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ART REVIEW | ASA AMES

## Filling in the Contours of a Surprising Golden Age

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

The little-known American sculptor Asa Ames worked mostly from life, carving and then painting three-dimensional wood portraits. He made either busts or full-length figures, depicting family and friends, and when he died of consumption in 1851, at 27, he left behind 12 or 13 sculptures from the last four or five years of his life. Eight of these works form a stunning little show at the American Folk Art Museum, the first ever devoted to Ames's work. It has been organized by Stacy C. Hollander, the museum's senior curator and director of exhibitions.

The art, artifacts and objects produced in America during the first half of the 19th century constitute something of an artistic golden age, but a highly disorganized one that is still yielding surprises. Its legacy is short on towering stone temples or airy frescoes that stay in one place, and long on portable objects made for pleasure, use, profit or a combination of the three. These often anonymous efforts constitute an amazing tribute to the collective spirit, imagination and ingenuity of a time when creativity was widespread, initiative was bottom-up, and per capita participation was high. They also confirm the basic human need for beauty and decoration.

Enterprising self-taught painters of the period like Ammi Philips and Erastus Salisbury Field, who traveled around New England painting portraits for a living, have long been known in the folk-art world and beyond. Similarly determined sculptors are much rarer. Ames is an exception, though much about his life remains a mystery. He was born in 1823 in Evans, N.Y., a small town 20 miles south of Buffalo. His date of birth and death both come from his gravestone. And an 1850 federal census tantalizingly lists his occupation as "sculpturing." He might have spent time at sea and been apprenticed to a carver of ships' figureheads or trade figures. Until 25 years ago, Ames's work, when noticed at all, was probably lumped together with such carvings. But in 1981 the American Folk Art Museum received an anonymous piece as a gift: a wood bust of a young girl whose head has a phrenology chart painted on it. Ms. Hollander ultimately attributed it to Ames. In 1982 Jack T. Ericson, an antiques dealer, culminated 12 years of research on Ames with an article in *Antiques* magazine. It reproduced the works that could be traced or attributed to him, including the folk art museum's piece, which is thought to have been made at the end of Ames's life, when he was ill and living with a doctor who practiced alternative medicine.

One of the show's standouts was discovered only in 2003, in the basement of the Boulder History Museum in Colorado. Made in December 1849, it is a full-length portrait of Susan Ames, the daughter of his brother Henry G. Ames. Wearing a violet dress, Susan stands staunch and solemn, showing that posing was not much fun. Her eyes are intent but unfocused; she is holding still as best she can by thinking about other things. She has a small Bible or hymnal in her right hand; her left is raised.

The violet of Susan's dress is boldly accented with a red collar, waist and hem; its gathers are round and regular,

almost like the flutes on a Classical column. Her pantaloons are edged in eyelet lace whose holes have been carefully carved, as has the red upholstered footstool she stands on, right down to its brass-colored tacks. The colors and details imbue the entire sculpture with the intensity of Susan's expression.

Ames's artistry has a distinct personality. His work is full of signature tics, like his careful carvings of his subjects' hair or ears. There is also a familial resemblance among the sculptures, and between them and Ames, as shown by the only known photograph of him.

Two of the best pieces in the show are sculptures of robust young men who might be Ames's brothers or Ames himself. "Head of a Boy" is luxuriant with youth, from its thick, carefully combed hair (back from the brow, but forward on the sides) and flushed cheeks to its fine-looking jacket, tie and shirt. His dark, focused eyes and slightly pursed lips brim with ambition and hope; he seems to be practicing to look like a judge or senator. The slightly fairer subject of "Bust of a Young Man" is even more lifelike; here the pursed lips seem about to speak. He brings to mind the figures of the self-taught sculptor and photographer Morton Bartlett and Charles Ray's mannequin sculptures.

Ames's inspirations clearly included the portraits that itinerant painters were making during this period, but translating these wonderfully stiff, often emotionally fraught images into three dimensions gives them an added sense of life. The best of them have the artifice and complexity of 19th-century photographs, with which Ames had at least one close encounter.

The strange, beautiful and overpopulated daguerreotype that this encounter produced testifies to Ames's ambition. He is in his Sunday best, working intently with a mallet and chisel on a bust of a man. (Its profile, near his knee, suggests a self-portrait.) Three sculptures look on from the upper right: a pudgy baby with a drape of fabric around its middle (it is in the exhibition, without the drape) and the busts of two other children, both in carved, off-the-shoulder togas in keeping with the neo-Classical style of the day.

The busts teeter on a textile-covered stand beneath which, peeking upward, is a young man, who might almost be another sculpture. The carving of a hand (also in the show) and real-looking bass viol visible behind this party of five increase the sense of elaborate stage-managing. Ames was probably ill when this photograph was made, and perhaps he knew that obscurity threatened. Packed with details about his leisure interests as well as his "sculpturing," with his works doubling as an imagined audience, this carefully constructed image has the same intensity as Ames's portraits. It is a detailed message in a bottle that he sent into the future, which is now.

*"Asa Ames: Occupation Sculpturing" continues through Sept. 14 at the American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 265-1040, [folkartmuseum.org](http://folkartmuseum.org).*

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