Sampson Vryling Stoddard Wilder

Date
1808–1812

Primary Maker
John Vanderlyn

Medium
oil on canvas

Description
Sampson Vryling Stoddard Wilder is a half-length portrait of a seated man, turned three-quarters left and looking forward. He has curly brown hair and slightly tufted sideburns that extend to his jawline. His eyes are blue. The face and hands are painted in a range of red and pink flesh tones, with the strongest reds on the cheeks. Wilder wears a dark green coat over a white waistcoat, stock, and shirt. The shirt has a ruffled front and is decorated with a gold-colored pin that has a white, pearl-like head. The lapels of the coat are a slightly warmer green than the rest of the coat and have a texture that suggests velvet. The sitter’s pants are painted ocher. The figure sits in a Greek Revival chair with an elongated S-shaped contour that runs from the back rest to the hand rest. The chair has a distinctive barrel-shaped back and scroll handholds. Wilder’s proper left arm is in a relaxed position and conforms to the gentle curves of the chair. His right arms rests on a portable, wooden desk at the left side of the painting. The lid of the desk is open and its green cloth-lined surface is covered with documents. The edge of the desk is trimmed with yellow metal, probably brass; there are hinges and L-shaped brackets at the corners of the desk lid that also appear to be brass. A glass inkwell sits on the back right corner of the desk, just behind a bundle of papers. A quill pen lies across an open letter that is signed, "S. Higginson Jr." The paper closest to Wilder’s right hand, which had been folded in thirds and is now partially open forms a triangle; the surface of the letter that faces the viewer gives the name and address of the sitter. The background at left is occupied by a red fringed drapery that has been tied back, and from which a red tassel hangs. The wall behind the sitter is olive green and is lightest at the center of the painting, behind the figure. The wall is slightly darker at the right side of the composition, and the drapery casts a dark shadow to its right. A gray chair rail runs horizontally, just below the center right part of the composition. The wall is grayish purple below the rail. At bottom right are two books. The larger book is bound in brown leather with a red title panel on the spine; that book is clearly identified with a title inscription painted in yellow to suggest gold lettering: "LEX MERCATOR." To the left of that book is a smaller one, which is bound in a blue cover. The title of that book is not identified. Vanderlyn painted a strong light on the sitter’s face, white textiles, and hands. A softer light falls on the still life of papers, drapery, and chair. Together with the smooth brushstrokes, the light gives the figure a sculptural presence, rather than a warm human quality.

Dimensions
canvas: 92.1 x 73.3 cm (36 1/4 x 28 7/8 in.)