Portrait of a Man with a Gun

Date
1784

Primary Maker
Ralph Earl

Medium
oil on canvas

Description
Portrait of a Man with a Gun is a full-length portrait of a hunter. He stands in the right half of the painting, facing three-quarters left. His head also is turned three-quarters left, and he looks at the viewer. In his right hand he holds a black hat that is lined with blue fabric and a brown band; he extends it in a gesture that nearly reaches the right edge of the painting. In his left hand he holds a rifle that balances on a diagonal from lower right to upper left and crosses in front of his other arm at the elbow. The large format seems to have posed a challenge to Earl in that the head is disproportionately small and the arms too long and slender. The subject’s powdered hair is pulled back and apparently gathered in a queue; there is a single tight curl visible above his left ear. He wears a white stock and bow and an orange, spotted waistcoat that is edged with a double row of gold braid and decorated with two rows of small gold-colored buttons. He also has on a red coat with large, silver-colored buttons. His buff-colored breeches are fastened at the knee with cloth-covered buttons of the same color and tucked into knee-high boots that are dark brown at the top and black from the calf to the toe. The man is accompanied by two hunting dogs, whose heads are turned in the direction of his gesture. The dog on the left, its back to the viewer, is placed on a diagonal from the bottom-left corner toward the middle of the image. This animal has a dark gray head and ears and a large gray spot on the back of its neck; its coat is mottled gray and white. The other dog stands in profile behind its master, its neck extended and facing left. This canine has reddish-brown markings on its head and back and a similarly spotted coat. The man and dogs appear in the clearing of a wooded landscape. Gently curving lines of trees recede along the left and right sides; a single tree stands just behind and to the right of the hunter. The sky has large gray clouds whose shapes echo the soft contours of the trees as well as broad passages of pink and blue. Although the figure of the man is rather tightly rendered compared to those in characteristic English paintings of the time, Earl used broad brushstrokes in the landscape, especially in the bush on the left and the soil in the foreground. As in Earl’s indoor portraits, a strong light source from the left defines the modeling and casts a web of shadows beneath the figures.

Dimensions
218.8 x 145.9 cm (86 1/8 x 57 7/16 in.)