



American Wonder

FOLK ART FROM THE COLLECTION

FROM THE DIRECTOR

It is a joy to present this wonderful collection of American folk art assembled by the discerning eyes of Bliss Carnochan and Nancy Edebo. Their keen connoisseurship is evident in each and every work, whether humble or grand. Thanks to their extraordinarily generous donation of this collection to BAM/PFA, our audiences will be able to enjoy the fruits of their dedication and expertise for decades to come. I'm sure that these works of art will be cherished for their rich opportunities for multidisciplinary scholarship as well as for their aesthetic rewards.

Bliss has been a wonderful and enthusiastic partner in mounting this large exhibition. He has been extremely generous with his time and expertise, even lending his voice for the audio tour (along with the exhibition curator and several Cal students). It has been a delight to work with him and his wife, Gitta. Our deep thanks to Nancy Edebo for her ongoing engagement and dedication.

Finally, thanks to Lucinda Barnes, BAM/PFA's chief curator and director of programs and collections, whose fresh eye has shed new light on these works. I know that this has been an especially enjoyable and gratifying project for her.

Lawrence Rinder

DIRECTOR, BAM/PFA

GUIDE BY CELL

1. Look for this symbol 
2. Dial (510) 550-7585.
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Audio tour material written and recorded by the exhibition curator, BAM/PFA Chief Curator and Director of Programs and Collections Lucinda Barnes; Bliss Carnochan, who with Nancy Edebo assembled the collection; and by UC Berkeley graduate students Susan Eberhard, Sarah Gold McBride, Kappy Mintie, and Emma Silverman, who serve as tour guides for the exhibition.

COVER John Brewster, Jr. (attributed): *Boy in Green (Samuel Field McIntire)*, c. 1805–10; oil on canvas; 53¾ × 32¼ in.; gift of Bliss Carnochan.

BACK COVER Joseph H. Davis: *Portrait of Betsy Dowst*, 1837; ink, pencil, and watercolor on paper; 9¼ × 7 in.; gift of Bliss Carnochan and Nancy Edebo.



American Wonder: Folk Art from the Collection captures our burgeoning nation during a time of enormous change, from the wake of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 to the years just following the Civil War (1861–65). The exhibition draws upon the BAM/PFA collection, one of the finest of American folk art in California, generously donated by collectors and patrons Bliss Carnochan and Nancy Edebo.

The majority of the works in **American Wonder** are from New England and reflect the domestic lives and aspirations of Colonial settlers in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Predominantly made by itinerant artists, folk art from this period vividly captures a view of American identity aligned with the goals of liberty, self-improvement, and advancement. We see newly independent citizens in growing communities express confidence, wonder, and optimism for the future. We encounter enterprising itinerant artists, schoolgirls being trained in decorative arts, patriarchs setting forth records of their families and professional achievements. We see rural areas growing and prospering in the years between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. As the nation expands westward, industries grow from shipping to milling and mining. Our view is one fashioned by hand, by skilled artisans working outside the rapid advance of photography, which would overtake the work of the itinerant portrait painter in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In the first years of independence, painted portraits were in high demand, to identify individuals, establish family legacy, and demonstrate personal and/or civic achievement. Many folk artists, such as Sarah Perkins (1771–1831), began by painting portraits of their immediate families and community members. Although she did not sign or date her paintings and pastels, her work has been identified in part by what is known about her sitters. Perkins painted the three sons of Dr. Elija Dix in about 1795. She portrays Alexander, ten years old at the time, in a three-quarter pose, standing before a verdant landscape holding a small songbird resembling an American goldfinch. It was common to depict children with toys or pets, such as this bird, that signified their youth and innocence. Birds also symbolized fleeting life, a gentle and poignant reminder of the high mortality rates among children in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America. Perkins shows Alexander's older brothers, Jonathan and Clarendon, in more studious surroundings, seated at tables with books and musical instruments, indicating their educational achievements in preparation for adulthood.

Many post-Revolution folk artists traveled from one town to another, following the path of developing prosperity and security in the immediate aftermath of the war of independence from the British. Enterprising itinerant artists placed ads in local newspapers, almost always emphasizing their skills in creating true likenesses of their sitters. For example, in 1801, while working on a large single-family commission, John Brewster, Jr. (1766–1854) placed the following ad in a local newspaper:

John Brewster, Portrait and Miniature Painter, respectfully informs the Ladies and Gentlemen of Newburyport, that if they wish to employ him in the line of his profession, he is at Mr. James Prince's where a Specimen of his Paintings may be seen. He flatters himself, if any will be pleased to call, they will be pleased with the striking likeness of his, and with the reasonableness of his prices. N.B. If there is no application made to him within ten days, he will leave town.¹

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the prolific deaf artist John Brewster traveled and worked in coastal centers and rural towns from Maine to New York. After a brief training, he began painting portraits of his parents and siblings in their Connecticut home. In 1795 he moved to Maine with his brother. Shortly thereafter, perhaps through family connections, Brewster began to receive commissions from a number of successful merchants. In one case, he painted three generations of an extended family over a period of twenty-five years.

Brewster is known to have painted a number of portraits in and around Salem, Massachusetts, a thriving shipping and commercial hub. Salem was also an artistic center, particularly in the areas of architecture and design. Brewster's *Boy in Green* is now thought to be a portrait of Samuel Field McIntire, who became a distinguished furniture maker and architectural carver in Salem in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. His father, Samuel McIntire, has been referred to as "the architect of Salem," designing and building some of the most important civic buildings and private residences in the region. The younger McIntire joined his father's busy architectural firm in 1811.



In Brewster's portrait, young McIntire is dressed in a smartly styled green suit, similar to the clothing worn by Alexander Dix in his portrait. With book in hand, McIntire stands, a bit stiffly, on a rose-and-gold geometrically patterned floor. Distinctive floor coverings stand out in a number of Brewster's full-length portraits, adding visual vibrancy and attesting to the fashionable tastes and means of his patrons. Beyond these elements, McIntire's environs are plainly generalized. Brewster focuses his greatest attention on facial features, characteristics that would identify him to his contemporaries as Samuel Field McIntire, poised to move into adulthood and professional life.

Like Salem, Providence, Rhode Island, grew out of early maritime trade. *View of Providence, Rhode Island*, created in the 1820s by an unidentified artist, functions as a portrait of the harbor city on the brink of its transition from a fishing village to a bustling center of commerce. Narrated by means of architecture rather than people and activities, this compact urban panorama along South Water Street unfolds from old to new as Providence shifted from sea trade to manufacturing industries. Presiding over the scene is the First Unitarian Church, organized in 1636 as the First Baptist Church



in America. In the distance, the rooftop of another prominent building pops up from behind the trees in the direction of the present-day campus of Brown University, founded in 1764. Surely whomever commissioned this beautiful painting meant to communicate the pride and honor of the nascent city.

In the years following the Revolutionary War, towns and commercial centers began to grow further inland from the Atlantic seacoast, particularly following river trade routes and agricultural development. Mill towns began to develop in areas with abundant lumber and waterpower. In the late 1700s Joseph Dorr and his brother Russell settled near Hoosick Falls, New York, where he established what would become a successful textile mill. A few years later Russell and his growing family moved about fifty miles south, to Chatham Center, where in 1814 he engaged the artist Ammi Phillips (1788–1865) to paint members of his family. Phillips, one of the best-known folk portraitists of the era, also painted portraits of Joseph’s family.

Phillips, who does not seem to have trained academically, began to advertise in the Berkshire Mountains region in 1809. He claimed he could produce “correct likenesses” and “perfect shadows,” and that his subjects would be presented in elegant and fashionable dress.² *Portrait of Catherine Van Slyck Dorr* (1814–15) is an exceptional example of his early work, characterized by soft pastel hues and simple domestic settings. Catherine sits quietly on a grain-painted chair. Her pale blue Empire style dress and rosy complexion convey a gentle and delicate charm. Phillips made eight paintings of the Russell Dorr family members, several now in the collection of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum. Originally they were to be arranged as four sets of pendants, decreasing in size according to the age of the sitter.³ A later pair of portraits by Phillips in the BAM/PFA collection, of Dr. and Mrs. Gabriel Norton Phillips (not related



to the artist), date from his “Kent” period, characterized by strong contrasts of pale flesh and richly colored fabric. Typical of folk-art portraiture of the time, the couple is portrayed in two separate paintings, seated in similar poses and inclined toward one another, Dr. Phillips positioned to the left and Mrs. Phillips to the right.

Artist Ruth Whittier Shute (1803–1882) was born in Dover, New Hampshire, another early and important mill town in the first years of the nineteenth century. Soon after Ruth married Samuel Addison Shute (1803–1836) in 1827, her husband gave up his career in medicine to join her in establishing a business as itinerant portrait painters. A wife/husband artistic team was quite unusual—they actually worked on the same painting simultaneously. Inscriptions credited both artists; in some instances the inscription detailed: “Drawn by R. W. Shute and Painted by S. A. Shute.”

Many of the Shutes’ sitters were young women who worked in textile mills along river towns in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. *Portrait of a Woman with Combs in Her Hair* (c. 1835) very closely resembles other portraits by the Shutes of identified young women known to have worked in textile mills. When the Shutes painted in oil, as we see in the BAM/PFA portrait, they often interspersed layers of pigment with varnishes and glazes, achieving a light and shimmering effect, particularly with the lacey fabric.

Ruth Henshaw Bascom (1774–1848) made portraits of men, women, and children in small towns of central and western Massachusetts. Her subjects generally were friends and neighbors in the various communities where her husband served as minister.

Dr. George Morse of Clinton, Massachusetts, the attributed subject of a pastel profile, had tended the wounded during Civil War. Later, he was instrumental in founding Clinton Hospital, near Worcester. Bascom usually “took the shadow,” of her subjects



after dark, so with the aid of a light she could cast strong outlines of their facial features. In a journal dated 1837 she wrote, “I painted Herbert Richardson, ten years old, a neighbor who was sketched last P.M., and then took Miss Knight’s shadow at evening.” It is possible that Bascom learned this technique as part of her high school education.

In early nineteenth-century America children of means were educated in academies and private high schools. Boys were taught fine penmanship as part of their training to become clergymen, teachers, doctors, or lawyers. Writing “a good hand” was associated with professionalism and prosperity. In *Untitled (Calligraphy Leaping Deer)* (c. 1840), an elegantly flourished deer is surrounded by dozens of individual name cards, demonstrating the range and skills of the penman.

On the other hand, the curriculum for young girls emphasized rhetoric, needlework, and drawing and painting. Instruction in theorem painting was particularly prevalent. A theorem, or stencil, was used as a compositional baseline from which students and practitioners could compose still lifes and landscapes, leaving room for freehand applications of color and embellishment according to each artist’s desire and skill. Theorems were often painted in watercolor and gouache on velvet or fabric surfaces, offering soft visual effects. Ready-made stencils and do-it-yourself instruction books spread the popularity, practice, and accessibility of this form of artmaking.

Untitled (Calligraphy Leaping Deer), United States, c. 1840; ink on paper with collage of inked cards; 29 3/8 × 34 3/8 in.; gift of Bliss Carnochan and Nancy Edebo.



Maria Hyde Humphrey was active as a theorem painter in Ohio in 1839 and 1840, and was known to have taught school. *A View from North River* (c. 1840) is signed by Humphrey and inscribed “Norwalk Seminary,” a private Methodist school founded in 1838 just east of present-day Cleveland. Then known as the Connecticut Western Reserve, the region was settled by New England families whose properties were destroyed during the Revolutionary War. Indeed, Humphrey was born in Connecticut and had moved as a child with her family to northeast Ohio. She may have made this work as an instructor or student at Norwalk Seminary.

The theorem from which Humphrey made this work is still available from the Historical Society of Early American Decoration in New York.⁴ It is accompanied by step-by-step instructions on how to create a mezzotint theorem, quoted from Maria Turner’s *Young Ladies’ Assistant in Drawing and Painting*, published in Ohio in 1833. Using black lead instead of paint, this method produces a black, gray, and white picture. In the BAM/PFA work we see that Maria Humphrey closely adhered to the original stencil and technical instructions. A similar work in the BAM/PFA collection, *Untitled (A Country Seat Near Hudson, New York)* (c. 1838), also could have derived from the same theorem.

As part of their artistic training, young girls often created pictorial memorials honoring recently deceased family members. These mourning pictures usually followed a standard

Maria Hyde Humphrey: *A View from North River*, c. 1840; stencil and graphite wash on paper; 8¾ × 11 in.; gift of Bliss Carnochan and Nancy Edebo. Photo: Sibila Savage.



formula of compositional elements: a tomb inscribed with the name of the deceased, one or more mourners, a river, a weeping willow tree, and perhaps a church or homestead in the distance. Patty Robeshow's delicately embroidered mourning picture is dedicated to Joseph Robeshaw, perhaps her father, who was lost at sea in the Boston Harbor in 1786, at the age of thirty-one. Four mourners, presumably his widow, two daughters, and a son, somberly flank the inscribed tomb, which rests beneath a willowy tree.

Elsy Holman painted the watercolor mourning picture *Holman Memorial* in 1815. At center, a tomb topped with a Grecian urn stands at the edge of a meandering stream under a leafy willow tree. A classically inspired young female figure leans in mourning by the tomb. In the far distance we see the faint outline of a church and its tall steeple. A printed card collaged on the face of the tomb lists the death dates of Abraham (1805), Mrs. Abigail (1814), and Abraham Junior (1815, aged thirty-one). An unattributed but strikingly similar mourning picture dated 1816 is inscribed with the names of two Thomas family children who had died in 1807 and 1816. Whether this was also created by Elsey Holman or there was a relationship between the two artists and their families is unknown. At the least, these works share the same template, perhaps a theorem that was popular and readily available.

Two unattributed views of Mount Vernon, one executed in softly hued



Patty Robeshow: Untitled, after 1786; colored embroidery on fabric; 22½ × 18 in. oval; gift of Bliss Carnochan and Nancy Edebo.

Stove Top Figure of George Washington, United States, c. 1875; cast iron; 46 × 14 × 10 in.; promised gift of Bliss Carnochan and Nancy Edebo.



pastels, the other in shades of black and gray, can be seen as memorial tributes to George Washington. The works are dated about 1840, which coincides with the completion of a new tomb for Washington on the grounds of Mount Vernon, his plantation in Virginia. In 1797, after serving two terms as America's first president, George and Martha Washington returned to Mount Vernon, where Washington died in 1799. The two compositions of slightly different sizes essentially depict the same scene: a gated tomb stands under willowy trees in the foreground, alongside a river that runs through grassy fields; a hillside manor house presides over the vast property. While absent of his image, these works would have been viewed as memorials to Washington and statements of patriotism and civic morality.

George Washington's easily recognizable profile, as in Samuel Folwell's silhouette from the mid-1790s, was often replicated both during his lifetime and after. As one of the first and most important heroes of an independent United States of America, Washington represented national unity and the value of the Constitution. Another common patriotic symbol during Washington's time was the bald eagle, chosen in 1782 as the national emblem. Often portrayed with wings outspread and talons clutching the rolled pages of the Declaration of Independence, the eagle decorated a vast range of materials and objects. The dramatic and beautifully detailed wings of the mid-nineteenth-century wood and gilded eagle in the exhibition were carved completely in the round. The sculpture is thought to have been made as decoration for a ship's interior. In American folk art, revered patriotic symbols were not restricted from use in popular forms of decoration or functional objects, as in the stove-top figures of George and



Weathervane: Horse, United States, c. 1820; painted bronze; 21 × 29 × 3 in. (approx.); promised gift of Bliss Carnochan and Nancy Edebo.

Weathervane: Ram, United States, c. 1870; hammered and welded sheet copper with gold leaf; 31¼ × 31½ × 6½ in.; promised gift of Bliss Carnochan and Nancy Edebo.



Martha Washington from about 1875. Modeled after a grand statue by Sir Francis Legatt Chantrey created for the Boston State House in 1827, the figure of Washington stands dressed in a classical toga, holding rolled documents that certainly represent proclamations of the Founding Fathers. (Martha's figure is far more generic.) Manufactured in New York by J. L. Mott Iron Works, the pair of painted cast-iron sculptures were intended for domestic use, to be placed in the parlor of private homes. Positioned on top of a stove, they actually functioned as radiators.

Throughout the nineteenth century weathervanes were among the most visible expressions of ornamented functional sculpture. Early American metal weathervanes were fashioned from hand-cut and hammered copper sheets, mounted on a pole and anchored with a wind-catching fin, often in the form of an arrow. Weathervane production increased after the Civil War, as a result of the development of metalwork manufacturing. Often intended for agricultural outbuildings and barns, vanes were particularly important for farmers and sailors, allowing them to anticipate weather. They were also used in more commercial settings as signs indicating a trade or occupation. The Tilton Tanning Company in Tilton, New Hampshire, commissioned *Weathervane: Ram* for the top of its new building, completed in 1870. The hollow sculpture is composed of five copper sheets, joined at the top and below the belly of the animal.

Farm animals, particularly horses, were common subjects of weathervanes. Prior to the introduction of large-scale production of the automobile in the first years of the twentieth century, the horse was ubiquitous in American life. An emblem of motion, speed, and status, the horse was the subject of countless weathervanes, some even modeled after famous harness racers. *Weathervane: Trotting Horse and Sulky with Rider* reflects the popularity of the sport of trotting in mid-nineteenth-century New England. The bearded sulky rider and his dynamic horse probably derived from a series of Currier and Ives prints from the late 1860s depicting the champion trotter dubbed Ethan Allen.



In the painting *The Chestnut Stallion* (c. 1845), the horse stands as the centerpiece of the composition. Whether a racer or a workhorse, the strong and beautiful animal poses outside the stable as a possession of its proud owner. It is likely that the painting was intended a testament to both the animal's material value and its owner's accomplishments. C.P. Ferguson's *Rural Landscape* (c. 1860), a large and expansive view of flourishing, hilly farmlands, also can be seen as a portrait of achievement, narrated by the landscape itself. Although devoid of figures and activities, the scene shows evidence of long and arduous work. Groomed fields and pastures thrive in the midst of surrounding dense woodlands. Fields are fenced and demarcated, probably according to specific crop or function. Streams and directed waterways provide irrigation. A cluster of homes is perched on a hill in the middle distance. At the peak of the rising hills, three singular trees top the landscape, like an agrarian steeple, backlit by a bright sky. It is not clear if this respectable property is the achievement of one or more families, but the scope of cultivation and range of architecture suggest multiple generations working in unison toward a solid legacy for the future.

Erastus Salisbury Field (1805–1900) began as a portrait painter in the 1830s in western Massachusetts and the Connecticut Valley. But unlike other regional itinerant artists, in the 1840s he moved his family to New York City, where he exhibited his work and is thought to have studied photography. When Field returned to New England to care for his ailing father's farm in about 1860, his art took a turn in another direction, toward landscapes and religious and historical scenes. *The Israelites Crossing the Red Sea* (c. 1865–88) is part of Field's cycle of paintings dealing with the ten plagues of Egypt and the final escape of the Israelites, thought to have been painted for the North Amherst Church.⁵ Field's later biblical works were embedded with his strong opposition to slavery and abolitionist interests.

Erastus Salisbury Field: *The Israelites Crossing the Red Sea*, c. 1865–88; oil on canvas; 31¾ × 46 in.; promised gift of Bliss Carnochan and Nancy Edebo.



Dating from about the same time as Ferguson's bucolic landscape, Charles Elveena's *Slate Bluff Mining Company* (c. 1860) envisions a wholly different landscape and a part of the country heading in a completely different direction. Born in New York, Elveena found his way to California through a variety of circumstances and opportunities. After serving in the Mexican American War, he went to the Sacramento region during the Gold Rush with thousands of others seeking fortune.

The arc of **American Wonder**, which begins in the late eighteenth-century maritime hub of Salem, Massachusetts, lands in the San Francisco Bay Area nearly one hundred years later, where the pitched optimism of discovering gold nuggets would meet with dreams of a post-Civil War American Eden.

Lucinda Barnes

CHIEF CURATOR AND DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS AND COLLECTIONS

1. Harlan Lane, *A Deaf Artist in Early America: The Worlds of John Brewster Jr.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 28.
2. Stacy Hollander, *Revisiting Ammi Phillips: Fifty Years of American Portraiture* (New York: Museum of American Folk Art, 1994), 12.
3. "Folk Art Center Acquires Ammi Phillips Portraits," *Antiques and the Arts Weekly* (May 2, 1980): 23.
4. I am grateful to Bliss Carnochan for locating this in *Theorem Patterns from the Collection of The Historical Society of Early American Decoration* (Cooperstown, NY: Historical Society of Early American Decoration, 1998), 12.
5. Mary Black, *Erastus Salisbury Field 1805-1900* (Springfield, MA: Museum of Fine Arts, 1984), 49.

Charles Elveena: *State Bluff Mining Company*, c. 1860; watercolor on gold paper; 18 × 23½ in.; gift of Bliss Carnochan and Nancy Edebo. Photo: Sibila Savage.

AMERICAN WONDER: FOLK ART FROM THE COLLECTION
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive

October 1-December 21, 2014



PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Curator's Gallery Talk

Thursday / 10.2.14 / 12:15

Gallery Talk: Bliss Carnochan

Sunday / 10.5.14 / 3:00

Guided Tours

Thursdays at 12:15 & Sundays at 2:00

**Imagining Everyday Life in the Young US:
Margaretta Lovell and David Henkin
in Conversation**

Sunday / 11.23.14 / 3:00

American Sign Language Guided Tour

Saturday / 11.15.14 / 1:30

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