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THE
ABBY ALDRICH ROCKEFELLER

FOLK ART
COLLECTION

GALLERY BOOK

WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

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Notes on the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection

IN 1935 Mrs. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller generously loaned the principal portion of her Collection of American folk art for public exhibition in Williamsburg where it was shown in the Ludwell-Paradise House, a former exhibition building of Colonial Williamsburg. In 1939 this portion of the Collection was presented to Colonial Williamsburg. At the same time the balance of the Collection was given by Mrs. Rockefeller to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and that museum later shared the gift with the Metropolitan Museum, also of New York City. Through the co-operation of these two museums, these pieces have been brought to Williamsburg, and the Collection is now shown for the first time in its entirety. The permanent home for the Collection, located outside the restored area, was the generous gift of Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and was opened to the public in March 1957.

The building housing the Collection was designed by the Department of Architecture of Colonial Williamsburg in consultation with Mrs. Nina Fletcher Little and Laurence Harrison.

Domestic interiors reminiscent of the last century have been recreated in the galleries to provide harmonious backgrounds for the exhibition. Paneled dados, chair rails, stenciled floor and wall decorations, and other hallmarks of nineteenth-century taste have been used. There is no attempt to furnish the rooms, as the function of the galleries is the display of folk art.

Fireboards, which were once placed in fireplaces during the summer months, have been used in several galleries. The sheathed pine walls of Gallery 5 are from a house in Scotland County, North Carolina. The entire room has been installed as an example of the craftsmanship of the artisan-painters of the nineteenth century. The over-mantel painting and decorative festoon on the walls are the work of an otherwise unknown itinerant artist, I. Scott.

The stencil decorating the walls of Gallery 6 is based on a design in the Governor Pierce Mansion, Hillsboro, New Hampshire. The pattern on the floor of Gallery 9 is copied from that seen in the portrait, *Boy With Finch*, a picture in the Collection.

A Brief Account of American Folk Artists and Their Works

BEGINNING about the time of the Revolution and continuing for most of the nineteenth century, this country went through a phase of artistic expression common to most developing cultures – folk art. But in America it emerged in an unique form of irresistible appeal. Unlike the stereotyped folk art of many nationalities, it offers infinite variety, reflecting the varied art traditions and cultures which were to be represented in this broad new land.

Produced by self-taught amateurs for their own gratification, or by artisan-craftsmen for pay in direct response to the needs of ordinary men and women, American folk art was, in essence, art of the people, by the people, for the people. The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection reveals not only this spontaneous artistic expression of a people, but something more rarely seen – the character of a bygone era. Here, in nostalgic array, are the customs and tastes, the way of life of our forebears. Here, in the grass roots of artistic expression in America, we can see not only the face, but the heart of generations who preceded us.

American folk art knew no geographical boundaries – it found a ready market in the agrarian south and spread westward with the pioneers – but New England and the German sections of Pennsylvania were the richest centers because they were the richest in artisans and craftsmen. In the northeast, men trained in the crafts turned their skills to artistic purpose. Sign, coach, and house painters executed portraits and landscapes; farmers made weathervanes from wood or metal; ship carpenters carved figureheads, ornaments, and store advertisement figures such as the well-remembered cigar store Indian. Hunters and sportsmen carved decoys. Shopkeepers, teachers, ministers, young graduates of female academies, and a host of others painted, drew, whittled, sewed, or carved in answer to their own aesthetic yearnings. Some, achieving artistic popularity, found their recreation more profitable than their vocation and devoted all their energies to a one-time hobby.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the effects of the machine were being felt in all branches of the arts, and folk art gently expired under the impress of mass production methods and broadened educational opportunities. For most of a



PLATE I
GIRL SEATED ON BENCH c. 1840
Attributed to William M. Prior
Oil on canvas. 26" x 22"

century the works of the traveling artist, the craftsmen, and the school girl painters were overlooked by collectors. However, as artistic sensitivity grew, and as more and more Americans sought to discover the character of their past, folk art once more caught the attention of serious collectors and a large public. The abstract qualities of much folk painting did not escape the champions of modern art, who were among the leaders in the revival of interest in folk art. Others saw in it an intimate portrait of our social history. Viewed as either art or history, it is often original, and always possesses unflinching charm.

PAINTINGS IN OIL

Most early American portrait painters worked in the style of the "limner," a name taken from medieval manuscript decorators, or "illuminers." Trained as craftsmen, they "took likenesses" in oil on either wood or canvas, with little effort to achieve a feeling of depth, or to produce more than a highly stylized likeness. Nevertheless, the finest examples of the limner's art are superb revelations of character and personality.

During the period of Colonial prosperity, more elegant portraiture was in demand. Well-to-do patrons sat in handsome attire and genteel poses while the artist attempted to imitate the composition and style of European engravings. The results often lacked the pristine flavor of the folk tradition.

Post-Revolution paintings accurately reflect the changing social structure in America. The canvases make clear that the sitters are individuals and not mere symbols of a special class. Subjects posed with the tools of their trade, and, paradoxically enough, in the often rigid, uncompromising portraits we see revealed those men and women who gave impetus to the most fluid society in history.

Most of the artists who rose from the amateur ranks took to the road at one time or another in search of patrons, traveling from town to town on foot, by horseback, and, in time, by train. If need be, these itinerants would adjust the price of their work to the pocketbook of the buyer. William M. Prior, one of the most versatile of mid-nineteenth century artists, had a scale ranging from \$2.92 (done in about an hour's sitting) to \$25, to accommodate the wealth of his customers. Profiles could be had for less, but whatever his professional wiles, the life of the itinerant was one of catch-as-catch-can security.

Plate 1, a simple, unshaded painting, is typical of Prior's less expensive portraits. Although the little girl's feet are unnaturally small, the arms large, and her hands crudely drawn, the portrait possesses an appealing charm. Conceived and executed with utmost simplicity, the clear outline, unshaded surfaces, and lack of superfluous detail produce a quality closely related to that of many contemporary paintings.



PLATE 2
LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURES c. 1785
Artist Unknown
Oil on wood - cedar. 20 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 38 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

Occasionally the artist had in his studio, or carried with him on his travels, stock props which might be used to supplement the possessions of the sitter. These recur time and again in different portraits and, coupled with stereotyped poses, gave rise to a popular legend that bodies and backgrounds were painted "assembly-line" fashion in off seasons, the heads and faces to be added later. This assumption would have explained why so many ladies seem to have identical jewelry and access to the same wardrobe. However, journals and account books of traveling artists make no mention of such a practice. A more logical explanation is that, once an artist developed a successful formula for pleasing his clientele, he used it over and over. The existence of incomplete sketches of heads, rather than headless bodies, also contradicts the legend.

Landscape paintings made their appearance in America during the first half of the eighteenth century. Largely imitations by skilled artisans of scenes found on contemporary English woodwork and canvas, they lost popularity as American nationalism rose, and soon native themes were introduced. Heroes and heroic events became symbols of the new unity and of America's destiny among nations. All manner of people, both professionals and amateurs, were moved to express their admiration for American heroes and heroics in tangible artistic form.

When an itinerant artist, laden with as many canvases as he could carry, arrived in town, he often put up at an inn or tavern where the landlord might expect the artist to decorate the walls with ornamental stencils or paint a scene above one of the mantelpieces in exchange for his room and meals. In many cases, English prints or book illustrations provided the inspirations for such paintings. Plate 2, "Landscape With Figures," is an example of a scene probably copied from a printed source. Although once thought to be a view of the Schuylkill River near Philadelphia, the romantic composition and the architecture of the house on the right suggest that the unknown painter was working from English engravings. It is painted in oil on a cedar wood panel and is permanently installed over the mantelpiece in Gallery 1.

PAINTINGS IN WATERCOLOR AND PASTEL

The greatest number of folk art paintings were done in watercolor on either paper or such fabrics as silk, velvet, or satin, and many works of this type were executed by school girls and genteel young ladies. Where the pioneer woman sewed strictly for necessity, her granddaughter, in more comfortable circumstances, had time and inspiration to indulge in decorative embroidery and pictorial needlework. Still later, painting in watercolor was deemed an integral part of the instruction required to develop the "taste and delicacy" of the female sex, and few academies were without instruction in the art.

Using paper stencils, or theorems, as they were called, and laboriously following

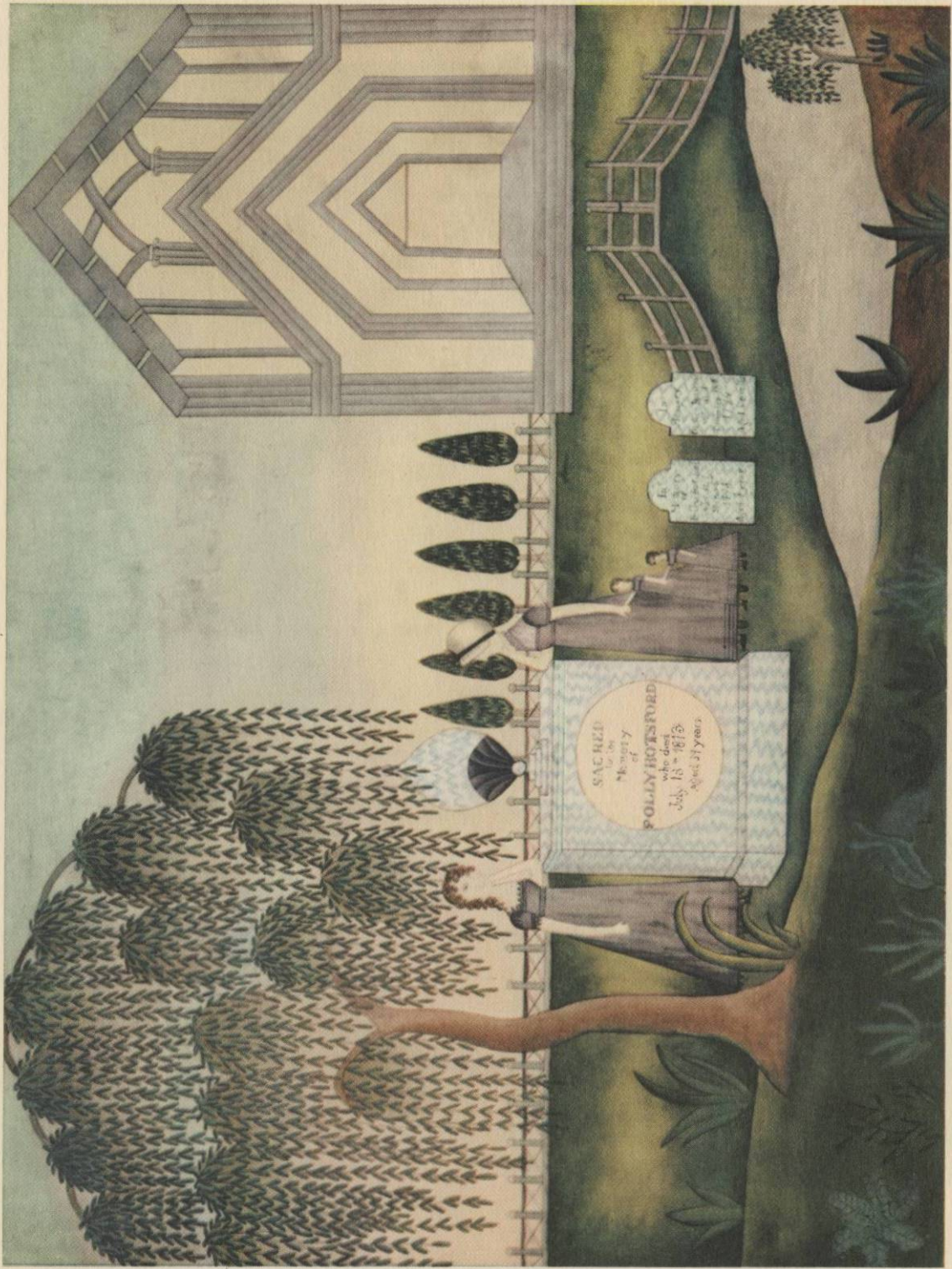


PLATE 3
MOURNING PICTURE - POLLY BOTSFORD AND HER CHILDREN c. 1813

Artist Unknown

Watercolor on paper. 18" x 23 1/2"



PLATE 4

MRS. PEARCE c. 1835

Attributed to Erastus Salisbury Field

Oil on canvas. $30\frac{1}{2}'' \times 26\frac{1}{8}''$



PLATE 5

MR. PEARCE c. 1835

Attributed to Erastus Salisbury Field

Oil on canvas. 30 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 26"

instructions contained in standard drawing books, the young women produced a variety of still-life compositions and drawings. By copying book illustrations or romantic lithographs, they produced pictures ranging from nostalgic scenes of the English countryside to family mourning pictures. Perhaps a strict definition would exclude school girl art from American "folk arts." Yet these efforts often show expressiveness, charm, and design as appealing as that of the self-taught journeyman artists. Certainly, the genteel, prim, and dreamlike quality of these works accurately reflects American society at a time when a woman's place was very much in the home.

The widespread popularity of mourning pictures is evidence of the all-pervasive concern with death one hundred years ago when the average life expectancy was at least twenty years less than it is today. It also suggests the sentiment and deep attachment of families in a less peripatetic society.

Mourning pictures might commemorate anyone from a late relative to a yet-to-be-departed member of the family, who, in all probability, greeted the honor with mixed enthusiasm. Occasionally, a woman painted a memorial for herself, the tombstone date to be filled in later. The mourning picture illustrated in Plate 3 contains the conventional symbols of grief: monument, weeping willow, church, and disconsolate figures. These undoubtedly were copied from a printed source. The artist's personal touch, however, appears in the bold, geometric abstraction of the church, the simplification of the figures, and the stylized willow tree.

Quite different from the school girl painters was Joseph H. Davis, or Pine Hill Joe, as legend calls him. A product of the hard and demanding Maine back country, he left his farm to roam the small towns of southeastern New Hampshire selling portraits and sometimes signing himself as *Joseph H. Davis, Left Handed Painter*. By using watercolor, pencil, or pen and ink on paper, he hit upon a happy compromise between the time-consuming and costly oil painting and the cheaper profile. Celebrated for his vivid color, he painted in infinite detail, placing his figures in a setting with furniture, wall decorations, and floor coverings.

Plate 6 illustrates a typical composition on which he lavished as much time and effort painting chairs, tables, and floor covering as he did on the sitters. In the one hundred or more watercolors attributed to him, the popular fashions of the first half of the nineteenth century are richly documented.

CALLIGRAPHIC DRAWINGS AND FRACTURS

Nowhere are the currents that make up the main stream of American culture more visible than in the legacy left by the settlers of the Pennsylvania German country. These people developed a traditional Old World craft — *fraktur schriften* — into a picturesque folk art form.



PLATE 6
 THE TILTON FAMILY 1837
 Joseph H. Davis (unsigned)
 Watercolor on paper. 10" × 15½"

Fraktur schriften, or writing executed in the character of German gothic calligraphy, was introduced by eleventh- and twelfth-century European monks. Brought to America by German Protestant refugees from the Rhineland, eighteenth-century *fracturs* were usually the work of a minister or schoolmaster, who lavished great care on the decoration of religious texts and birth and baptismal certificates. Gradually, in the early nineteenth century the art was put to more secular purposes. It was used in embellishing book marks, music title sheets, memorials, scholastic certificates, valentines, and for decorative work as an end in itself.

The flourishes and curlicues of nineteenth-century American penmanship were also used to produce some of the most fanciful and decorative pieces in the folk art tradition. The popularity of steel pen drawing was an outgrowth of the emphasis upon good handwriting.

WOOD AND METAL SCULPTURE

America's earliest sculpture was produced in the shops of the carpenter, the ship-builder, and the cabinetmaker. With an eye for utility, these craftsmen produced weathervanes, ships' figureheads, chests, architectural decorations, funerary ornaments, and tradesmen's advertising figures.

The weathervane illustrated in Plate 7 is a fine example of utility graced by artful use of wood and metal. The racing horse, with outstretched legs, flying mane and tail, creates a vivid impression of effortless speed, bearing his metal Indian rider with perfect balance.

Many of America's professional carvers learned their trade fashioning figureheads and stern pieces in the ancient tradition of salty seaport towns. A figurehead was more than mere decoration to the men who sailed the oceans of the world. Riding at the prow, it symbolized the spirit of the vessel, the sailor's faith in his ship, and in the seafarer's mind served as protection to vessel and crew. In America, figureheads usually took the form of national heroes, Indians, statesmen, gods or goddesses, and representations of the owner's wife or daughter. An example of the latter is illustrated in Plate 8. Although removed from its lofty position under the high riding bowsprit of a sailing ship, it remains a poignant reminder of a proud and lusty period in American maritime history.

The shipwright-carver or the local carpenter also produced another colorful, but now extinct, figure – the tradesman's symbol. The practice of displaying carved figures in front of shops in England was at least 200 years old before it became popular in America, but when it did, tavern-keepers, ships' chandlers, butchers, wool merchants, and many others followed the custom. By mid-nineteenth century, however, there remained only the best remembered examples of folk sculpture – the wooden Indian, or Turk, who advertised the tobaccoist's wares. With the



PLATE 7
WEATHERVANE - INDIAN ON HORSEBACK 1850-1875
Horse: Woodcarving - pine. Indian: Sheet iron. Length 39"

shift in popularity to the painted sign, this colorful form of advertising declined and the few examples produced in the late nineteenth century became dull and stereotyped.

Hunting wild fowl over decoys was an art learned from the American Indian and never improved upon by the settlers. Both professional carvers and hunters with a knack for whittling turned out all types of bird decoys. The floating variety for ducks, geese, and loons sat lifelike on the water. "Stickups" represented shore birds and were fitted with removable sticks which enabled one to fix them into the ground. The majority were made of wood, some being realistically carved and painted. Although some discriminating gunners demanded handmade decoys, factory production after the Civil War largely displaced the craft.

There were other objects that captured the whittler's fancy - mantel ornaments, toys, gimcracks and doorstops, to name a few - but they, too, suffered the common fate of the folk art tradition under the impress of machine production.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century the limner's art was replaced by the magic of the daguerreotype. Landscapes, still lifes, historic scenes, and mourning pictures could be secured from any printer. Currier and Ives was equal to all situations that demanded imagination, color, and romance - at a modest price. The iron foundries put crowing cocks or trotting horses on any barn for a reasonable figure. Decoys rolled off lathes; toys and decorative pieces poured from factories. Thus the taste of a nation changed and so passed a phase of our culture.

In the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection, as in other collections, a unique expression in the history of American art is preserved and perpetuated. Here is the graphic record of a people and their times as set down by work-a-day members of society. Here are their tastes, interests, and way of life, recorded as only they were capable of recording them, in the only fashion they knew - plain, simple, lacking worldliness, polish and perfection, but infinitely naive and charming.

Probably never again in our land will we have a record in comparable terms. The world has grown too small; the untutored eye of the folk artist has been replaced by the trained eye of the student. Today, public education has made the culture and knowledge of generations of civilization available to all. Although modern man finds new ways for self expression, never again will his efforts be so completely his own, so uncomplicated by the influence of a complex world society.

Here is America of the nineteenth century seen through the eyes of her sons and daughters.



PLATE 8
SHIP'S FIGUREHEAD - BUST OF GIRL c. 1825
Woodcarving - pine. Height 27½"

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