

February 14, 2013

Death Spoke to a Painter, as Life Did, Too

By KEN JOHNSON

Antique folk art is usually admired for its soulful simplicity and unaffected directness. It seems to reflect a kind of life — traditional, rural, organic — that our hyper-complicated times have left far behind. What, then, are we to make of William Matthew Prior (1806-1873), the subject of a fascinating exhibition, “Artist and Visionary: William Matthew Prior Revealed,” at the [American Folk Art Museum](#)?

Prior has been well known to folk art followers since the 1940s. Scanning the 40 portrait paintings on view, you will observe many in the “American primitive” mode, the seemingly naïve style in which people are described in simplified, flat forms and without the refinements of light, space, detail and texture that technically sophisticated artists use to create lifelike realism. Prior’s paintings of solemn, pie-faced tots, stiffly posed yet animated by some inner mystery, are especially compelling.

Other pictures here look like the work of someone who spent time under European academic tutelage. The painting of Anne Cascoline Merrill Staples depicts a young woman wearing dangling earrings and a stylish dress with voluminous sleeves, who turns her body to the left while gazing dreamily to the right. With drapery behind her drawn back to reveal a distant landscape and crepuscular sky, the painting could be taken for the work of a well-trained, high-society portraitist.

Then there are others in what Prior scholars call his “middling” style, in which he finessed the difference between naïveté and sophistication. A portrait of Lucy Hartshorn shows her seated with her body turned rightward against a flat, brown background. She wears a black dress whose wide neck starts to dip down over one shoulder. This elegant young woman — of a working-class, not aristocratic family — holds a small open book in one hand and looks pensively downward.

With the sitter’s white skin and pink cheeks sharply contrasting with the dark colors, the painting has vivid immediacy. Were it to appear in an exhibition of paintings by Manet and his followers, it would not seem out of place.

Most curious of all is the portrait of William Miller, a handsome middle-aged man in a broad-brimmed hat facing forward and directing a penetrating, enigmatic gaze at the viewer. In one hand he holds a thick red tome with the date 1849 inscribed on its cover.

Miller was a Baptist minister who became famous in his day for predicting the end of the world,

which he and his followers, called Millerites, expected to happen in 1844. Prior had been close to Miller and even produced charts for him illustrating biblical prophecies of apocalypse, which were circulated among the believers.

The date on the book is noteworthy because Miller died in 1849, at a time when Prior was producing (among other things) what he called “spirit effect” portraits. He claimed to be able to envision and paint images of departed souls. The portrait of Miller, made posthumously from memory, if not from supernatural experience, is a striking example.

Prior was also an abolitionist who, at some risk to his reputation, painted portraits of black people. Justly considered among his masterpieces are two beautiful 1843 examples in his “middling” style: Nancy Lawson in a fancy green dress and white bonnet, and her husband, William Lawson, in a sober black suit. The Lawsons, an exceptionally attractive couple, as it seems in the paintings, were Bostonians whom Prior seems to have known through Millerite connections.

While advancing his spiritual and moral ideals via art, Prior pursued a career of remarkable entrepreneurial independence. Born in Bath, Me., he moved to Portland in 1824, where he learned decorative house painting and married the daughter of Alмеры Hamblin, the city’s foremost house painter. During the 1830s he established himself as a painter and a smart businessman who offered portraits in styles priced according to his clients’ budgets.

In 1840 he moved to Boston with his wife and children. There he veered away from the high-art establishment and took up residence in the working-class neighborhood of East Boston. In the ensuing decades he painted many elaborate, whole-figure portraits of children in juvenile finery. He added to his income by making and selling copies of [Gilbert Stuart’s](#) famous portrait of George Washington, including many in the form of reverse painting on glass.

Although Prior did not work for the social upper crust, he was successful enough to buy property in East Boston and build a three-story home that included room for his painting studio. For the duration of his working life, his painting was enough to support himself and his family.

Organized by the art historian Jacquelyn Oak for the [Fenimore Art Museum](#) in Cooperstown, N.Y., where it opened last spring, this exhibition brings to light a professional artist of extraordinary versatility, resourcefulness and democratic sensibility. He was something more than a folk artist in the conventional sense; he could have been a contender in the Europhile high-art world of his day. But he opted for a humbler, more pragmatic path. No doubt there were others like him, but he was certainly one of the best of his kind.

“Artist and Visionary: William Matthew Prior Revealed” continues through May 26 at the American Folk Art Museum, 2 Lincoln Square, Columbus Avenue at 66th Street; (212) 595-9533.



OPEN

MORE IN ART & DESIGN (1 OF

**Art Review: A Time
and Pain, Two Lon,
Ago**

[Read More »](#)