Primary Maker: John Vanderlyn
Title: Robert Fulton (1765–1815)
Date: 1798
Medium: Probably Conté crayon, black chalk?, and graphite with touches of white gouache on lightly oiled paper
Dimensions: Overall: 10 1/2 x 8 3/16 in. (26.7 x 20.8 cm)
Credit Line: Bequest of Randall J. LeBoeuf Jr.
Object Number: 1976.56

Classification: DRAWINGS

Curatorial Remarks:
At age sixteen, a young John Vanderlyn enrolled at Archibald and Alexander Robertson’s Columbian Academy of Painting. Soon thereafter, the young artist’s copy of Gilbert Stuart’s portrait of Aaron Burr attracted Burr’s attention, and the statesman offered him the exciting opportunity to assist Stuart for a year in his Philadelphia studio and later to study abroad in Paris. Except for a brief return to America in 1801–3 and visits to England and Italy, Vanderlyn lived in France until 1815. Vanderlyn’s bust-length portrait of his friend, artist-turned-inventor Robert Fulton, was executed during the Revolutionary period in Paris and celebrates the youthful promise of both men. Extraordinarily ambitious, Fulton associated with key players of the time—Americans abroad as well as French citoyens. He experimented with canal design (1976.60), submarines, and torpedoes but is best known for the construction, in association with Robert R. Livingston, of the first commercially successful steamboat, the North River Steamboat (later known as the Clermont). Before embarking in earnest on his career as a history painter, Vanderlyn supported himself rendering portraits of members of the American expatriate community in Paris. At the time, small-scale, fully-
modelled, and highly finished works, such as this portrait, were in vogue. Created largely with the newly patented Conté crayon, which produces a highly nuanced sfumato (smoky quality) reminiscent of the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci, this charismatic portrait suggests the visionary aspect of Fulton’s character. Vanderlyn was not met with universal acclaim within his own lifetime, in no small part because his sensual Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos (1809–14), the first female reclining nude produced by an American artist, was considered scandalous. Since his ambitious historical compositions found no American market, he also pursued entrepreneurial ventures such as the construction of panoramas, which he exhibited throughout the country. His most famous was in his New York Rotunda (1818), a neoclassical building near City Hall. It contained his large-scale Panoramic View of the Palace and Gardens of Versailles. After a brief retirement to his hometown of Kingston, New York, and eight frustrating years spent in Paris working on a commission for the U.S. Capitol Rotunda (The Landing of Columbus, 1846), he returned to Washington to paint portraits. Unsuccessful in most of his later enterprises, he gave up his Washington studio in 1852 and again retired to Kingston, an impoverished and embittered man. Vanderlyn’s portrait of Fulton belongs to an impressive group of Fultoniana, previously the largest in private hands, donated to the N-YHS through the bequests of Randall LeBoeuf Jr., a former member of the Society, and his wife, Harriet Ross LeBoeuf.

Physical Description:
Portait

Signed: Signed at lower right outside image in graphite: "Vanderlyn.--"
Inscribed: Inscribed at lower center outside image: "Fulton"
Related Objects: