Folk Art, Religion, and Folks: Folk Art Portraits as Windows onto Nineteenth Century Religious Currents

The first half of the nineteenth century was a time of great growth and change in American society. The Revolutionary War and the hard-won freedoms it brought about provided America with great opportunity. Americans tended to fancy themselves to be a privileged people, a blessed land destined to lead the world toward their particular brand of “freedom.” It is within this social scene that I wish to look at what has been referred to as folk painting, specifically folk portraiture done in the North Eastern United States between 1800 and 1850. This time frame more or less correlates with the Second Great Awakening that swept the nation, spreading, then enforcing, religious beliefs on the American public. It is the intersection of these two phenomena—folk portrait painting and the Second Great Awakening—that I would like to explore. I believe we can view folk portraits as windows allowing a glimpse at the social climate of nineteenth century America, here paying close attention to how religious mores and attitudes can be discerned.

The nineteenth century saw a marked increase in the consumption of paintings—between 1800 and 1850 the number of households owning pictures doubled.¹ The majority of these pictures were portraits, with only a fraction having religious subjects despite the strong religious currents surging through the American society. It might seem odd that so religious a society did not want religious images to buttress their belief system, but we ought to keep in mind that at this time the United States was a fairly Puritan iconoclastic society. It is ironic that an iconoclastic society might reject one set of icons—the Virgin Mary and Christ Child of Byzantine and early Italian painting
for instance— but embrace another— that of peoples' own likeness. Moreover, the widespread acceptance of portraiture by the middle class was a drastic departure from the role the medium held in its infancy. In fifteenth century Europe portraiture was the sole domain of the ruling class used as means of displaying power and status. yet in colonial America, portraiture was embraced by a broader audience as a medium through which one could project a public image. As Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser said in Meet Your Neighbors. "Rather than capturing one moment in time, the portrait painter tried to convey not only the physical resemblance of the person, but important aspects of an individual's life and achievements. These might include the subject's place within a family, relationship to other family members, social status, professional status, and domestic endeavors."

To adequately accomplish this task of providing a view through the window of folk portraiture onto the early nineteenth century, I must ask for your patience while I explore two tangential subjects: the field of study surrounding, but seldom really addressing in a meaningful manner, folk art, and the social climate and currents of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century America that brought about and fostered the Second Great Awakening.

In his essay in The Spirit in Folk Art catalogue Henry Glassie throws out for consideration a deceptively simple, essentialized definition of folk art— "Fine art is our art. Folk art is their art." OK. Hmm.... In the case of nineteenth-century folk portrait paintings, who is "our" and who is "their"? "Our" would obviously refer to contemporary times, while "their" in this case would be the nineteenth century, as our separation by time creates a division that we cannot easily overcome, keeping us from fully understanding the function, context and form of folk art in general and folk portraiture in particular. Still, things are not so clear— maybe we ought to back up a
In 1915 Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney organized the Friends of the Young Artists, which evolved into the Whitney Studio Club, which still later became what is today the Whitney Museum of American Art. But for the moment, the Whitney Studio Club interests us, as the first exhibition of folk art took place there in 1924. Simply called, "Early American Art," the exhibition included 45 objects, the majority of which were paintings and watercolors, with a few pieces executed in the "minor arts." A stir of excitement was generated around this exhibition, from which an already growing community of art collectors, museums, and art enthusiasts solidified into a branch of the art world. One scholar has referred to the Whitney Studio Club exhibition as, "the result of connoisseurship's wish to put American folk art on view as a deep and powerful aesthetic form." Certainly, this is not far from the truth, if not right on target.

Little attention was paid to the context of folk art, to the functional aspects that went along with the undeniably intriguing forms. Fine art had evolved from similar functional roots to its present state of detachment and purely formal presence (at least in terms of the outside world beyond the fine art community). It is only natural that those interested in promoting and studying folk art would adapt the tools of the soundly established fine art community for its own tasks. By consciously ignoring the functional aspects of folk art, those promoting this new-found American art form were overlooking the most crucial aspects of what had the potential of providing both aesthetic and historical enjoyment.

To assist in legitimizing the exhibition and its position on folk art, the Whitney Studio Club had artists such as Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth select works from their personal collections of folk art to put on display. By including prominent contemporary artists in the selection of the exhibited works, folk art was suddenly, without warning, became a viable, respectable art form, with its own aesthetic system. Further, the folk, "primitive", or "naïve" aesthetic became a measure against which
twentieth century art was judged.

The folk art community had set up camp on the perimeter of the fine art world, conducting its own Vasarian art historical business. The next major milestone in the history of folk art would come in 1932 with the Museum of Modern Art exhibition, "American Folk Art." It is in the introduction of the exhibition catalogue that the foundations of American folk art scholarship were laid. Holger Cahill (fig. 1), curator of the exhibition, spun a confused, condescending tale of an art of times past, an art from the origins of our country when things were much more simple— the good old days. On the one hand Cahill held up folk art, particularly folk painting, which he mostly concerned himself with, as a pure American aesthetic and art form. On the other hand, he lambasted folk painters as being bad, primitive, simple, of no better than second rate. He even went so far as to say at one point that folk artists, "did not even know they were producing art." Yet Cahill continued to assert the primacy of a purely formal analysis of these objects. However Cahill justified proposing such conflicting information we'll never know, but it is easier to understand now the utter confusion of what folk art is and how it functions in the contemporary art world.

Most every myth about folk art, particularly folk painting, can be traced back to this essay. Here are a few choice statements which will allow a good idea of Cahill's biases:

"They were apt to insist too much upon outline, and upon detail which was not essential."9

"Usually there was something which the limner could do well; he might be good at getting likenesses, or at suggesting the texture of garments. Most of the old limners seem to have taken a delight in the treatment of textile surfaces especially when they were painting the details of women's costumes."10

It was Cahill again who proposed that limners spent the winters in their studios painting from prints and currently-fashionable garments portrait templates. In the spring, the limner would load his cart with these templates and a plethora of props. he would then add to the templates the likeness of a sitter, and then fill out the portrait
with a few props selected by the patron.  

It seems the majority of the misguided, connoisseurship-based scholarship on folk art owes at least part of its existence to Cahill.

In 1950 *The Magazine Antiques* held a symposium titled, "What is Folk Art?" in which scholars were asked for their definition of folk art. The responses generally had a chummy, insider quality to them. All the published responses remain within the confines of Cahill's methodologies. Throughout the essays, folk art is championed as a pure American art form whose presence establishes early roots for American modernism in this strong, sometimes "primitive," American style. Little critical thinking on the approach used in folk art history appears in these essays. Because of the friendly, fairly uncritical positions taken up by the respondents, no clear, concise definition of what folk art is rose to the surface.

Our next stop in our whirlwind tour of the history of folk art would be the 1974 exhibition, "The Flowering of Folk Art," which was at least in part in honor of the first folk art exhibition of 1924. In the introduction to this exhibition's catalogue Jean Lipman, who was at that time the leading scholar on folk art, said of the exhibition, "This book and the exhibition coinciding with its publication present the first achievement of American folk art during the century of its highest development."  

In Vasarian terms, the exhibition pronounced and celebrated the High Renaissance of American Folk Art. This appears to have been the message the American public was presented with: in his review for *Newsweek*, Douglas Davis said the exhibition, "heralds much more than a shift in taste or a surge in prices for old paintings and weathervanes hidden in dusty attics. It implies nothing less than the rewriting of American cultural history."

Throughout the fifty years since the first folk art exhibition, momentum was gaining to crown folk art as the first truly American art movement; "The Flowering of American Folk Art" seems to have been the Coronation Ball.
In 1977, the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum held a symposium on folk art which was lead by Kenneth Ames. "Beyond Necessity: Art in the Folk Tradition" fell like a ton of bricks on the folk art community. If "The Flowering of American Folk Art" was the Coronation Ball, then "Beyond Necessity" was Bastille Day. Ames felt the methodology established by Cahill and Lipman was, "becoming bogged down in the usually irrelevant issue of artistic merit," and accordingly missing the point of folk art. Continuing his critique of folk scholarship, Ames felt that folk cultures and their artifacts were not important for their virtuous purity founded in the youthful exuberance of America's early years, but for what they can tell us about American life at the time of the objects' creation. Instead of viewing folk art as another commodity to be fetishized and marginalized, Ames was arguing for an anthropological/material cultural study of folk art. Ames phrases it more succinctly: "The emphasis on aesthetics combined with the elimination of context as a step in the apotheosis of an object to the status of art severely hinders the historian's attempt to explore the artifact's place in space and time." In a nut shell, "Beyond Necessity" broke in on the folk art scene like some upstart teen ranting on about how bogus his or her parents' generation was.

The "primitive" qualities of folk art, those qualities which had been latched-upon by Cahill, Lipman, the Whitney Studio Club and its artist-collectors as evidence of a pure, naïve American style were a major point Ames wished to critique. The established folk art community had never really reconciled their seemingly contradictory assertions that folk art was both "primitive" and "bad," yet at the same time worthy of formal admiration. To explain the discrepancy between the seemingly unskilled appearance of folk art and the perceived attempt of folk artists to achieve realism, Ames borrowed from linguistics theory the concepts of competence and performance. Competence in linguistic parlance is "the system of rules that characterize an individual's knowledge or understanding of how something is done," while performance, "refers to a person's ability to execute or carry out this system." In
the case of folk art, the system of rules seems to be different than that found in fine art, and within those rules, Ames seems to be implying that the gap between performance and competence was wider than might have been previously assumed. Then Ames let the blade of the guillotine fall.

Citing a study conducted by Susan Roach on quilting in a rural Louisiana community, Ames proposes that within the context of a utilitarian functional role in a society, creation can have meaning beyond aesthetics.17 Roach had observed that though the quilters recognized and appreciated craftsmanship and aesthetic value, other functions of the quilts (the ability to provide warmth, the occasion for social gatherings at quilting bees, etc.) were more important. This all might seem like common sense, but to the folk art establishment it was, and is to this day, heresy. In making this point, Ames was attempting to refresh the memory of Lipman and company of the probable original function of folk art.

"Beyond Necessity" managed to split the folk art camp into two parties: that led by Lipman, still holding the torch for the connoisseurship-based approach to folk art, and Ames, Vlach and the others who wished to reposition folk art in its original context, or at least as close as possible under the circumstances.

John Michael Vlach pushed further away from the traditional approach to folk art history in his essays of 1988 and 1991. Reasserting the idea that stylistic analysis was not a viable means of studying folk art, Vlach went on to say that all methodologies used in the study of fine art would prove futile in any attempt to better understand folk art.18 He felt that the only way to ever evaluate folk art on its own merits would be to focus scholarly attention on works created in a medium unique to folk art.19 Since the bulk of folk art scholarship concerns painting and sculpture, both of which are media deeply entrenched in the Western fine art culture, Vlach believes an objective examination of folk art has yet to occur.20

As perhaps the final blow to the faint clutches of the traditional scholars, Vlach
suggested in the article "The Wrong Stuff" of 1991 that folk painting is a misnomer, as the majority of folk painting, particularly portraiture, was not really "folk" at all as it was done for middle class upwardly-mobile patrons looking for a means of establishing class claims. In place of "folk painting," Vlach suggested the phrase, "plain painting," which he felt more accurately described the objects under consideration.

At this point very little was left undisturbed of the original conception of folk art as it was conceived and refined over the previous seventy years. Yet Jean Lipman and her fellow aestheticians persevered. In 1990, the exhibition, Five Star Folk Art: One Hundred American Masterpieces was hung in the Museum of American Folk Art. In her introduction, Jean Lipman discusses the premise of the exhibition— to identify the highest quality folk art objects as a means of approaching a clear understanding of what folk art means, and by what system it can be evaluated. The traditionalists had not given up their ground. The catalogue was dedicated to the memory and legacy of Holger Cahill (fig. 1)— "To the memory of Holger Cahill, who laid firm foundations for the study of folk art," presumably as both a respectful nod to a respect scholar, and as a rebuttal to the recent criticisms of his methodologies. In her introduction, Lipman discusses the more recent scholarly attempts to understand folk art: "In the folk art field, a subgroup of 'revisionists' known as 'folklorists' also believes that the art object is important for what it reveals about its time and place— important because it is there—not for its quality as a timeless and universal work of art." Once again Lipman sent out a query to artists, scholars and collectors interested in folk art , this time to obtain definitions of what quality meant in terms of folk art. The majority of the responses basically said, "I'm not really sure, but I know it when I see it." Three people declined to respond, at least in Lipman's mind. All three of these dissenters, Jasper Johns included, stated that a definition of so complex a phenomenon was impossible. Instead of publishing these as valid opinions, Lipman belittled the three by portraying them as elitist snobs from the fine art establishment.
An irreconcilable difference continues to exist in the field of folk art. The older, more established methodology still stubbornly aligns itself with Western fine art concepts of evaluating art, while the newer "folklore" approach has questioned the very notion that folk art is art at all. I believe the later methods make more sense both in terms of historically appreciating and understanding folk art and in terms of responsibly interacting with another culture and its material artifacts.

Allow me a quick aside which I propose as evidence of how the methodologies and actions of traditional folk art scholars has done folk art a disservice. The 1924 "Early American Art" exhibition and the folk art history culture that has sprung up in its wake has lead to the corruption of contemporary folk artists. The visionary artist Howard Finster who lives in rural Georgia is an example of a contemporary folk artist forever changed by the folk art culture. Finster talks of having to clear out space on his property so the tour buses from Atlanta can come through. Finster has been commissioned to do record covers for rock bands, appeared in music videos, and put out his own records. The folk art collector Herbert Hemphill even commissioned a portrait from Finster (fig. 2. 1978), which includes the inscription, "The Herbert Wade Hemphill Jr. Collection founder of American Folk Art the Man who Preserves the Lone and Forgotten. The Unknown Collection." James Harold Jennings, a folk sculptor, keeps a notebook where he records the over 500 backorders he has for his "simple, untainted' works. These are not exactly the humble, pure creative acts Jean Lipman might have expected from a visionary folk artist, but the consumer culture that has gradually formed around folk art thanks to the privileging of aesthetic over function that first came to light in the 1924 Whitney Studio Club exhibition.

Hopefully, we now have a more clear idea of how folk art has come to exist as it does today in America. But what is or is not folk art still is not apparent. Let us return then to Henry Glassie’s definition, "Fine art is our art. Folk art is their art." To further refine our working definition, then, we might add Andre Malraux's division of creative
endeavors into two groups—"true art" which has function in society, and "art of
delection" which is purely diversionary, entertainment.\textsuperscript{23} I believe the majority of folk
art would fall into the first category, while arguably much of fine art, outside its own
cultural sphere, has precious little function.

We now have a definition of folk art that requires that it to be part of another
culture, separated from us by time, location, language, etc., and that the object has a
functional role in its society. To expand this slightly, I would like to add that aesthetic
values are not a necessary part of folk art, at least not to our uncomprehending eyes,
nor are they mandatory for the culture from which they come. When an object has
greater value and significance to a culture than its appearance, its surface value, it can
then be referred to as folk art.

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Throughout the last decade of the eighteenth-century a change of cultural attitudes was underway, moving from what were basically Anglican values and beliefs
towards a more purely "American" cultural structure. The nation was rebuilding and
restructuring in the wake of the Revolutionary War. A feeling of great freedom, of
historical uniqueness was prevalent in American thought in the late eighteenth and
early nineteenth centuries—"We have it in our power to begin the world over again.
A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now.
The birthday of a new world is at hand."\textsuperscript{24} Fueling the great patriotic fires were a
succession of important anniversaries which only served to bolster this intense
nationalistic spirit. The fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence occurred
in 1826; the one hundredth anniversary of George Washington's birth came about in
1832; the fiftieth anniversary of the U.S. Constitution took place in 1839.

The freedoms gained through victory against the British Empire were cherished;
Americans had the power to shape their own society, without constraints from their
government. Religious freedom, and the moral structures that went hand-in-hand with religious belief, seemed to be held up as proof of America’s great future. The reality of this religious freedom was not quite so pure, however—"on the one hand, Americans exalted as natural and universal the freedom of all peoples to shape their own destinies. On the other hand, however, they judged one particular culture to be natural above all others and therefore claimed the right to enforce this culture as the destiny of the world. in the process, the often redefined freedom to mean the right to conform to this most natural way of life.”25 This most natural way of life, or, borrowing from Orwell, this most equal way of life, happened to be that promoted by Protestant Reformationists. As America had survived, and ultimately triumphed over a bitter war, Americans believed God had smiled upon them, blessed them and willed that they spread their triumphal ways, which became an essentially Protestant value system.

Though the first amendment clearly defines a separation of religion from governmental affairs, Americans from the outset framed their laws and governmental structure around what were in essence Protestant beliefs. In 1852, Lyman Beecher, a well-known leader in the Second Great Awakening, said of America’s structural basis: "Our republic in its constitution borrows from the Bible its elements, proportions, and power. It was God that gave these elementary principles to our forefathers.”26 It stands to reason then that though there were great freedoms in early nineteenth century America, these privileges were established within the parameters of Protestant morals. Good American behavior was more or less synonymous with proper Protestant behavior.

So what exactly were these Protestant beliefs? A reductivist logic was at the root of Protestant belief, boiling complex issues down to binary decisions: sin or grace, heaven or hell. Ambiguity was not favored. There was no gray area between the polar positions; either you lived a proper, Christian (read Protestant life), or you were an abject sinner. To make things even easier, the Bible contained the answers when one
might be unsure of which was the right choice in a given situation— as Alexander Campbell, another figure who rose to prominence during the great religious revival, said, "I can't be wrong— I follow the Book." Now, how the "Book" was interpreted led to many splinter groups within the larger picture of Protestantism, but nonetheless, a general moral consensus was established, based on the value of the Bible and the importance of spreading the Word of God. So long as the various religious sects remained under the larger canopy of Protestant beliefs, Americans were free to select the denomination that best suited their spiritual needs. This of course excluded the large population of Catholics and Jews that were established in the United States, and it goes without saying that Native American religions were not tolerated.

A good example of the paradoxical nature of the new American "freedom" is the role of women within early nineteenth century American Society. Within Protestant beliefs women were restricted to domestic activities, including the raising of children in a manner conducive to creating a good Christian soul. If you believe the nineteenth-century writers, women were best served (and best serving) by staying in the home where they could be sheltered from potential distractions—

"St. Paul knew what was best for women when he advised them to be domestic. There is something sedative in the duties which home involves. It affords security not only from the world, but from delusions and errors of every kind."  
"Religion is exactly what a woman needs, for it gives her that dignity that best suits her dependence."  
"It was clearly the will of God that man should be superior in power and authority to woman; and asserted that no lesson is more plainly and frequently taught in the Bible, than women's subjection."

So we see that freedom was again a relative term, here excluding women, or phrasing it in more cynical terms, giving women the freedom to conform to and to be happy in their domestic roles as the mother and subservient wife.

It is in this quasi-free society that the Second Great Awakening took form and flourished. What this grandiose phrase refers to is the religious fervor that swept
across America beginning sometime around 1790 and not petering out until the 1840’s. Between 1800 and 1850 Church membership increased tenfold; by 1850 one in seven Americans aligned themselves with a Protestant religion. Looking at Lewis Miller's watercolor Inside the Old Lutheran Church of around 1849 (fig. 3) we can imagine the reverend delivering a fiery sermon on the great American future. No specific event or date can be identified as the date of origination or the single reason for the Second Great Awakening. It is most likely that the general ebb and flow of life, spurred by the hopes and fears of the Revolution brought about this wave of religious fervor. As Americans came to terms with the fact that they were now responsible for establishing their own national structure, the prevalent moral belief system, Protestantism, naturally rose to the forefront as social model.

Whatever the reason, momentum quickly picked up in the last decade of the eighteenth-century. Many give credit to Timothy Dwight, president of Yale University form 1795 to 1817, for setting the course of the Second Great Awakening. Under Dwight’s leadership, a religious fever struck Yale, converting over one third of the student body to Christianity. Charged with religious excitement, many of Dwight’s students went out and spread the Word. In the Connecticut area, the religious revival was clear and present—Edward Dorr Griffin, a Yale Theologian and student of Dwight’s wrote, "I saw a continued succession of heavenly sprinkling at New Salem, Farmington, Middlebury, and New Hartford... until in 1799, I could stand at my door in New Hartford, Litchfield County, and number fifty or sixty contiguous congregations laid down in our field of divine wonders.”

Lyman Beecher, another student of Timothy Dwight, is often held up as an example of the essential concepts of the evangelical revival of the nineteenth century. Beecher's missionary work was based on the assumption that Americans needed to be informed of the dire importance of the Word, as it contained the moral sensibility essential for American prosperity. Beecher was involved in the temperance
movements that were one aspect of the Second Great Awakening. In 1813 the Society for the Suppression of Intemperance was formed; by 1825, the group had shifted to a zero-tolerance stance of total abstinence. Other voluntary organizations sprang up around the rallying cry of temperance—in 1826, the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance started, followed in 1833 by the American Temperance Society. Slowly what ought to have remained a social belief crept into law. In 1846 Maine passed a law banning alcohol. In total, fourteen states would pass similar legislation during the religious revival.

A good deal of the spread of the Great Awakening can be associated with the aggressive publishing of certain voluntary organizations. The American Bible Society was founded in 1816 with the primary goal of spreading the Word in printed form. Between 1816 and 1820 the group distributed 100,000 Bibles. Besides publishing a bimonthly magazine a Christian almanac, and children's books, the New England Tract Society, which later changed its name to The American Tract Society, disseminated some 777,000 pamphlets by 1823.

Personal contact was made by these evangelists through both camp meetings and Sunday school classes. Both served as platforms for espousing Protestant rhetoric, which was hoped to convert the damned and trigger action in the already-converted. A real sense of sheltering was present in the Sunday school and women's seminary phenomena. Those running the Protestant religions (men of course) did not seem to believe that women and children had the wits about them to keep out of the devil's way, and so set up these institutions to protect their wives and children. An early nineteenth century drawing of a Sunday school class perfectly illustrates this point (fig. 4). We see a group of young people gathered together presumably under the supervision of the sole adult, a woman positioned to the extreme right of the image. Running beneath the group is the inscription, "We are going to attend Sunday School and Shun bad company today."
What started as a hope to spread the freedoms won in the late eighteenth-century through conversion through enlightenment turned into a campaign of moral bullying based on coercive tactics. The Second great Awakening caused a gang mentality towards Christianity which in its popular Protestant form did not leave much room for nonconformists. A distrust in dance, song, gambling, drinking, profanity and obscenity (as these were all on the wrong side of the moral fence) took root in American society during this crucial period of social construction; even today we retain these biases. And as the political structures, also newly-forming, were based on these Protestant-derived morals, our very governmental structure absorbed these moralistic judgments. As Alexis de Tocqueville stated in Democracy in America, "Upon arrival in the United States, the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention; and the longer I stayed the more did I perceive the great political consequences resulting from this state of things, to which I was unaccustomed."42

So now we return to folk portraits of the nineteenth century. I do not agree completely with Vlach in his assertion that folk painting, specifically portraiture, is not a part of folk culture. As my example I hold up John Brewster, Jr., a folk portraitist whose case lends itself well to this discussion. Brewster was born both deaf and dumb, giving him that natural handicap that would somehow make his creative production "pure" to the folk art aestheticians. He is thought to have received some art training from the Reverend John Steward, though their two styles do not show obvious similarities.43 Over one hundred full size portraits are extant, while only a half dozen of his miniatures have been discovered.44 A diary entry of 1790 by Reverend James Cogswell of Scotland, Connecticut mentions Brewster as a painter, which is the first mention of the man: "[Brewster] is very Ingenious, has a Genius for painting & can write well & converse by signs so that he may be understood in many things...."45
In 1809, John Brewster, Jr. painted a miniature portrait on ivory of Benjamin Apthorp Gould, Jr. (fig. 5), which is inscribed on paper on the verso of the miniature, "Benj. Gould Jr. Taken by/ Mr. John Brewster, Jr./ Oct. 1809." Gould was a Harvard graduate and highly successful educator. Soon after completing his studies at Harvard, he became Headmaster of the Public Latin School of Boston, where he wrote a Latin textbook that was adopted nationally as the standard Latin textbook. Eventually, Gould retired from teaching to become a businessman.

Certainly John Brewster, Jr. fits the mold of a folk artist—little to no training, a simple man with a handicap that he has successfully overcome, a style that retains a flat, naïve appearance. But what of Benjamin Apthorp Gould, Jr.? Does he qualify as a member of a folk society?

If folk is defined in terms of economic status or geographical proximity to large urban areas, then perhaps Vlach is right, nineteenth century portrait paintings are not folk art. However, though nineteenth century portraits were, as Vlach said, commissioned for specific intent by middle class people, they still are "folk" in that they served a function within the social system of nineteenth century New England. What I propose this function might be is the conscious portrayal of middle class Americans who wish to communicate to their peers via their portraits their status and role in society. In this essay, the specific message being broadcast in these images is, "I am an upstanding American citizen, living within the constraints of our social norms." In more direct terms, the sitters wished to be recognized for their adherence to Protestant moral codes that were pushed upon the public via the Second Great Awakening and the Protestant foundations on which the United States government was constructed.

In Charles Bird King's The Itinerant Artist (fig. 6) from around the turn of the century we are afforded a glimpse at a limner inside a home painting the likeness of what I imagine is the matron of the house. Around her the family goes about their business, save for a couple of children, what appears to be a young African American
girl, and the older woman leaning over the limner’s shoulder. She seems to be making suggestions about how to portray the younger woman, paying close attention to getting things just right, as appearances did matter in nineteenth century society.

The most prevalent folk portraits are single likenesses, with double portraits much less frequent, and family portraits even less prevalent. In all of these we can see glimpses of religious currents in early nineteenth century life. Throughout all three portrait types certain elements are present which should suggest to us religious impact. The sitters are almost always well-dressed, albeit austere and simple; little in the way of visible flesh is ever present. Further, they are placed in an austere, plain room with little ornament of any kind. The anonymous portraits Old Man in Red Slat Back Chair (fig. 6 c.1836/40. National Gallery of Art) and Woman in Red Arrow Back Chair (fig. 7. c. 1836/40. National Gallery of Art) are good examples of these tendencies. All three of these phenomena can be traced to the Puritan roots of the Protestant revival which swept the nation between 1800 and 1840.

In the pendant portraits, John and Caterina Bickel of Jonestown, Pennsylvania by Jacob Maentel (fig. 9), we find another significant, and often present, sign of the religious life of nineteenth century life. Many sitters chose to portray themselves with a small book, almost always open, which most likely is a small devotional text or the "Book." Symbolically, the small volumes might represent in single portraits the sitter's belief that the Word, and thus God, is with them and guiding their life.

The Bible becomes an almost constant image in folk portraiture. It is almost a given that a large, authoritative Bible will accompany any portrait of a reverend or clergyman like the massive tome seen in the anonymous Portrait of a Clergyman (fig. 10). The clergyman's chamber is brimming with volumes containing undoubtedly the Word; the Bible almost appears to be ambling across the floor powered by the truth it contains. In the double portrait Thomas and Betsey Thompson (fig. 11) of 1837 by Joseph H. Davis we see an austere older couple sitting at a table, the woman holding a
small devotional text, the man writing what appears to be a letter. The table is dominated by a large Bible, seemingly the anchor of their lives. Both Mr. and Mrs. Thompson are looking up at the mourning picture that hangs above the table. The tomb in the image is inscribed, "W.H.J. Thompson." W.H.J. is probably a child of the Thompson's who has passed away. While both Mr. and Mrs. Thompson hold small devotional texts, a third sits on the table beside the Bible, presumably left by their deceased child.

Religion in the nineteenth century set the tone for family life. Eunice Pinney's *The Cotter's Saturday Night* (fig. 12) of circa 1820. Pinney has portrayed for the Cotter family a Saturday evening of family communion spent studying the Word. Mr. Cottter leads the family in its religious instruction, with his family gathered around a table intently listening to that evening’s lesson.

Young women were from an early age trained to raise a family in a wholesome, Christian manner. *Five Children of the Budd Family* (fig. 13) by an anonymous limner portrays the elder Budd daughter leads her fellow siblings in a Bible lesson. If we do not accept that the painting depicts a moment captured in the lives of the Budd Children, but is instead a posed scene, we must at least accept that the elder Budd is clearly identified as having the responsibility of authority, which translates into maintaining proper behavior while their parents are busy, as she has been vested with the power of the Word.

In folk portraits we seldom find a woman in a position of authority. As in *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, (fig. 12) the women are all removed from the main action of conducting the lesson. Only the father who sits before the Bible and his son who leans over the table to perhaps ask a question take any action in the scene. As Caleb Atwater said, "It was clearly the will of God that man should be superior in power and authority to woman; and asserted that no lesson is more plainly and frequently taught in the Bible, than women's subjection."47 Women in Protestant America did not take active
roles in any aspect of life outside the domestic sphere, where she was afforded, "...security not only from the world, but from delusions and errors of every kind." If we look at the anonymous pendant portraits Old Man in Red Slat Back Chair (fig. 7) and Woman in Red Arrow Back Chair (fig. 8), we can observe that while the man sits actively reading from his devotional text, participating in the translation of the Word into morals and laws, the woman merely holds hers, secure in the knowledge that there is order in all things in God’s world.

In these few examples, I believe we can begin to formulate ideas about how much information on nineteenth century life we can gather from folk portraits. While there is, undoubtedly, an aesthetic attraction to these works, to neglect the potential for learning about the ways of life of the milieu in which the paintings were created would be unfortunate.

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