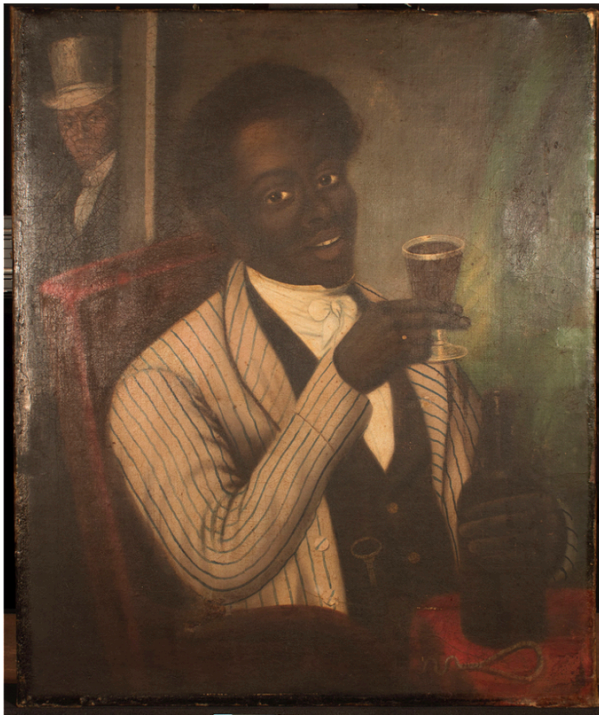


Painting Pairs: Art History and Technical Study 2021/22

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Portraits of Ira Aldridge (?): *Servant Drinking the Master's Port* and *Maid Trying on the Mistress's Bonnet* (unattributed)

Abstract

This report summarises our findings from the conservation and art historical research of a pair of early nineteenth century portraits, purportedly of the actor Ira Aldridge (1807-1867). Both of the paintings are unsigned and undated by the artist, with very little known about their provenance. When they arrived at The Courtauld for conservation in 2021, it was tentatively suggested that both portraits depict Aldridge in different roles from the same play, *The Padlock*. The paintings are correspondingly titled 'Servant Drinking the Master's Port' and 'Maid Trying on the Mistress's Bonnet'. Both works arrived in a relatively stable structural condition, but with poor aesthetic condition. Due to the extent of the cleaning and conservation required, as well as the challenges which we encountered when trying to identify the female figure, we focussed the majority of our time and attention on the portrait titled 'Servant Drinking the Master's Port'.

The primary aim of this study has been to explore and strengthen the possibility that this portrait represents Ira Aldridge as Mungo in *The Padlock*, through narrowing down a potential date range, and by bringing the portrait into dialogue with the literature on Ira Aldridge's life and career. By attempting to date both the pigments used and the artist's techniques, we hoped to more accurately locate the production of the portrait within, or shortly after, Aldridge's lifetime, and particularly the years in which he was professionally active. Elemental analysis using XRF spectroscopy revealed the presence of barium and chrome in the pigments, from which we can approximate that the paintings were produced after the 1820s. This therefore supports an interpretation that the paintings were produced within or around Aldridge's lifetime.

We contextualised 'Servant Drinking the Master's Port' by locating the precise scene in *The Padlock* which corresponds to the narrative detail in the portrait, and researched Aldridge's transformation of Mungo from a racist caricature into a more complex and rebellious character. Through comparing the portrait with other images of Aldridge in the role, which imitate earlier representations of the stereotyped character, we explored the possibility that the portrait reflects Aldridge's ability to challenge and subvert his audiences' expectations through his performances. We also explored the portrait's relationship to a corresponding painting in the Northwestern University Collection, and discovered two additional analogous images, which broadens our understanding of the extent to which Aldridge's image was circulated. Finally, in addition to strengthening the attribution, our report has explored how broadening our knowledge of the range of images attributed to Aldridge can deepen our understanding of his impact and practice as an actor.