

Painted Parlors

Jacob Maentel's Ornamented Interiors

By Ann Eckert Brown

M

uch can be learned about the lifestyle of Federal period Americans by studying the work of the numerous untutored portrait painters commissioned by their contemporaries, who, proud of their accomplishments in a new nation, desired images of themselves and their possessions for posterity. While filling this need and the need to augment their incomes, these mostly itinerant artisans documented the culture and decorative arts of a most important period in America's development.

For some forty years, the well-documented and prolific folk artist Jacob Maentel recorded a wide range of decorative styles and techniques popular in predominantly German areas of Maryland and Pennsylvania, and later in the frontier states of Indiana and Illinois. Much information can be gleaned by viewing the room interiors and furnishings, and even the dress and reading material, of his subjects.

Maentel was born in October 1778 in an area of Germany called Hesse-Kassel.¹ He was the son of Elizabetha Krieger and Friedrich Maentel, beadle of the principal post office. He grew to manhood in the elegant city of Kassel, a cosmopolitan center of art and culture. When parts of Hesse came under Napoleon's rule late in the eighteenth century,² Maentel found himself drafted into the French army, where he spent seven years, including service as secretary to Napoleon himself. His decision to immigrate to America in 1806 was precipitated by two events, the death of his father in 1805 and, of course, his discharge from the army soon after. Maentel seems to have arrived via the port of Baltimore, where a few records of his advertising as a portrait painter in

**GENERAL SCHUMACKER'S
DAUGHTER**

Jacob Maentel
Probably southeastern
Pennsylvania
c. 1812
Watercolor, gouache, and ink
on paper

14⁷/₁₆ × 9¹/₂"
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, D.C., gift of
Edgar William and Bernice
Chrysler Garbish, 1980.62.54

1807–1808 have survived. The first real proof of his presence in Pennsylvania, however, dates to 1811 when he applied for citizenship at York,³ just in time to enlist in the 2nd Regiment of the Pennsylvania militia, which was preparing for the War of 1812. Maentel must have been comfortable in York, with its predominantly German speaking population including a number of Hessians,⁴ possibly dating to the Revolutionary War period.

During his stint in the militia, Maentel painted several portraits of military officers and their families. Of this group, the portraits of General Schumacker and his daughter, c. 1812, executed in watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper, are perhaps his finest early works.

Fräulein Schumacker is depicted in the parlor of her home. Painted in profile, she appears to be not quite twenty years of age and is dressed and coiffed in the Empire style, a late classical-period style made popular by the Napoleonic Court, subsequently popular in England and then in America by the early nineteenth century. Holding an open book, which appears to be a German bible, she makes a fetching picture posed against a delightfully ornamented interior, featuring a festoon of pink roses at the ceiling level, a delicate guilloche border accenting the room's architectural elements, and faux graining in a style called Pecky Bois ornamenting the dado, or lower third of the room. It is a charming room in the classical style, which was the rage in Europe starting midway through the eighteenth century and which later became America's Federal style.

Walls embellished only with borders, like those seen in Pompeii, were very fashionable beginning about 1789. Paper borders with classical motifs were first imported and later manufactured by numerous domestic wallpaper stainers. Appleton Prentiss of Boston produced a rather elaborate version of the rose-festoon border frieze late in the eighteenth century. Several other American paper stainers are known to have produced different, somewhat simpler versions. Wall stencil artists, who plied their craft up and down



◀
MARIA REX ZIMMERMAN
Jacob Maentel
Schaefferstown, Lebanon
County, Pennsylvania
c. 1828
Watercolor, gouache, ink,
and pencil on paper
17 × 10½"
American Folk Art Museum,
promised gift, P1.2001.14a



▶
CATERINA BICKEL
Jacob Maentel
Jonestown, Lebanon County,
Pennsylvania
c. 1815–1825
Watercolor, gouache, ink,
and pencil on paper
19 × 12"
American Folk Art Museum,
promised gift, P1.2001.13b

John Bigelow Taylor, NYC



Ken Peika

FOUR LENGTHS OF UNCUT FESTOON WALLPAPER BORDER
Probably Appleton Prentiss
Boston, Massachusetts
c. 1800
Block printed on hand-made paper
5½" deep
Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Virginia Hamill, 1955-24-1-a



Detail of stenciled frieze border / artist unknown / Aaron Peck house, Wickford, Rhode Island / c. 1800 / distemper and pigmented whitewash on plaster / 7" deep / photo in author's collection



Section of re-created painted decoration showing designs applied at different times from mid-eighteenth to early nineteenth century / found on kitchen walls / Samuel Rex house, Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania / re-created in 1980s / Catherine Bucher Eckert / photo in author's collection



Original stenciling in David Thompson house, which once stood in Alewife District, Kennebunk, Maine / c. 1820 / attributed to Moses Eaton Senior and/or Moses Eaton Junior / distemper and pigmented whitewash on plaster / Collection of The Brick Store Museum, Kennebunk, Maine, Collection 29, Barry Family, Box 1, f.19

America's eastern seaboard, perhaps as early as 1790, were greatly influenced by wallpaper when choosing designs for their stenciled wall decorations. The very popular rose festoon was converted to a technique by several of these artists said to be working in the classical genre of stencil decoration. It was used to ornament the plaster walls of numerous homes of all social and economic levels throughout New England, with isolated sightings in New York State, Long Island, and Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. With their portfolios of classical stencils such as urns, fans, belle flowers, swags, festoons, etc., stencil artists often sought new commissions, traveling by water using the coastal sailing vessels connecting

early seaport towns and the barges that traversed the large rivers.

In Wickford, Rhode Island, a bustling colonial seaport, two stenciled versions of the rose-festoon frieze and a stenciled guilloche border were luckily preserved under wallpaper in a group of late eighteenth-century homes. The Robert Potter house (1779), the Samuel Carr house (1797), and the Aaron Peck house (1785) all retain stenciling dating to 1800 or before, which is of the classical border type.

In northwestern Vermont, the parlor of the Samuel Rich Tavern, built in 1805 in North Montpelier, retained a stenciled copy of the Appleton Prentiss wallpaper border under a thick wallpaper covering. It is

such a precise copy that, if viewed by an untrained eye, it might seem to be a "ghost" or transfer of wallpaper, which once covered the plaster substrate. It is definitely stenciling. These are but a few of the numerous sightings of the very popular rose-festoon stenciled border.

Although no stenciling in the classical genre has been found in the mid-Atlantic states of Pennsylvania and Maryland as yet, wall stenciling of a different type by at least three itinerant stencil artists has been discovered in this area. It is possible that a stenciler using classical borders also visited the area, or perhaps at least the Schumacker house.

In the painting of General Schumacker's daughter, the decora-

tive borders adorning the wall behind Miss Schumacker could very well be painted, probably with the use of a stencil plate. Certainly, they depict popular wallpaper motifs, which were freely borrowed by wall stencilers. Short of finding General Schumacker's house with its stenciling still intact, which is a very unlikely scenario, this mystery must remain unsolved. In addition, the wood graining on the wainscoting is most certainly Pecky Bois, or hand painted. All types of faux graining, realistic and fanciful, were a particularly popular decorative feature in the mid-Atlantic area starting in the colonial period and remaining in favor well into the Victorian era.

About 1819, Maentel married Catherine Weaver of northern Maryland—she was about seventeen years old and Maentel was just forty. By 1820 they were living in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania, where for some twenty years he painted numerous portraits of mostly Germanic families posed in rooms with brightly patterned walls, grained wainscoting, painted chairs and mirrors, and multi-colored flat-woven carpets covering the floors. The late Windsor chairs, either dark wood grained or solid yellow, have top slats decorated with either floral or scenic motifs. The looking glasses, many of the split-spindle architectural type, are gilded with reverse-painted tablets depicting sea or landscapes at the top⁵—a delightful window into the interior decoration in an area of Pennsylvania where Germanic culture and artistic foundations had been firmly established for three generations at the time of Maentel's recording.

Known as Pennsylvania Dutch Country, the German American counties that radiate out from Philadelphia—the port of entry for most emigrants from Germany—were areas of high artistic activity, with numerous furniture makers and painters,⁶ *fraktur* artists, potters, carvers of wood and stone, embroiderers, weavers, and perhaps glass painters, all using techniques and designs remembered from Germany. Any of the furniture decorators would have had the artistic know-how and access to oil-based paint materials needed to execute the decoration

depicted on the furniture and the graining on the wainscoting seen in Maentel's interiors. The focus of this study, however, is the technique or techniques used to achieve the colorful patterned walls behind many of his subjects, such as Caterina Bickle, painted 1815–1825, and Maria Rex Zimmerman, painted c. 1828, both in Lebanon County. Bickel and Zimmerman are similarly posed facing three-quarter forward, as were most of Maentel's portraits during his middle period, dating roughly from 1820 to 1838.

It could be wallpaper, of course, because paper with small evenly spaced floral motifs, known as "sprig" style,⁷ was made in America before 1789 and was widely disseminated. It was imported from Philadelphia and sold in Schaefferstown, Lebanon County, as early as 1800, according to a daily ledger kept by storekeeper Samuel Rex.⁸ It would have been well within the price range of those who could afford a high-style gilded Hepplewhite looking glass,⁹ such as that in the Bickel portrait. Considering the strong history of Germanic affinity for the painted surface, however, it is possible that the simple floral motifs depicted by Maentel were applied directly to colored plaster walls using a type of water-based paint called distemper,¹⁰ the paint of choice of most wall painters and wallpaper stainers during the Federal period.

Numerous examples of painted interiors have been recorded in the Lebanon County area, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century and continuing well into the nineteenth. In Schaefferstown, the residence of the aforementioned storekeeper—Samuel Rex, who was Maria Rex Zimmerman's uncle—has remnants of four layers of white-on-red distemper decorations on the same kitchen wall, the earliest possibly dating to before 1750. The mid-eighteenth-century Peter Wentz house (now a museum) in nearby Montgomery County has at least two layers of hand-painted decoration re-created throughout. In basic black, white, and red distemper, the simple circles and crescents suggest the colonial New England-style decoration often described by Nina Fletcher Little in her scholarly writ-

ings. The Bechtel house, built in 1816 in Berks County, continues the tradition, with fragments of free-hand decoration in blue, yellow, red, and dark green-black throughout the house, with multiple layers in several areas. It is clear that the tradition of painted interiors, which started in Germany, remained popular in the New World well into the Maentel period.

Paint materials were readily available in the bustling German market towns encircling Philadelphia. By 1825 Maentel was buying his supplies from the Rex store,¹¹ now owned by Samuel's younger brother, Abraham. In 1826 he purchased Prussian Blue and Chromic Yellow pigments, and sheets of paper.¹² He also purchased vast amounts of honey and sugar and other confections, reportedly for his wife, who ran a cake shop. Perhaps the very popular barter system helped pay for these supplies, because during this period Maentel received commissions to paint two portraits of Abraham's daughter, Maria Zimmerman, one of his son-in-law, Peter Zimmerman, plus members of other related families such as the Buchers and the Valentines.

If painted, the wall decoration seen in the Bickel and Zimmerman portraits could have been achieved by several techniques—free hand, stenciling, or something called "potato stamp," which seems to be of American invention, since potatoes did not become popular in German American communities until late in the eighteenth century (but of course, any large root vegetable such as a turnip would have worked just as well). This quote concerning nineteenth-century Germanic homemaking mentions potato printing: "As whitewashed walls gave a cold bare look to a room, the walls were tinted pale pink, blue or buff—some people, in their love of beauty, added a figure to their walls. After the room had its coat of wash, they took a large potato, cut it through the center, cut a conventional figure on it, then dipping it in white-wash touched the walls at intervals, making a figured wall."¹³

A daisy, similar to that depicted by Maentel in the Bickel house of Jonestown, is among the original designs retained in the Rex

house. When viewed closely, this daisy is definitely produced with a mechanical aid, either stamp or stencil, and is not free hand. Another original motif from the Rex house, a rather primitive four-leaf clover, matches one found stenciled in a house that once stood in Stewartstown, York County. It was part of a stenciled scheme found on top of earlier nineteenth-century wall stenciling. The guilloche border depicted by Maentel above the dado in many of his paintings was also found in the Stewartstown house, an indication that in-house potato stamping, and free-hand painting or stenciling by itinerant artists, can be found in the same house and occasionally on the same wall, more often than not, under many layers of wallpaper.

The body of information on the paint-versus-wallpaper debate is inconclusive, but it does strongly suggest that at least a portion of the patterned walls depicted by Maentel in eastern Pennsylvania were actually painted and not papered, or perhaps of Maentel's invention.

No guesswork is required to identify the type of wall decoration that is behind Rebeckah Jaquess of Poseyville, Indiana, painted by Maentel in 1841. It is clearly recognizable as New England-style wall stenciling of a type attributed by Janet Waring¹⁴ in her groundbreaking 1937 book to America's most documented wall stencilers, the father and son team of Moses Eaton Senior (1753–1833) and Moses Eaton Junior (1796–1886). They worked mostly in New England during the first half of the nineteenth century, but it has been often suggested that Eaton Junior stenciled his way west sometime after his father's death.

Jaquess is posed in the family's best parlor seated on a green bamboo Windsor chair with a writing arm, which supports an open bible written in English. She is in front of a wall decorated above and below the chair rail with red, green, and blue-black stencil designs on a vivid blue wall. It's a lighter blue than that seen in the Bickel portrait, but is no doubt made with the same Prussian Blue pigment. The woodwork appears to be salmon pink; there is probably a tint of minimum (red lead) and, on

the floor, the familiar woven carpet is seen. Jaquess was seventy-nine years old when she was painted, and is posed full-faced, as were most of Maentel's later portraits.

The Jaquess clan had resided in Indiana for close to twenty-five years before the arrival of the Maentel family, which by then included Jacob, Catherine, and four children. Reportedly, they were on their way to Texas but, because of illness, stopped in Indiana to seek assistance from an old friend from Schaefferstown, the Reverend Jacob Schnee, who had come west in 1827 hoping to establish a religious commune. Schnee assisted his friends by finding a farm for them to lease in Poseyville, and work for the sons. Not surprisingly, as Poseyville was an agricultural community where money was scarce, Maentel again used his art as a commodity, exchanging portraits for much needed goods for his family. Here Jacob Maentel resided until his death in 1863.

When the signed and dated portraits of Jonathan and Rebeckah Jaquess, considered the best of Maentel's late work, were purchased by the Abby Aldrich Folk Art Center, Williamsburg, Virginia, in the 1960s, the paintings and their creator caught the attention of folk art historians such as Mary C. Black and Nina Fletcher Little. Since then, numerous portraits by Jacob Maentel have come to light, establishing him as one of America's foremost nineteenth-century folk painters.

In 1975, when the Jaquess house was about to be razed, Historic New Harmony,¹⁵ believing that the stenciling was preserved under wallpaper, accepted the house, in exchange for its removal, as a gift from the last Jaquess family member to own portraits and homestead. Once the house was transported to a field outside the nearby museum, Indiana preservation architect Rose A. Broz began the tedious work of

stripping thirteen layers of paper from the parlor walls. Remarkably, she found remnants of the stenciled designs recorded by Maentel more than a century and a half ago. The actual designs were the same but were arranged a bit differently and of slightly different proportion; the colors were appropriately aged variations of those used by Maentel, and



REBECKAH JAQUESS

Jacob Maentel
Poseyville, Indiana
1841

Watercolor, gouache, pen,
and pencil on paper
17 × 11½"

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk
Art Museum, Colonial
Williamsburg Foundation,
Williamsburg, Virginia,
1959.300.7

all designs proved similar to those used by the Eatons, either compared to actual stencils in the Eaton paint box¹⁶ in the collections of the Society of the Preservation of New England Antiquities, Boston, or stenciled on the walls of numerous New England houses, such as the Thompson house, which once stood in Alewife, Maine. Maentel had depicted an almost photographic image of the Jaquess parlor, including the unusual writing arm of the Windsor chair and

Rebeckah's reading glasses, both of which have been located and are now displayed in the parlor. An added perk for Broz and the museum was the discovery of stenciled fragments in the front stair hall.

Once installed in the museum, the parlor was restenciled, relying on Eaton stencils to interpret incomplete original decoration. In the hall, however, where only a fragmented image of a pineapple was discernable, most of the stenciled scheme was invented using compatible Eaton designs. Thus stenciling by Moses Eaton Junior was re-created as possible evidence of his journey west in the 1830s.

The discovery and re-creation of New England-style stenciling of a type made popular by America's best-documented stencil artist is a great accomplishment by numerous preservationists, and a remarkable resource for researchers and connoisseurs of American material history and decorative arts—all thanks to Jacob Maentel's extremely accurate and charming painted images of the culture and domestic life of the American frontier. ★

Ann Eckert Brown has been researching and teaching eighteenth- and nineteenth-century decorative painting techniques since the 1960s. Included in her restoration commissions is the painted interior of a Gothic Revival chapel in Newport, Rhode Island. Her work has been exhibited widely and featured in Yankee magazine and Early American Life, which named her Craftsman of the Year in 1993. She has presented numerous programs on American wall stenciling, including those at Old Sturbridge Village, Massachusetts, and the Farmer's Museum in Cooperstown, New York. Brown resides with her author-historian husband, Henry A.L. Brown, on the historic Spring Green Farm, overlooking Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay.

Notes:

- 1 Mary Lou Fleming and Marianne Ruch, "Jacob Maentel: A Second Look," *Pennsylvania Folklife* (Autumn 1991), p. 3.
- 2 About 1797 much of Hesse became part of Napoleon's military district called Westphalia.
- 3 Mary C. Black, *Simplicity, A Grace: Jacob Maentel in Indiana* (Indiana: Evansville Museum of Arts & Science, 1989), p. 14.
- 4 James McClure, "Nine Months in York Town," (Pennsylvania: *York Daily Record*, 2001), p. 113.
- 5 It is impossible to determine precisely which Pennsylvanian German-type reverse paintings were painted in America and which were painted in Germany. It is thought that many were produced at glass factories in Wistarberg, New Jersey, not far from Philadelphia, and at

the Stiegel glassworks in Mannheim, York County. Source: Mildred Lee Ward, *Reverse Paintings on Glass*, exhibition catalog, 1978, the Helen Foreman Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, p. 47.

6 Cynthia V.A. Schaffer and Susan Klein, *American Painted Furniture 1790-1880* (New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 1997), p. 135.

7 Richard C. Nyland, *Wallpaper in New England* (Boston: Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, 1986), p. 57.

8 In 1800 Samuel Rex sold two yards of flowered paper to Frederick Garret for 1 shilling, 8 pence. Garret also bought two looking glasses for 16 shillings, 6 pence. Source: Samuel Rex ledger #11, Historic Schaefferstown Collections.

9 In 1799 Samuel Rex sold one looking glass to Elizabeth Dickman for 8 shillings, 6 pence. Source: Samuel Rex ledger #10, Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Library Collections, Delaware.

10 Distemper is a water-soluble paint made by dissolving dry hide glue in warm water. Color pigment is added to form a paste, which is thinned to spreading consistency with water. Of British origin, it is the paint favored by most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century wall decorators, and is very similar to gouache but more suitable for large areas.

11 In April 1826 Jacob Maentel purchased two paintbrushes, one ounce each of Prussian Blue and Chromic Yellow pigments (the blue cost 10 cents and the yellow 6 cents). Source: Abraham Rex daybook #71, Collections of Historic Schaefferstown.

12 In October 1826 Maentel bought twelve sheets of paper. Source: Abraham Rex daybook #72, Collections of Historic Schaefferstown.

13 Mary L. Roedel, "When Grandmamma Was Young," paper read before the Lebanon Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, 1925, Collections of the Lebanon County Historical Society, Lebanon, Pennsylvania. Brought to the author's attention by Abe and Nancy Roan of Bechtelville, Pennsylvania.

14 Janet Waring, *Early American Stencils* (New York: William R. Scott, 1937), p. 78.

15 New Harmony, Indiana, is the site of two of America's earliest utopian communities. The earliest was established by George Rapp, founder of a German religious group called the Harmony Society. He and his followers left their homes in Harmonie, Pennsylvania, in 1814 to settle a much larger tract in southeastern Indiana. Historic New Harmony Inc. interprets and preserves this unique history through individual properties, of which the Jaquess parlor and stair hall represent the 1840s period.

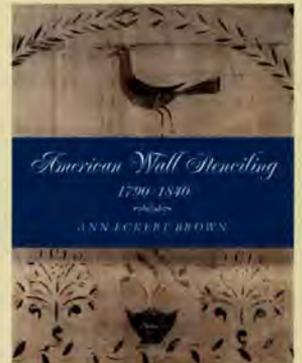
16 While researching her book of American wall stenciling, Janet Waring found the Eaton stencil box tucked away in the attic of Junior's home in Dublin, New Hampshire. It contained eighty worn brushes and seventy-eight stencil plates that made up forty designs. Upon Waring's death in 1941, her sister gave the box to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA), Boston, Massachusetts.

American Wall Stenciling, 1790-1840

By Ann Eckert Brown

For today's owner of an antique house, the discovery of an early stenciled wall—even a fragment of one—is a revelatory glimpse into the past. In post-Revolutionary War America, walls painted with intricate stenciled designs were the decoration of choice for a surprisingly large number of home owners. Successive generations of wallpaper, which became increasingly more affordable after the industrial revolution, covered stenciled walls, obliterating some designs and preserving others.

American Wall Stenciling, 1790-1840, by Ann Eckert Brown and published by University Press of New England, will be available in December. With a text enriched by 150 color images, Brown makes fresh stylistic connections among more than two centuries of designs, artists, regions, and houses, and ties together the shared destinies of the families, descendants, artists, wall rescuers, and restorers who lived with, created, and preserved this beautiful art form.



"Brown gives us a genealogy of design relationships and similarities in shapes—leaves, festoons, flowers, and fans—as well as the more abstract record of their juxtapositions, density, size, and spacing. Her absolute familiarity with the myriad variations of folk and classical designs, as well as their migrations, and her ability to place them in context, is a great advantage to those of us who are glad to know about what remains of these bright, lively images from the quickly receding American past."

—Mimi Handler, former editor of *Early American Life*

This beautiful and informative 224-page, 8½ × 11" clothbound edition includes 250 illustrations (150 in color), and sells for \$60. Available in December 2002 at the American Folk Art Museum's Book and Gift Shop, at 45 West 53rd Street, and at the museum's Eva and Morris Feld Gallery Shop, at 2 Lincoln Square (Columbus Avenue, between 65th and 66th Streets). Museum members receive a 10 percent discount. For mail order information, please call 212/265-1040, ext. 124.