



Ralph Earl, Major General Friedrich Wilhelm Ludolf Gerhard Augustin, Baron von Steuben

Title

Baron von Steuben

Medium

Oil on canvas

Date

ca. 1786

Dimensions

52 1/4 × 44 in. (132.7 × 111.8 cm)

Accession number

94.16.1

Credit Line

Gift of A. Pennington Whitehead and O. Z. Whitehead, 1994

Web Description

Ralph Earl painted several versions of this formal military portrait of Baron Frederic Wilhelm von Steuben, a major general in the Continental Army. Prussian-born Major General Friedrich Wilhelm Ludolf Gerhard Augustin, Baron von Steuben (1730-1794), served as aide-de-camp to Frederick the Great before coming to America in 1777 to support the American cause. He offered his assistance to the Second Continental Congress in reorganizing the undisciplined American army on the European model. In this portrait he wears a dress sword presented to him by the United States Congress, the star of the Prussian Order of Fidelity, and the insignia of the American Society of the Cincinnati. When he left military service in 1784, he was granted full citizenship and a pension by the Congress, as well as a significant land grant in the Mohawk Valley of New York State, where he retired. Ralph Earl was born in Worcester County, Massachusetts, and began his career as a self-taught artist. A loyalist during the American Revolution, Earl fled to England and studied under Benjamin West. He returned to the United States in 1785 and became an itinerant artist, completing portraits of the landed gentry throughout the Northeast. The subject of a Prussian military officer who served as General Washington's chief of staff ran counter to Earl's Loyalist leanings. Regardless of his personal politics, this major commission undoubtedly benefited Earl, who found himself in dire financial straits after his return to the United States, including a term in debtors' prison. All

three of the portraits (Yale University Art Gallery and Fenimore Art Museum) descended through branches of the family of James Duane, mayor of New York, and one of Earl's benefactors through the Society for the Relief of Distressed Debtors.