, the Hilliards from Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the Gages of Merrimack, New Hampshire, and Lawrence, Massachusetts. Sitters convey an age of refinement in this early nineteenth-century moment and the prevailing taste for specific clothing and hairstyles between 1820 and 1835. With his interest in science and technology, Porter likely used mechanical devices to aid in the creation of his portraits, such as a camera obscura to trace the profile of his sitter.

A significant portion of the gift includes a set of fifteen murals, signed by Porter. He painted wall murals between 1822 and 1840 and depicted a variety of landscapes inspired by New England. His murals responded to the popularity of scenic wallpaper, but Porter offered a decorative alternative with his vibrant scenes painted on dry plaster. As an itinerant artist, he traveled to paint his murals in western and southern Maine, where he spent his childhood, along the Saco and Kennebec River Valley; in Massachusetts, around Boston, the North Shore, Middlesex County, and southern Worcester County; and in New Hampshire, along the Massachusetts border, east of the Lakes Region, and the Upper Connecticut Valley.

The 1838 murals, which are also the partial gift of Heller Washam Antiques, were originally from the stair hall of the Doctor Francis Howe House in Westwood, Massachusetts, near Boston, demolished in 1966. The Howe House was located on the town's High Street, the main thoroughfare that expanded with businesses in the early nineteenth century. Unfortunately, many wall murals painted in the early to mid-nineteenth-century did not last into the later twentieth century. The Howe examples by Porter serve as an invaluable example of an art form and landscape school tied to New England.

Lindberg said, "We've owned this incredible set of murals for 20 years, and learned so much about the life of Rufus Porter from them. Originally purchased for resale, we soon realized they were too important to be separated and sold, and thus decided to find a permanent home in a museum setting to preserve them. We are delighted that Historic Deerfield will become the final home to these murals and will make them available to the public in their original conformation as one of America's greatest art treasures. We are deeply grateful to the Board for their willingness to become the caretakers, and to the many folk art dealers who have assisted us in creating this collection and to whom we owe a great deal."

With his panoramic landscapes, Porter immersed his patrons in the natural scenery. His murals include distinct stylistic features, and he would often repeat motifs across his commissions, whether elm trees or vibrant farmhouses atop hills. The Howe panels include a waterscape with islands, as schooners and steamboats dot the harbor scene. On other panels, he painted

colorful farmhouses with smoke rising from the chimneys and farmland with rolling, verdant fields and brush hedges. Rail fences and elms also punctuate the landscape, providing a sense of depth and perspective along the water's edge. The stairwell panels may depict the craggy ridges of the White Mountains, including the whimsical figure of a man, and a goat prepared to leap from the cliff.

Across the panels, Porter incorporated large trees to frame the foreground. He used a dry brush on the tree trunks to stimulate the texture of bark. The Howe series also includes a distinct panel with the silhouette of Napoleon formed by trees, likely an allusion to his burial place at St. Helena and a direct reference to a Nathaniel Currier engraving published in 1835.

His painted landscape scenes and natural scenery would be familiar to New England clients. Always the teacher, Porter described how his wall murals could transport patrons away from winter hardships and into "pleasant groves and verdant fields." He also wrote instructions for "Landscape Painting on Walls of Rooms" in his *Curious Arts* of 1825 and would also publish a later set of instructions in *Scientific American* between 1845 and 1847 with a discussion of mural motifs. The numerous wall murals by other nineteenth-century artists in the New England region demonstrate how many followed Porter's style of mural painting. Through the Westwood panels, we can better understand his artistic practice and panoramic landscapes.

Historic Deerfield's President John Davis thanked the donors, adding, "This transformative acquisition will continue to strengthen Historic Deerfield's collection of itinerant artists and material culture related to life in New England and the Upper Connecticut River Valley." A selection of material from this Rufus Porter gift will be featured in a "New Acquisitions" exhibition at Historic Deerfield, which will open in September, 2024.

To learn more about Historic Deerfield, visit the website, historic-deerfield.org.

Images available [here](#).

About Historic Deerfield. Historic Deerfield is a museum of early American life situated in an authentic 18th-century New England village in the Connecticut River Valley of Massachusetts. Its historic houses and world-famous collection of early American decorative arts open doors to new perspectives that inspire people to seek a deeper understanding of themselves, their communities, and the world.