

October 6, 2006

Art Review | 'The Worlds of John Brewster Jr.'

Intense Visions by a Painter Who Couldn't Hear

By **HOLLAND COTTER**

Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies, a poet wrote. If so, Young America was a very grown-up place. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, according to some statistics, only one of every three people lived to be 20, and death among the very young was common. For those who survived infancy, diseases like mumps and diphtheria lay in wait. Medicine, with its bleedings and purgings, brought hazards of its own.

Small wonder that, even deep in the provinces, portraiture flourished. Beyond its value as a social status symbol, a painted portrait, particularly of a child, was a combination of genetic trophy, protective talisman and personal memento: a record of continuity, a wish for the future, a reminder of what was or might have been.

Few artists in early America painted more incisive and empathetic likeness than John Brewster Jr. (1766-1854), who is the subject of a fine traveling show at the American Folk Art Museum. And few worked under such potentially limiting circumstances: Brewster was born deaf in an era before remedial help or a common signing language existed.

Yet he was lucky in his beginnings. Born in Connecticut, he was descended from elite Puritan stock. His father was a doctor. His family was large, close-knit and socially well connected.

Brewster trained with a local artist, the Rev. Joseph Steward, who was influenced by another painter, Ralph Earl (1751-1801). Earl had spent time in England — he was a Loyalist during the Revolution — where he devised a style of portraiture that crossed a rough-hewn Colonial limner tradition with the European grand manner.

Like many American artists, Earl led an itinerant, multitasking life, often on the road, taking gigs as a sign painter when nothing else came up. Brewster did sideline jobs too, but stayed mostly within striking distance of family, either his father in Connecticut or his younger brother Royal, who moved to Maine in

1795, taking Brewster with him.

One of the earliest pictures in the show is a double portrait of Brewster's father and stepmother, Ruth Avery Brewster: the father broad-faced, affable and distracted; the mother tense, focused, gazing straight out at the viewer. The Old World frills that spell "classy" are in place. The subjects are framed by red swag curtains; a window behind them gives onto a parklike vista.

But the table they sit at is a chunky drop-leaf, as ungrand as can be. Dr. Brewster wears Puritanical black-and-white; his wife, a plain brown dress. No stylists have had their way with them: a large mole on Ruth Brewster's chin is right there for the world to see.

Around the same time, 1800-ish, Brewster painted his very young stepsisters, Betsey and Sophia. Betsey, 2 or 3 years old, he placed outdoors, against a landscape of tree-sprinkled hills. The strawberries she carries in a little basket match her pert red shoes.

Sophia's portrait is different. She's outdoors too, but the landscape, if that's what it is, is dark and blank. It rises flat behind her like a solid, shoulder-high wall cut by a horizon line and a moody sunset sky. The picture may be a posthumous likeness; the child died in 1800 before she was 5.

Brewster did most of his painting in Maine. Probably through his brother's wife he met the Cutts family, local gentry, and produced striking life-size standing portraits of the dourly reproofing Col. and Mrs. Thomas Cutts, pictures that bring Brewster, in spirit, close to his Calvinist roots and suggest why he so often seems more an 18th- than a 19th-century artist.

Yet from Maine come some of his tenderest images of children. One is of Francis O. Watts, who grew up to enter [Harvard](#) at 15 and become a lawyer, but here is a toddler in a white chemise.

And there are portraits of the roses-in-bloom sisters Clarrisa and Mary Jane Nowell, identical twins right down to matching spit-curls and enormous brown eyes that seem straight from ancient Fayum. Or would that be from the yet-to-come Margaret and Walter Keane? Sentimentality is never far from Brewster's child portraits, though never too close either.

He visited Massachusetts, at one point living for three months at the home of the merchant James Prince in Newburyport. It was a productive stay, resulting in a fine likeness of Prince, and of his teenage daughter Sarah, fetchingly seated at a pianoforte, sheet music in hand, as if she were about to play.

Who decided on this pose? Sarah? Her father? Or Brewster, who could not of course hear music?

Historians have speculated that Prince was particularly attuned to Brewster's disability because his father, a renowned minister, was blind.

Whatever the case, Brewster stopped painting and turned his full attention to his deafness in 1817. That year the first American school for the deaf, the Connecticut Asylum, opened in Hartford, and Brewster enrolled. At 51 he was considerably older than his fellow students, but he stayed for three years, during which time American Sign Language was developed.

The show, organized by the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y., makes much of his disability. This is most obvious in the exhibition title, "A Deaf Artist in Early America: The Worlds of John Brewster Jr.," which is directly borrowed from a 2004 book by Harlan Lane, a professor of psychology at [Northeastern University](#), Boston.

Mr. Lane's study places Brewster's art in the context of what he calls America's developing deaf-world culture. This is a logical and worthy subject, though the connections he tries to draw between Brewster's deafness and his art remain vague and undemonstrated. Do the portraits he painted after leaving the asylum in 1820 really reflect his experience there through their more somber faces? The Cutts portraits, from around 1796-1801, are pretty somber. So is Ruth Avery Brewster's.

Maybe more late work would prove the point, though little of that has survived and almost nothing is known about his last decades. What is clear, from first to last, however, is his integral place in the mainstream American art of his time, an art at once New World naïve and Old World traditional, pioneering and preservative.