

# Jacob Maentel:

Born in Kassel, Germany in 1763, Jacob Maentel, the itinerant artist and gentleman of unique talents and far-reaching vision, practiced many careers in the course of his lifetime. He was a physician, a secretary as well as a soldier under Napoleon, also serving during the War of 1812, a farmer and lastly, best remembered, an itinerant limner. Maentel's distinctive portraiture style sets him apart from other Pennsylvania limners who also employed the ubiquitous profile. His work imbues the faces of his subjects with vitality, aptly capturing the likenesses, even if the results were not always particularly flattering. The continual presence of diagonal design, specific facial and body characteristics, oriental treatment of foliage and detailed setting in some early profiles and many later frontal portraits, should put to rest the controversy among scholars, dealers and art collectors regarding the possibility of more than one hand executing these paintings. Maentel's prolific body of work in America spanned more than half a century; the majority of portraits were painted in Southeastern Pennsylvania (Lancaster, York, Dauphin, Berks and Lebanon counties), beginning around 1807 and extending through the next three decades. It was later that the artist moved westward to

## PORTRAITS OF A PROUD PAST

by Valerie Redler



### On the Trail of Jacob Maentel . . .

How many of us are fortunate enough to relive a moment in history? That opportunity presented itself last March as I flew from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania en route to New Harmony, Indiana, imagining the westward path of the nineteenth century gentleman farmer, Jacob Maentel, a local portrait painter known for his talent and truthfulness in rendering his subjects.

Staying with a descendant whose late husband, Thomas F. Mumford, Sr., was Maentel's great-great grandson provided access to a treasure

trove of family papers and photographs. Visiting the Maentel home and gravesite, as well as meeting friends and relatives of the Jaquess, Cooper and Faul families whom he painted, gave me a deeper understanding of the life of the painter. The stenciled parlor where Maentel painted Mrs. Jaquess in 1841 was already familiar, and as I watched Mrs. Mumford feeding the horses, goats and dogs on her farm, the image of the monumental oil on canvas farm scene by Maentel now on display at the Workingmen's Institute came to life.

**Possible Self Portrait.** *Jacob Maentel. Womelsdorf, Pennsylvania. 1828. Watercolor on paper. 7½ x 6½". Courtesy of the Historical Society of Berks County, Reading, Pennsylvania.*

New Harmony, Indiana and its environs, where he worked for at least twelve more years. Records at the Workingmen's Institute in New Harmony should answer the previously unresolved question of birth and death dates:

Old man Mantle, one of Bonaparte's old soldiers died today [April 28, 1863] he was near 100 years old, born June 15, 1763.

It should be noted that variations in the spelling of Maentel appear throughout the text, in keeping with their original state. Reasons for inconsistencies are due to phonetic spelling, misspelling, anglicization of the name and even the possible inebriated state of a census taker! The German spelling of Mäntel is synonymous with Maentel; other versions are shown as Maental, Mentle, Mentel, Mendel and Mantell. The anglicized version of Mental was used by the family in Indiana and is also the presently desired pronunciation of the descendants.

Walking through Harmony Township's Maple Hill Cemetery revealed Maentel's small rectangular gravestone, devoid of any dates and initialed J.M.; it is surrounded by that of his daughters, Amelia (1828-1908) and Louisa (1822-1901), and also by Louisa's husband, Thomas Mumford,



**Photograph of Louisa Mental Mumford.** (1822-1901). New Harmony, Indiana. ca. 1890-1900. Collection of Mrs. Thomas F. Mumford, Sr.

Sr., with whom Maentel lived out his remaining years. Three other children, William, Wilhemina and Frederick, are buried nearby. An imposing granite monument boldly displays the MENTAL-MUMFORD names on adjacent surfaces. The Indiana Federal Census of 1850 lists Jacob Mentle as ninety-five years old (incorrect age) and living with his daughter Louisa, son-in-law Thomas Mumford, a successful merchant and farmer, and their three children: Mary (Thrall), Amelia (Hill) and Thomas. Advanced age was not the only reason Jacob Maentel no longer was master of his own house; a newspaper article in the *New Harmony Advertiser* dated Saturday, October 2, 1858 reports a devastating fire.

On Wednesday morning last, about 3 o'clock, the house, belonging to Col. R. Owen, situated on his farm about a mile from town, was discovered to be on fire. The occupants, Mr. Mentle and family. . . barely escaped with their lives, losing everything they possessed. . .!

Notes from great-granddaughter Louise Hill add that "to his great sorrow," Maentel's papers of discharge from the army were burned, together with miniature portraits of his seven or nine sisters which had been brought to America. However, a small, bound, medical book of remedies and medication, a "Materia Medica," handwritten in German and Latin, seems to have been salvaged from that fire, for it was singed. A recipe for "Mental Salve" (consisting of a mixture of lard, white

and red lead, beeswax, camphor, oil of spike and oil of stone), passed down in the family, may also come from that book.

Nevertheless, it is not as physician but as itinerant limner that Jacob Maentel is best remembered; the Indiana Federal Census of 1850 lists the occupation of Jacob Mentle as Painter. He is known for painting portraits of friends, relatives and everyday acquaintances, immortalizing their self-esteem and newly acquired success as a record for posterity, in addition to the more practical birth and baptismal certificates and marriage records. As J. Bennett Nolan so aptly stated: "What these strolling craftsmen sold was vanity. . ."<sup>2</sup>

Until now it was thought that Maentel and his family arrived in Indiana in 1836; however, evidence suggests that the year 1838 is more likely, due to several factors: the existence of a birth and baptismal portrait of *Johannes Heinrich Meyer* painted in Maentel's hand on June 14, 1837 in Schaeffers-town, Pennsylvania; a newspaper obituary of Maentel's daughter Louisa, born in Harrisburg on March 2, 1822, telling of her arrival from Pennsylvania at the age of sixteen; and finally, records from the Posey County Assessor's Book of 1838 indicating that Jacob Mental owned personal property worth

**Birth Certificate of Johannes Heinrich Meyer.**  
*Jacob Maentel. Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania.*  
 1837. Ink and watercolor on paper.  
 12¼ x 7½". Private Collection.

one hundred dollars, with a tax of thirteen dollars.<sup>3</sup> New Harmony, however, was not Maentel's original destination; he and his family were head toward Texas when illness occurred, causing them to stop in New Harmony and seek aid from their friends, the Schnees, whom they had known in Pennsylvania. Mr. Schnee took Catherine and the Maentel children to the area later known as Pelhamtown where he found employment for her sons.<sup>4</sup> The identification of Mr. Schnee is finally complete; the Posey County Cemetery records yield the name of Jacob Schnee (1784-1838), a former Lutheran minister from Lebanon, Pennsylvania who brought settlers into the Owen-Macluria Community in 1827.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, Jacob Maentel's active painting years around Stewartsville and New Harmony span at least twelve years from around 1838 to 1850 and possibly later; the last known dated portrait is *Jacob Frederick Keck*, done in 1846.

The question about Maentel's possible time spent in Baltimore and the new identification of his wife need to be addressed, due to the scarcity of information that is known about his early years. Although the 1807 and 1818 city directories of Baltimore list a Jacob Mattell as portrait painter,<sup>6</sup> the connection remains questionable. To date there are no known Baltimore portraits



executed by Maentel, yet a Maryland link does appear to exist through marriage to his wife, Catherine. This fact is revealed by new information stated in the family notes of Louise Hill, indicating that he married Catherine Weaver of Baltimore, whose mother's maiden name was Gutt, as told to her by a relative. Until now, Maentel was said to have married a Catherine Gutt, of Alsace-Lorraine. It is known that Catherine Weaver was confirmed in 1818 in the First German Evangelical Church (Reformed) of Frederick, Maryland, married Jacob Maentel and moved to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania where a daughter, Louisa, was born on March 2, 1822 and a son, William, several years later. Louisa's birthplace had also been questioned as to whether it was Pennsylvania or Baltimore. Two other children were born in Schaefferstown according to church records from St. Luke's Evangelical Church; Wilhemina Mendel on April 12, 1826 and Amelia on November 30, 1828.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the parish register includes names of many of the subjects he painted, such as Peter and Maria Rex Zimmerman, Christian and Mary Bucher and mem-

bers of the Bomberger, Wolfersperger, Haak, Mays and Zartmann families.

Maentel's prolific years as a traveling limner began sometime in the early nineteenth century, but new information indicates that the group portrait thought to be his earliest, *Schoolmaster and Boys*, should no longer be dated circa 1800. A re-evaluation of the boys' clothing indicates a later date, of at least 1810. Furthermore, the smooth, mask-like face of the schoolmaster has been called a "youthful, halting attempt at portraiture,"<sup>8</sup> unlike any of Maentel's usual facial characteristics. This discrepancy now holds a more plausible explanation. Close study has revealed that an extensive replacement was made to the upper half of the composition, including the schoolmaster's face, at an unknown date prior to acquisition by The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center. Nonetheless, it should still be considered one of the first examples of the artist's profile and frontal stance within an interior setting.<sup>9</sup>

The earliest portrait that I have seen is the profile of *Mary Koss*, dated 1807, with her name and date inscribed in the lower right quadrant; more dated profiles emerge from 1808 through 1811. In addition, portraits of military heroes appear around the time of the War of 1812; the proud profile of *General*

**Grandmother Hartman.** Reverse inscription:  
Painted on August 31, 1827 by Jacob Mäntel.



*Schumacker* (ca. 1812) from Lancaster County is set amidst swirls of cannon smoke as his troops advance against the British with muskets and sabers; *Major William Rees and his Daughter, Mary* (ca. 1814) are posed before a typical Pennsylvania landscape of rolling hills dotted with bushes, trees and houses.

It should be noted that Maentel's familiarity with and interest in military portraits coincides with his own involvement in the War of 1812, when he joined the Second Regiment, Second Brigade of the Pennsylvania Militia in Captain Thomas Huston's company, under command of Lieutenant Colonel John Lutz at York. Muster and receipt rolls show that Jacob Mantell of Lancaster served for six months from September 1, 1814 to March 1, 1815 and earned six dollars.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike many academic artists, itinerant limners did not always sign their work, but Jacob Maentel signed four of his more than two hundred portraits. The earliest and only known signed profile is *Lady with Reticule* (August 31, 1827), signed on the reverse in German manuscript "von Jacob Mäntel." The woman can now be identified as Grandmother Hartman, whose name, written in English, was found by the present owner on a separate backing behind the portrait. In December, 1965



**Grandmother Hartman.** Jacob Maentel. Pennsylvania. 1827. Watercolor on paper. 9 x 6½". Private Collection.

when *Art in America* published a photograph of this unidentified and signed profile portrait in a short letter to the Editor by R.H. Wood, its very existence served to reconfirm Mary Black's successful re-attribution of a large body of profiles to Maentel, previously thought to have been painted by the printer, Samuel Endredi Stettinius.<sup>11</sup>

Jacob Maentel's distinctive style is consistent throughout his many profile and frontal portraits, although there are those who think that more than one other artist had a hand in producing works attributed to Maentel. As Charles F. Hummel states:

The number and variety of watercolors attributed to him suggest that at least two or three Pennsylvania artists may have been responsible for their execution.<sup>12</sup>

It is my contention, however, that the hand of one single artist is clearly visible, a theory reinforced by my discovery of a frontal counterpart of the identified profile of *Maria Rex*, the great-granddaughter of the founder of Schaefferstown, with a companion portrait of her husband, *Peter Zimmerman*. Photographs of both portraits were published in a 1974 exhibition catalogue of the Allentown Art Museum. The limner is only identified as "The Schaefferstown Artist"; he is assuredly Jacob Maentel. In both the frontal and the profile por-



**Maria Rex (Zimmerman).** Jacob Maentel. Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania. 1827-1830. Watercolor on paper. 16½ x 10½". Private Collection.



**Maria Rex.** Jacob Maentel. Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania. 1827-1830. Watercolor on paper. 12 x 7½". The Howard and Catherine Feldman Collection. Photo: John Kress Bachman.

traits of Maria she is wearing the same dress. In the outdoor profile the collar is more opaque; she wears a diaphanous bonnet, holds an open book and stands on a small hill. The crude rendition of her outlined hand is seen in other profiles, such as *Grandmother Hartman*, and is more refined in Maria's frontal stance. The profile's carefully delineated facial characteristics include a heavy eyebrow over a thickly fringed eyelash with shadowing under the eye, an emphasized nostril, filled in upper lip area and pronounced chin line. I believe that the profile's previous dating of circa 1815 should be corrected to the years between 1827 and 1830, as her birth date of 1804 would have made her only eleven years old at the time of this sitting. Also, Maria and Peter were married around 1827.

The rather elaborate interior of Maria's frontal portrait (ca. 1827-1830) shows her standing with her hand resting on the back of a yellow bamboo-turned Windsor chair, its strange, elongated shadows repeated under her tiny feet and adjacent table. The stenciled wall of Chinese inspired design is separated from the lower marbled pattern by an oval diaper design above the chair rail: this type of design is also seen in *General Schumacker's Daughter* (ca. 1812).



Additional stylistic features appearing in the frontal portrait of Maria Rex include exaggerated, deepset eyelids, stylized nose, lip demarcation, shaded lower jaw, inverted wing shape within the outlined ear and detailed hand, all of which occur in varying degrees in Maentel's three signed frontals of *Seated Man with a Book*, *Johannes Zartmann* and *Jonathan Jaquess*.

The half portrait of *Seated Man with a Book* in a three-quarter pose is quite fascinating; the subject contemplates a verse from Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*. The lower right portion of the book identifies the picture as being painted by Jacob Mäntel in "Wommelsdorf" on April 20, 1828. Could this possibly be a self-portrait? The Maentel family sees the same deepset eyes, prominent bone structure and wide forehead in the photograph of Maentel's daughter, Louisa Mental Mumford, who died at seventy-nine years of age.

A Taufschein, a birth and baptismal certificate from nearby Jackson Township in Lebanon County of *Johannes Zartmann*, dated November 13, 1828, successfully bridges the gap between Fraktur form and portrait painting by expanding the means of record keeping. According to Mary Black: "Maentel widened the horizon of traditional Fraktur painting to include small scale portraits of his neighbors and relations." Historian Frederick Weiser also states that they comprise a separate

**Johannes Zartmann.** *Jacob Maentel.* Lebanon County, Pennsylvania. 1828. Ink and watercolor on paper. 9<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>". Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch.

and more specialized category of Fraktur.<sup>13</sup>

The fourth and only signed portrait from Poseyville, Indiana is signed in a slanted cursive style "Jacob Maentel fecit" and is of a well-known local Revolutionary War hero, *Jonathan Jaquess*, who was painted in 1841 at the age of eighty-eight. He was a Minuteman who served on land and sea for five years, including a tour of duty under General George Washington. He later sailed out to sea on the "Baltimore Packet," a brig "mounting fourteen twelve pounders" that is thought to be the full-rigged ship in this portrait, according to a Jaquess descendant. The scar on the lower portion of Mr. Jaquess' face was caused by a saber cut during the Battle of White Plains. His third wife is shown in a companion portrait, *Rebekah Fraser Rankin Jaquess*, where she is seated in a green, left Writing Arm Windsor chair in front of a light blue stenciled wall. A New Harmony architect, Rose Broz, who removed about eleven layers of wallpaper in the Jaquess house to reveal the faded stenciled walls, is convinced they are authentic Moses Eaton patterns.<sup>14</sup> Art historian Nina Fletcher Little also believes the three border designs may be Eaton's.<sup>15</sup>

A highlight of my research and trip to New Harmony was seeing two unsigned oil on canvas firescreens at

**Mrs. Jonathan Jaquess (Rebeckah Fraser Rankin).** *Jacob Maentel. Poseyville, Indiana. 1841. Watercolor on paper. 17¾ x 11¾".* Courtesy of The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Williamsburg, Virginia.

the Workingmen's Institute which provide evidence of Maentel's continued growth as an artist and add a new dimension to his career. Though the medium has changed from watercolor to oil, and a much larger canvas is used, continuity exists in his treatment of similar elements. A sailing ship in the *Seascape* resembles the "Baltimore Packet" in the portrait of *Jonathan Jaquess*. The lower stone house with white framed windows and roofline also appears in the *Farm Landscape* and in the portrait of the *Elder Mr. Faul*. Diagonal shading in the exterior windows has its interior counterpart in the portraits of *Mrs. Jonathan Jaquess* and others. Maentel's use of diagonals is unmistakable, extending to overall design of subjects and objects: slanted shadows, books, hats, chairs, desks and even dress fabric patterns. His technique of outlined clustered leaves, usually depicted in lower bushes, as in the portraits of *General Schumacker* (ca. 1812) and *Johannes Heinrich Meyer* (1837), is used in the tree foliage of the upper quadrants of the *Seascape*.



**Seascape.** *Jacob Maentel. New Harmony, Indiana. 1840-50. Oil on canvas firescreen. 33¾ x 47¾".* Courtesy of The New Harmony Workingmen's Institute, New Harmony, Indiana. Gift of Mrs. Mary Mumford Thrall. Photo: Robert Bryant.



**Farm Landscape.** *Jacob Maentel. New Harmony, Indiana. 1840-50. Oil on canvas firescreen. 36 x 41".* Courtesy of The New Harmony Workingmen's Institute, New Harmony, Indiana. Gift of Mrs. Mary Mumford Thrall. Photo: Robert Bryant.



Unfortunately, these portraits were not always held in the highest regard by their owners. Family tradition tells that Grandmother Mumford lined her drawers with Maentel's portraits and eventually burned them! A member of the Faul family remembers the paintings lining the bottom of a cherry chest. And according to notes from the Cooper family, whose seven portraits were painted in payment of a debt, "The boys were so outraged with the results . . . that the pictures were hidden away in a trunk to be forever suppressed." They surfaced seventy years later when a great-granddaughter found them. The paintings are now hanging in the home of her daughter, who says: "I think Jacob Maentel would be amazed at all the activity his paintings have produced—and the Cooper boys even more!" The culmination of



this "activity" will be a major retrospective of Jacob Maentel's works at the Museum of American Folk Art.

A search is still underway for portraits painted by Jacob Maentel and further information on his life and travels. Kindly write to Valerie Redler, the Museum of American Folk Art, 49 West 53rd Street, New York, New York 10019.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Local History File (New Harmony Workingmen's Institute); Richard Owen is the son of Robert Owen, founder of the Owenite community in New Harmony.
2. J. Bennett Nolan, "Pennsylvania Sunday Best," *American Heritage*, 8, no. 3, April 1957, p. 48.
3. Local History File (New Harmony Workingmen's Institute), assisted by Josephine Elliott.
4. Mumford family notes from the First Agricultural Fair, 1859.
5. Carrol O. Cox, *Posey County Cemetery Records 1814-1979*, Evansville, Indiana, 1979, p. 117.
6. Mary Black, "Jacob Maentel," *American Folk Painters of Three Centuries*, eds. Jean Lipman and Tom Armstrong (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1980), p. 117.
7. *St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania, Parish Register, 1763-1834, trans. Pastor Frederick Weiser.
8. Mary Black, "Jacob Maentel," p. 123.

**Jonathan Jaquess.** *Jacob Maentel. Poseyville, Indiana. 1841. Watercolor on paper. 17 7/8 x 11 1/4".* Courtesy of The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Williamsburg, Virginia.

9. Curator Work Sheet, accession no. 47.301.1, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Williamsburg, Virginia. "New areas not original to portrait" were noted in June 1978 at A.A.R.F.A.C.
10. "Muster Rolls of the Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of 1812-1814," *Pennsylvania Archives*, 2nd ser., vol. 12, eds. John B. Lina and William H. Egle, M.D. (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Lane S. Hart, 1880), pp. 228-229; "Soldiers of the War of 1812-14, Pennsylvania Volunteers," 6th ser., vol. 8, pp. 1132-1133.
11. R. H. Wood, "Attribution," *Art in America*, 53, December 1965, p. 138.
12. Charles F. Hummel, "The Pennsylvania Germans: A Celebration of Their Arts, 1683-1850," *Antiques*, 122, no. 6, December 1982, p. 1253.
13. Mary Black, "American Folk Painting," *How to Know American Folk Art*, ed. Ruth Andrews (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977), p. 95; Frederick Weiser, "Pennsylvania German Folk Art," pp. 136-137.
14. Local History File, newspaper article "John and Rebekah Jaquess . . . Pioneers"; Nils Kildegaard, "Tavern Street Museum to Re-create Rooms of Historical Jaquess House of Poseyville," *The New Harmony Times*, November 9, 1978.
15. Nina Fletcher Little, *American Decorative Wall Painting 1700-1850* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972), p. 147.

Valerie Redler, a teacher, Chinese brush painting artist and interior designer, is a 1983 graduate of the Folk Art Studies Master of Arts Degree program jointly sponsored by the Museum of American Folk Art and New York University, and will be the Guest Curator of the forthcoming 1986 exhibition of the paintings of Jacob Maentel to be held at the Museum.