Smith’s distinguished history of educating women for leadership is told, in part, by the portraits of those who have led the institution itself. Despite the cultural, economic and technological changes that higher education has faced in the decades since the college’s founding, Smith has stayed true to the ideals that first took root in the mind and conscience of Sophia Smith. Each president, in his or her own way, has advanced the college in support of its enduring constants: an uncompromising defense of academic and intellectual freedom, an attention to the relation between college education and the larger public issues of world order and human dignity, and a concern for the rights and privileges of women.

Most of the college’s presidential portraits—painted by artists from the Smith community and beyond—hang in College Hall. Some portraits, like that of Jill Ker Conway, hang in places of great meaning to their subject; her official portrait can be found in the Sophia Smith Collection, repository of the stories of women’s lives. Many presidents have multiple likenesses across campus, and a tour through Neilson Library, Seelye Hall and other buildings will often reveal a bust or portrait of one of the college’s early leaders. A number of the portraits are included in the collection of the Smith College Museum of Art, which generously assisted in this project.

Laurenus Clark Seelye, 1873–1910

Smith College opened in the fall of 1875 with 14 students and six faculty members under the presidency of Laurenus Clark Seelye. The small campus was designed to make the college part of “the real practical life” of a New England town, rather than a sequestered academic preserve.

During the 35 years of Seelye’s administration, the college prospered mightily. Its assets grew from Sophia Smith’s original bequest of about $400,000 to more than $3,000,000, its faculty to 122, its student body to 1,635, its buildings to 35. These buildings included Alumnae Gymnasium, site of the first women’s basketball game.

Seelye’s portrait, by J. Alden Weir (1852–1919), was painted in Weir’s New York studio between 1884 and 1886. This was at a time when Weir, known as an adventurous and progressive painter, was concerned with harmonies of color, beauty of texture, tonality to enforce mood and simplified masses for design. Seelye made frequent visits to New York to sit for the portrait, which was presented as a gift to the college from three trustees: Rodney Wallace, William B. Washburn and A. Lyman Williston. Weir told Seelye, “I never do a knock-down likeness…. My aim is to paint first soul, second likeness, third color.”

Other likenesses of Seelye include a bust in the Neilson Browsing Room, a painting by Edmund Charles Tarbell (currently undergoing conservation) that normally hangs in the Alumnae House and multiple portraits by the American artist Henry Salem Hubbell. Hubbell’s work was commissioned by Marjory Gane Harkness, class of 1901, and Gertrude Gane, class of 1894. According to a 1911 article in The Springfield Republican, “The portrait shows Dr. Seelye seated in the chair which he long occupied in the administrative work of the college.” Three portraits were eventually painted: one was kept by Hubbell, one was donated to the college and a third near-replica of the official portrait was created for Seelye himself.

Marion LeRoy Burton, 1910–17

Smith’s second president, Marion LeRoy Burton, was a graduate of Yale Divinity School and a gifted public speaker with an especially acute business sense. He used these talents to help the college raise the amazing sum of $1,000,000—a huge endowment campaign for any college at that time. With this funding, Burton was able to increase faculty salaries substantially and improve the faculty-to-student ratio. His fund drive also invigorated the alumnae, bringing them closer to the college than ever before and increasing their representation on the board of trustees.

Along with improving the financial state and business methods of the college, Burton contributed to a revision of the curriculum to better meet the challenges students would face in the world and initiated college honors programs to recognize outstanding students. He also helped organize a co-operative admission system among Smith, Mount Holyoke, Wellesley and Vassar—the finest women’s colleges of the day. Burton’s accomplishments are commemorated today by Burton Hall, the science building that his fund drive helped to finance.

Following his tenure at Smith, Burton served as president of the University of Minnesota and the University of Michigan.

His portrait, President Marion LeRoy Burton (at Smith 1910–17), was painted by Edmund Charles Tarbell (1862–1938), an American impressionist painter, and presented as a gift to the college from the class of 1891. Tarbell’s work can be found in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian Art Museum and numerous other locations.
When William Allan Neilson became president, Smith was already one of the largest women’s colleges in the world. Under Neilson’s shrewd leadership, the college developed many of the advantages of large academic institutions while maintaining the benefits of a small one. The size of the faculty continued to increase while the number of students remained at about 2,000. The structure of the curriculum was revised in a way that is still followed in many American colleges—requiring a broad foundation in various fields of knowledge, later complemented by the more intensive study of a major subject. The college expanded honors programs and initiated interdepartmental majors in science, landscape architecture and theatre. The School for Social Work, a coeducational graduate program, was founded. And more college houses were built, mainly in the Georgian complex called “the Quad,” so that every student could live on campus.

Not only did Neilson help make Smith one of the leading colleges in the United States, whether for men or women, but he also developed it into an institution of international distinction and concerns. Neilson, himself a Scotsman, married to a well-educated German woman, transformed the college from a high-minded but provincial community in the hinterland of Massachusetts into a cosmopolitan center constantly animated by ideas from abroad. Between the two world wars, he brought many important exiled or endangered for- eign teachers, scholars, lecturers and artists to the college. Meanwhile, as long as peace lasted, Smith students went to study in France, Italy and Spain on the Junior Year Abroad Program instituted by the college in 1924.

This portrait was painted by Elizabeth Taylor Watson. The piece was formally given to the college during its centennial year in memory of the artist by her niece Sarah Wingate Taylor and her fellow alumnae from the class of 1928.

Herbert Davis took office as Smith’s fourth president in 1940 and reaffirmed the contributions that a liberal arts college could make to a troubled world. Already during World War I, a group of Smith alumnae had gone to France to do relief work in the town of Grécourt; a replica of Grécourt’s chateau gates, presented by France in honor of those students, is in front of College Hall, and has become emblematic of the college.

Soon after the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor, the college agreed to provide facilities on its campus for the first Officers’ Training Unit of the Women’s Reserve, or WAVES. The college added a summer term from 1942 to 1945 so some students could graduate more quickly and go on to government, hospital or military service. Though physically isolated by travel restrictions, the college retained its cosmopolitan character as refugees came to lecture, teach and study. And foreign films were shown regularly in Sage Hall—a practice that would give generations of students their sensitivity both to other cultures and to an important art form. President Davis’ administration was marked by intensified academic life, reflecting his belief that serious study was a way of confronting the global threat to civilization.

A bust of President Davis, sculpted by Frances Rich ‘31, can be found in the Neilson Browsing Room. During Davis’ tenure as both the president of Smith College and the overseer of the WAVES Officers’ Training Unit, Rich was working as a special assistant to the director of WAVES. Rich, who later became Smith’s first director of public relations, created the life-sized bust to reflect Davis’ humanity and “sense of scholarship and dedication.”

Benjamin Fletcher Wright came from Harvard to become Smith’s fifth president. In this postwar period, the college resumed its regular calendar and completed several much-needed building projects, including a new heating plant and a student recreation center named for retiring President Davis. The most memorable achievements of Wright’s administration were the strengthening of Smith’s financial position and the defense of academic freedom during the 1950s.

In 1950, the $7 Million Fund Drive was triumphantly completed, enabling the college to improve facilities and increase faculty salaries. In 1955, the Helen Hills Hills Chapel was completed, giving Smith its own place of worship. As president, Wright made notable contributions to the honors and inter-departmental majors programs.

The early 1950s were not, though, easy years for colleges; McCarthyism bred a widespread suspicion of any writing or teaching that might seem left of center. In defending his faculty members’ rights to political and intellectual independence, Wright showed great courage and statesmanship. Complementing his achievements was the financial and moral support of Smith’s Alumnae Association, by now one of the most devoted and active groups of its kind in the country. Before Wright’s term ended, the college received a large gift for constructing a new faculty office and classroom building to be named for him.

Wright’s portrait, Benjamin Fletcher Wright, President of Smith College, was painted by Franklin Watkins (1894–1972) and presented as a gift from the board of trustees to Smith College in 1959.

When Thomas Corwin Mendenhall came from Yale to become Smith’s sixth president, both the college and the country at large were enjoying peace and prosperity. In response to the needs of increasingly independent and ambitious students, the curriculum was thoroughly revised. College-wide requirements were set aside and independent study encouraged. The college made more varied educational experiences available to Smith undergraduates by extending cooperation with its neighbors—Amherst, Hampshire and Mount Holyoke colleges and the University of Massachusetts. And Smith joined other private colleges in the Northeast to develop the Twelve College Exchange Program. The college added buildings with the most modern facilities for the study of the natural sciences, performing arts and fine arts. The new Fine Arts Center included the Smith College Museum of Art, now one of the most distinguished college museums in the country.

The 1960s saw the civil rights, the students’ rights, the anti-war and the women’s rights movements take root and grow at many of the country’s universities and colleges, including Smith. Thanks to these movements and to the wisdom, tact and humor of Mendenhall, the college emerged from the 1960s with a more precise awareness of students’ needs and an active, practical sense of social responsibility.

Thomas C. Mendenhall, President of Smith College, 1959–1975, was commissioned by the trustees of Smith College. The artist, Peter Egeli, enrolled at the Maryland Institute of Art in Baltimore after serving in the United States Marine Corps. He later taught drawing and painting and became a charter member, president and fellow of the American Society of Marine Artists.
Jill Ker Conway, 1975–85

The college began its second century by inaugurating its first woman president, Jill Ker Conway, who came to Smith from Australia by way of Harvard and the University of Toronto. She was a charismatic and energetic leader with a vision for women’s education, and her administration was marked by three major accomplishments: a large-scale renovation and expansion of Neilson Library, evidence of Smith’s undiminished concern for the heart of the liberal arts; the rapid growth of the Ada Comstock Scholars Program, through which women beyond the traditional college age could earn a Smith degree; and exceptionally successful fundraising efforts. Recognizing the rapidly growing emphasis on fitness and athletics for women, Smith built the Ainsworth Gymnasium and broke ground for new indoor and outdoor track and tennis facilities. Conway’s contributions underscored her commitment to women’s colleges and a liberal arts education in today’s society. Since leaving Smith, Conway has written an acclaimed series of memoirs; her 2001 book, A Woman’s Education, concerns her Smith years.

Sarah Belchetz-Swenson, then a Vermont-based artist chosen by the trustees, was commissioned to create Conway’s official portrait along with the small sketch that hangs in College Hall. Conway asked the trustees to find “a woman portrait artist, someone young and promising, not the already successful, and therefore possibly formulaic, practitioner.” Conway later wrote of her sittings with Belchetz-Swensen as “an unexpected gift” that “opened up for me what an intensely visual person I was and launched a set of relationships with working artists that became one of the delights of my next phase in life.” The artist’s daughter, Saskia Swenson Moss, graduated from Smith in 1990.

Jill Ker Conway’s portrait hangs in the Sophia Smith Collection, where she had worked as a graduate student in 1960.

Mary Maples Dunn, 1985–95

The college that President Conway left to her successor was in some ways very different from the college served by Presidents Seelye, Burton and Neilson. When Mary Maples Dunn came to Smith after many years as a professor of history and then as dean of Bryn Mawr College, Smith’s student body had diversified. During its early decades the student body had been overwhelmingly Protestant, but by the 1970s, Roman Catholic and Jewish college chaplains served alongside the Protestant chaplain, reflecting the increasingly varied religious and ethnic backgrounds of the students. All racial, ethnic and religious groups are now well represented on campus, evidence of Smith’s continuing moral and intellectual commitment to diversity.

In her decade as president, Mary Maples Dunn led the college through exciting and challenging times. During her tenure, the college raised more than $300 million, constructed two major buildings and renovated many more, enhanced communication on and off campus, attracted record numbers of applicants (while upholding the college’s high academic standards) and doubled the value of its endowment. Computer technology transformed the way Smith conducted its business. And the curriculum became broader in scope, with five new majors and increased course offerings in non-Western and neglected American cultures.

Dunn’s portrait was painted by Istvan Nyikos, a Hungarian artist, who describes his work as adherent “to the traditions of the old masters, particular to the draughtsmanship approach of Dürer or Holbein and modern masters such as Andrew Wyeth or Pietro Annigoni.” The college also commissioned a portrait of Dunn, now in the collection of the Museum of Art, from noted American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe.

Mary Maples Dunn’s portrait was commissioned from Everett Raymond Kinstler, an American artist whose other official portraits include Presidents Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan.

Ruth Simmons, 1995–2001

With a long and distinguished career in higher education behind her, Ruth Simmons, Smith’s ninth president, was the first African-American woman to head any top-ranked American college or university.

Simmons galvanized the campus through an ambitious campuswide self-study process that resulted in a number of landmark initiatives, including Praxis, a program that allows every Smith student to elect an internship funded by the college; an engineering program, the first at a women’s college; programs in the humanities, including the establishment of a poetry center and a peer-reviewed journal devoted to publishing scholarly works by and about women of color; and curricular innovations that include intensive seminars for first-year students and programs to encourage students’ speaking and writing skills. A committed and outspoken advocate for diversity in higher education, Simmons worked to ensure that the education offered at private colleges such as Smith be accessible to students from all economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds.

A number of building projects were launched during Simmons’ administration; most significant was the Brown Fine Arts Center, a $35-million expansion and renovation of the Smith College Museum of Art, art department and art library. Ground was broken in 2002 for a dramatic new campus center, and renovation and expansion of the Lyman Conservatory was completed in 2003.

Simmons’ portrait was commissioned from Everett Raymond Kinstler, an American artist whose other official portraits include Presidents Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan.

Carol T. Christ, 2002–13

A widely respected scholar of Victorian literature, Carol T. Christ, Smith’s 10th president, launched an energetic program of outreach, innovation and long-range planning. She encouraged the development of coursework emphasizing fluency in American cultures and increased understanding of the diversity of experience of American ethnic groups. She also launched a review, conducted by members of the Smith faculty and outside scholars, to determine the distinctive intellectual traditions of the Smith curriculum and areas on which to build. Christ’s tenure saw the launch of an ambitious $450 million capital campaign to increase access to a Smith education.

Under Christ’s leadership, Smith made significant commitments to environmental sustainability in its curriculum and campus operations. The college’s MacLeish Field Station, a 240-acre tract of forest and farmland in nearby West Whately, was dedicated in 2008 as a living laboratory for environmental research and education.

A number of major building projects came to fruition during Christ’s tenure: the Brown Fine Arts Center; the Campus Center; the Olin Fitness Center; and Conway House, an apartment building for Ada Comstock Scholars with children. Ford Hall, a state-of-the-art, sustainably designed classroom and laboratory facility for engineering and the sciences, opened in 2009.

Christ requested that her official portrait be painted by a member of the Smith faculty. Katy Schneider, a Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship recipient and member of the Smith College art department since 1990, was chosen by Christ and commissioned by the board of trustees. Schneider’s portrait is built, in her words, around “the manipulation of light and space to discover and reveal particular relationships...to create a ‘forever’ kind of quality to the work, though the subject matter may be of a fleeting nature.”
The Inauguration of Kathleen McCartney
11th President of Smith College
October 19, 2013

www.smith.edu/inauguration

On the cover: Portrait detail of Jill Ker Conway, President of Smith College 1975–85, by Sarah Belchetz-Swenson.