

Robert Gilmor, Jr., 1823
Thomas Sully (American, born England, 1783-1872)

This traditional 19th-century portrait captures every texture with a masterful technique.



Oil on canvas; 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 24 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Purchase with exchange funds from Gift of Albert Hendler, Bernard R. Hendler, Bernice Hendler Kolodny and Florence Hendler Trupp, BMA 1960.43

Thomas Sully painted at least 2,000 portraits and was very much in demand by members of affluent 19th-century society. He was an astute businessman who understood that pleasing the sitter was an important part of his work. It is said that Sully was able to flatter his sitters without seeming to do so. He was especially adept at painting the fabrics from which their fashionable clothing was made.

Robert Gilmor, Jr., son of a wealthy and prominent Baltimore merchant, retired from the family shipping business to devote himself exclusively to intellectual pursuits, including the collection of Old Master paintings, sculpture, drawings, and engravings. While Sully usually required at least six sittings, Gilmor refused to sit for him even once. Therefore, Sully produced this painting by copying an earlier portrait of Gilmor by the English artist Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830).

What different textures do you find in Sully's portrait? Was he able to paint them in a convincing way?

- Sully painted three different types of hair. The unruly hair on top of Gilmor's head looks soft and wavy while his sideburns appear fuzzy and his eyebrows seem coarse.
- Gilmor's skin looks appropriately ruddy and uneven, unlike the smooth, flawless skin that Sully gave his female sitters.
- Gilmor appears very much alive with glistening eyes and slightly moist lips—all the result of a few carefully placed spots of white (or light) paint.
- The open edge of Gilmor's white shirt is thick and stiffened while the stylish ruffles on his neck cloth appear thin and somewhat transparent.

Imagine Gilmor's portrait hanging on the wall of an elegant room alongside many other portraits. Why might his portrait attract more attention than the others?

- The dramatic spotlighting of Gilmor's face and shirt against a dark background would probably make this portrait more compelling than portraits that were lit more evenly. Its theatrical lighting may contribute to what one art historian called "an air of breeding, a high tone, and a genteel carriage" in Sully's work.¹

¹ Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists, American Artist Life* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1867), p. 159.