



The Capture of Major André

Date

1812

Primary Maker

Thomas Sully

Medium

oil on canvas

Description

Sully painted *The Capture of Major André* on a canvas slightly smaller than those he typically used for bust-size portraits. In the lower center, four male figures are positioned atop a hill, beneath

a large tree, on a dirt road marked with wagon ruts that leads out of the painting at the lower right. A man in a mauve-colored coat is the central, and tallest, figure in the composition. Another man kneels on one knee to this figure's right, another crouches behind him, and a third stands to his left. Just behind the figures, a saddled horse grazes under a large moss-covered tree, the top of which extends beyond the picture plane. The tree leans slightly to the left, and the soil around its base has eroded, exposing its roots. At the lower left are a leafy green bush and a dirt bank partially covered with dark-brown brush and green grass. A feathered hat, a musket, a black hat, and some scattered papers, including one with a torn red seal, are visible in the grass and dirt. A tree with yellow and brown leaves appears above the dirt bank at the left. Beyond it, water flows in a chasm above which stretch hills, blue-gray mountains, and billowing smoke mingled with pink-edged clouds in a blue sky. Darker clouds show through breaks in the foliage at the upper right. Three of the four men are dressed almost identically in what appears to be a uniform: brown shoes with silver buckles, long olive-green trousers with slits at the cuff and a matching short coat, powder horns, white shirts, and tan hats with feathers. The man crouching behind the figure in the mauve coat does not wear a neck cloth, and his shirt is unbuttoned. Only the kneeling man has placed his hat and musket on the ground. In addition to the long mauve coat, lined with gray silk and trimmed with gold braid and gold buttons, the central figure wears a ruffled white shirt, white stockings, ivory breeches, and a matching waistcoat. On his left foot he wears a black boot trimmed with tan; the kneeling man holds his other boot. He wears a powdered queue wig. Sully carefully delineated his figures' facial expressions and gestures. The kneeling man looks up in disbelief at the central figure from the spilled contents of the boot. His mouth is slightly open, and his left hand is extended; perhaps he is asking a question. The crouching figure is hunched over, intently reading a document he holds in both hands. The figure in mauve holds a watch in the palm of his right hand and has placed his left hand on the shoulder of the uniformed man standing at his right. Frowning and ignoring the extended watch, the uniformed man gazes outward and upward; he holds a gun in his left hand and clutches papers in his right hand. The two standing figures appear to be in a spotlight, although the brim of the uniformed man's hat shadows his face. Light coming from the upper left casts shadows from these two standing men. Only the face of the kneeling man is lit, and his body is in shadow, as is the crouching man slightly behind him. The brightest areas of the painting are the mauve coat, ivory breeches and waistcoat, and white ruffled shirt of the central figure, as well as the dirt road. The underdrawing is extensive. Working in pencil, Sully first sketched the figures and elements of the landscape background on the canvas. On top of this drawing, he laid down a thin, semitransparent layer of earth-colored paint. He built up the composition with semitransparent paint layers of varying colors but did not completely cover the underdrawing. For instance, the black outline of the nose, lips, and eyes of the standing uniformed figure is visible beneath a layer of flesh color. Sully applied opaque paint and impasto on the green mossy bark and the yellow-green leaves of the large tree. Near the base of the leaning tree, he signed the canvas with his cipher "TS," followed by the year, "1812".

Dimensions

canvas: 56.8 x 77.3 cm (22 3/8 x 30 7/16 in.)