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**The Torn Hat**

1820

Thomas Sully, American (born in England), 1783–1872

48.58 x 37.15 cm (19 1/8 x 14 5/8 in.)

Oil on panel

**Inscriptions:** note: on verso is a Landscape study; center, on hatband: TS, 1820 [TS in monogram]

**Classification:** Paintings

Object is currently not on view

Even in an era devoted to showing children as truly childlike, Thomas Sully's portrait of his nine-year old son, Thomas Wilcocks Sully, is unusually informal. The older Sully was Philadelphia's leading portraitist in the early nineteenth century. This work displays his characteristically fluid use of paint, a skill he learned in London in emulation of his mentor, the British Romantic portraitist Sir Thomas Lawrence. The young Thomas is situated off-center, creating a feeling of movement and immediacy. He wears an open shirt, rumpled jacket, and straw hat. Such less restrictive costume was becoming more usual for children as it was acknowledged that play was beneficial and healthful for young people.

The detail of the torn hat suggests some real, human mischief on the part of the subject that is not apparent in the rosy sweetness of his face. The viewer wonders how the hat got torn, suggesting an element of narrative rare in a portrait and tying the picture to genre painting. The tear in the hat brim also afforded Sully the opportunity to show off his ability to paint a face under a complex pattern of light and shadow. Like Copley before him (see *Boy with a Squirrel*, 78.297), Sully felt free to experiment in a portrait that was not a commissioned work.

The artist's experimentation with such unusual effects may reflect the disappointing turn of events in Sully's career. By 1820 his painting sales had been down for several years, and he was uncertain about whether he would be able to continue making his living as a portraitist. Sully

may have thought that a more informal kind of portrait might sell. Although the artist referred to the painting as "a study" and completed it in three days, he signed and dated it as he did his finished works. He also priced it at \$100, twice the amount he usually asked for a picture of its size.

Sully's gamble paid off. He sold the painting for his asking price just a year later, to Boston merchant and art collector John Hubbard. The artist went on to be much admired for his natural portrayals of children. Young Thomas Wilcocks Sully grew up to become a well-regarded portraitist in his own right.

This text was adapted from Davis, et al., MFA Highlights: American Painting (Boston, 2003) available at [www.mfashop.com/mfa-publications.html](http://www.mfashop.com/mfa-publications.html).

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Gift of Miss Belle Greene and Henry Copley Greene in memory of their mother, Mary Abby Greene (Mrs. J. S. Copley Greene), 1916

**Accession number:** 16.104

**Provenance/Ownership History:** The artist; to John Hubbard, Boston, 1821; to Elizabeth Parkinson Hubbard Greene (Mrs. John Singleton Copley Greene), his daughter; to Rev. John Singleton Copley Greene, her husband, 1841; to Belle Greene and Henry Copley Greene, his children; to MFA, 1916, gift of Belle Greene and Henry Copley Greene.

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### Thomas Sully

American, 1783 - 1872

Thomas Sully was born in 1783 in Horncastle, Lincolnshire, England, the youngest son of nine children born to the actors Matthew and Sarah Chester Sully. At the suggestion of his father's brother-in-law, a theater manager in Virginia and South Carolina, the Sullys emigrated to the United States in 1792. Sully attended school in New York until his mother's death in 1794, when he returned to live with his family in Richmond. From there they moved to Charleston, South Carolina, where the future artist performed on the stage with his parents and siblings.

Following the example of his older brother, the miniature painter Lawrence, Sully resolved to become an artist. He first received art lessons from his young schoolmate Charles Fraser. After an unsuccessful attempt to learn the business of insurance broking, Sully was apprenticed to his brother-in-law, a French emigrée miniaturist named Jean Belzons. After a violent quarrel with his teacher in 1799 Sully left Charleston and joined his brother Lawrence in Richmond. Inspired by the sight of portraits by Henry Benbridge, he continued to study art and opened up his first studio at Richmond in 1804. When Lawrence died in September 1804 Sully assumed responsibility for the family and eventually married his brother's widow Sarah. In 1806 Sully accepted a commission to paint at a theater in New York, where he met William Dunlap, John Wesley Jarvis, and John Trumbull. He invested one hundred dollars to have Trumbull paint a portrait of his wife so that he might learn something of the senior artist's technique. In 1807 he travelled to Boston and spent about three weeks studying with Gilbert Stuart, who encouraged his efforts to become a portraitist. Later that year Sully moved to Philadelphia, where he remained for the rest of his life.

His portrait practice flourished, and in May 1809 he entered into an agreement with a group of prominent citizens that enabled him to embark a year-long trip to study art in London. Sharing a room there with Charles Bird King, he studied under Benjamin West and Henry Fuseli, met the circle of British artists who were active at the Royal Academy of Art, and familiarized himself with collections of old master paintings. When Sully returned to Philadelphia in 1810 he quickly set about establishing his future reputation as one of America's foremost portraitists by painting a number of full-length commissions, beginning in 1811 with *George Frederick Cooke in the Role of Richard III*. In 1812, one year after the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts acquired the painting, Sully was elected to an honorary membership in the organization, in which he played an active role until resigning from its board of directors in 1831. From 1819 to at least 1846 he and his partner, the restorer and frame maker James S. Earle, ran a successful commercial art gallery.

Sully's artistic activity was not confined to Philadelphia, and throughout his long career he made numerous protracted trips to Washington, Baltimore, Boston, New York, and West Point. At the height of his fame in 1837 a Philadelphia association of British expatriates called the Society of the Sons of St. George sent him to England to paint a full-length portrait of the recently crowned Queen Victoria. Sully's professional stature was such that he attracted many pupils, most notable among them Charles Robert Leslie, John Neagle, and Jacob Eichholtz; he also trained several of his children to become competent artists. In 1851 he prepared a short practical guide for portraitists entitled *Hints to Young Painters and the Process of Portrait Painting*, which was revised in 1871 and published two years later.

Sully was America's foremost exponent of the highly romanticized, painterly, and fluid style of portraiture practiced by the two contemporary British artists he had most admired during his year of study in England, Sir Henry Raeburn and Sir Thomas Lawrence. Although he painted many of the most prominent politicians, clergymen, and military heroes of his era, Sully's fame rests mainly on his exaggeratedly elegant and idealized portraits of fashionable society women, and, to a lesser extent, his sentimental group portraits of children and "fancy pictures." Often painted with a nearly flawless mastery of technique, these ultra-refined images are fundamentally decorative, and the deliberately self-conscious affectations of the sitters create a sense of artificiality that precludes the achievement of any penetrating psychological insight into their characters. This aesthetic, however, appealed greatly to the elite social stratum from which Sully drew his patrons, and earned him the status of being the most successful American portrait painter following the death of Gilbert Stuart in 1826, until his gradual decline in the 1850s. Sully died in Philadelphia in 1872. [This is an edited version of the artist's biography published, or to be published, in the NGA Systematic Catalogue]

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