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Aging Gracefully

By Alexandra Deutsch, Chief Curator

In 1858, when Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte was seventy-three years old, she lamented "My Beauty is departed," a sentiment she had uttered for decades. Her beauty had been celebrated throughout her life. In her youth, she was thought the most beautiful woman in America. Her appearance was the thing of legends and, in 1803, drew Jérôme Bonaparte to Baltimore to meet the "exquisite creature" described to him.

For a woman whose beauty was central to her identity, aging must have been difficult. Rather than embracing the changes time wrought, Elizabeth defied them. Her account books documents a recipe for hair dye, as well as various compounds to create creams and possibly cosmetics. If she must age, she was going to do it as gracefully as possible.

As early as 1815 when Elizabeth was 30, a letter from her friend Elizabeth Godefroy suggests that Elizabeth saw her looks declining. Godefroy assures her, "I do not believe you about your looks." Perhaps she attributed her visible aging to the strain and stress of Napoléon's annulment, her return to her father's unwelcoming home in Baltimore and her (successful) suit for divorce from Jérôme. Life had been, as Elizabeth once said, "a mean and grinding martyrdom." Such emotional misery is not easy on the looks.

Despite her perception of her appearance, Elizabeth's beauty is documented in several surviving portraits. In 1838 when Elizabeth was 53, she had her silhouette cut in Rockaway Beach, New York. The solid black image depicts her in profile with a softening jawline and an appropriately middle-aged appearance. The silhouette is the last known image of her that survives. To date, no photographs of her are known. Instead, Elizabeth commissioned copies of her portraits to give as gifts. How did this woman look at 40, 60, 90?



Age Progression by Mike Streed

To answer this question, we turned to internationally-known forensic artist, Michael W. Streed, the owner of **SketchCOP Solutions**. Using existing images of Elizabeth, Streed age-progressed her, a delicate trick of artistry and intuition that produced fascinating results. The images Streed created are now on view in "*Woman of Two Worlds: Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte and Her Quest for an Imperial Legacy*."

I asked Streed a few questions about the process of "aging Elizabeth" and the challenges it presented. These were his responses to my questions.

How did you approach the project?

I read about Miss Bonaparte and her privileged, yet tragic life. I tried to imagine what it was like to carry her burden throughout the years. This led me to depict her as a proud, yet determined



Age Progression Image by Mike Streed

CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO WORLDS,
ELIZABETH PATTERSON BONAPARTE
CHARTED A ROYAL DESTINY.



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woman. An elegant woman not jaded, nor affected by environmental elements throughout her many travels overseas.

What was the greatest challenge?

My greatest challenge was accurately capturing Elizabeth Bonaparte’s photographic likeness from a painting. Miss Bonaparte had a unique facial structure that was difficult to duplicate. I believe in the end I was successful capturing her facial nuances. It took hours of reading and research to find the correct fashions and hairstyles for the various time periods throughout her life. Equally challenging was finding the right combination of photos to maintain the integrity of her identity as she gracefully and elegantly aged.

Did the results surprise you?

The results always surprise me during historical projects, mainly because the subjects themselves are so fascinating. Each of them has a look that makes them unique. A person’s face says much about their personality. Capturing it and maintaining it through a period of many years is the key to success.

Is there anything else you want me to add about the project?

Working on historical figures is always a pleasing distraction from my daily work depicting criminals. Although I have a passion for helping crime victims, I equally enjoy working with those tasked with preserving the rich history here in Baltimore. The opportunity to partner with highly intelligent, passionate and curious people enriches my life and makes me excited for what each new day might bring.

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Erica Houdson says:

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February 12, 2014 at 1:14 pm

quite amazing to see! I wish I could see my aging process.

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