

Making a Long-Gone World Alive

Sanford Schwartz

Artist and Visionary: William Matthew Prior Revealed

an exhibition at the Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York, May 26–December 31, 2012; and the American Folk Art Museum, New York City, January 24–May 26, 2013. Catalog of the exhibition by Jacquelyn Oak and Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw. Fenimore Art Museum, 64 pp., \$29.95 (paper)

It is sometimes said that, before the Civil War, American artists usually showed African-Americans in a trivializing and condescending manner. The thought is that, in antebellum days, American painters—and this would be largely painters working out of the Northeast, where our art world was at the time—saw black people as types at best, and too often as mindless figures, even puppets.

A good look at the art of the time jars this opinion, and the current exhibition at the American Folk Art Museum of the mid-nineteenth-century portraitist William Matthew Prior forms a quietly decisive refutation of the idea. Prior (1806–1873) was white, and of the 1,500 or so portraits he made in his native Maine and later in the Boston area, less than a dozen are pictures of African-American, or mixed-race, adults and children. Five are in the current show, the first retrospective this artist has been given, and they turn out to be among the most engaging works on view. A few of them, especially an 1843 portrait of William Lawson, a black Boston clothing merchant, struck me as a good bit more than that.

This straightforward portrait of a man seen from roughly the waist up, with a lit cigar in his hand, is acknowledged, in the exhibition's accompanying catalog, to be one of Prior's masterpieces. But Prior is not one of the better-known nineteenth-century American artists, and the portrait of Lawson, which I believe to be a classic of its era, and perhaps of our art in general, probably isn't familiar even to people who know the painting of the time. (The picture's relative unfamiliarity may be due to the fact that, along with the portrait of the sitter's wife, Nancy Lawson, which is also in the current show, it is owned by the Shelburne Museum, in Shelburne, Vermont, a somewhat inaccessible collection.)

William Lawson planted me before it in part because it is plainly exciting to discover a picture from the 1840s of a black American who faces us, as Lawson does, with a demeanor that seems at once friendly, self-assured, worldly, and quizzical. But it isn't only one's social conscience that is stirred. Prior's artistry is understatedly superb. No reproduction of the picture that I have seen remotely conveys the glowing overall surface polish of the work.



William Matthew Prior: William Lawson, 30 x 25 inches, 1843. For additional images from 'Artist and Visionary: William Matthew Prior Revealed,' see the Web version of this article at www.nybooks.com.

The painting's few colors, including the sitter's tan-brown face, the brown background, the man's black jacket and sharply delineated white collar—and the glowing orange tip of his cigar, at the very bottom of the picture, with its plume of smoke—sumptuously coalesce. The painting presents an overall darkness from which the cigar's little fire, Lawson's brilliant white collar, and the man's wonderfully tangible mind and spirit all spring forth. (With *Nancy Lawson*, neither its color scheme nor her characterization is quite in the same league.)

Prior's sitters in general, however, are rarely alive the way William and Nancy Lawson are, and the artist didn't often bring the same formal elegance to his portraits, either. But Prior's thinking as an artist is unusual, and this helps animate the show. He is generally considered a folk artist, and is known for portraits, many of vaguely chubby, round-cheeked children, often accompanied by a dog or a toy, done in roughly the same flat, stageset-like style you might see used in the decoration of furniture or tinware plates from the time. In his characteristic pictures, where he doesn't appear to have thought too long about his forms or color choices, he can, at least, make painting look easy and fun to do.

But Prior was also, while not a schooled, fine artist, a painter who could—unlike most of the itinerant portraitists of the time—show people as fully rounded entities. His work confuses, happily, our sense that folk and trained artists are separate beings, and, to add another devilish wrinkle, his career went backward, one might say, in that he moved from making conventionally volumetric portraits to working with a limner's, or folk portrait-maker's, flattened forms. He also made crossovers, or pictures—the Lawson portraits are good examples—in which he blends the stiff, patterned look of folk art with the roundedness and ability to show depth of a trained artist.

Prior was something of a crossover as a person. Some of his early, academically proper portraits—particularly pictures of a Portland, Maine, couple named Jesse and Lucy Hartshorn, from 1836—are solid and even vibrant. He seems to have had no problem, though, switching, when market demands called for it, to a—for his clients—less expensive folk-art approach. He came to see himself, as Jacquelyn Oak writes in the show's catalog, as more of an “artisan or mechanic” than a fine artist, and,

in the process, he corralled a number of his house-painter in-laws into the business.

For many years, his energies went as well into supporting a preacher named William Miller who prophesied that the world would end, Oak writes, “some-time between March 1843 and March 1844.” His preaching became known far beyond the Northeast. Although Prior seems to have had no real education, he wrote, in the 1860s, two books about Miller and his mission.

Does the boundary-blurring spirit of Prior the artist and the person have anything to do with his success with black sitters? His writings show him to have been, in principle, an abolitionist. Thinking of himself as something of a portrait manufacturer, he may have felt aligned as well with his occasional black patrons in Boston, who were successful merchants. Racism certainly existed in the city at the time. But as Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw writes in a catalog essay on African-Americans in the art of the antebellum period, Boston's small black population then was “largely integrated” and had achieved a rare degree of “social visibility”—a situation, she adds, that would be “eroded” after the war, when freed Southern blacks came north in number. The other outstanding work in Prior's show, *Three Sisters of the Copeland Family* (circa 1854)—a picture done in the painter's folk-art manner—comes out of this same highly particular world. The little girls' father, Samuel Copeland,

who was black (their mother was probably white), was, like William Lawson, a dealer in clothes.

For some viewers, the imposing Copeland picture—it is three feet wide—may be even finer than *William Lawson*. It is the kind of brightly colored and, in its design, pleasingly plain and abrupt folk painting that, especially in the middle decades of the twentieth century, would have been a revelation to eyes attuned to developments in modern art. In the nonchalant way the three girls, in their blue, yellow, and green dresses, fill out the space before the canvas-colored wall behind them, the work somehow made me think of Miró.

What the Copeland picture gives, although not as strongly as William Lawson's portrait, is a sense of sitters with something on their minds. Each of the Copeland children, it dawns on us, has a different inner life. Their differing moods can be felt in the subtlest shifts in the casts of their eyes. These children, like the Lawsons, are real to us to a degree that many of the painter's white sitters are not. Prior was obviously not an artist (or a folk artist) for the ages. But in a few pictures, and perhaps without even intending to do so, he makes a long-gone little world seem quite alive. □

Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont