

Few American artists of the nineteenth century have left as impressive a record of their work as Ammi Phillips (1788–1865), whose legacy exists today in the hundreds of canvases that have survived into this century. While a romantic image of the “primitive” itinerant portrait painter persists in the public imagination—a vestige of the early twentieth-century perspec-

work available for prospective clients to view contributed to the steady work that the artist received throughout his career. Phillips’s success in supporting himself almost exclusively through portrait painting after the earliest years was unusual. Typically, artists like Phillips needed to augment their incomes through other, more reliable pursuits. Competing first with academically trained artists of renown, such as John Vanderlyn, and later with technological advances, namely the daguerreotype,

period that threatened the end of the agrarian way of life.³

The complex interrelationships among Phillips’s sitters accounts, in part, for the great similarities of pose, costume, and accessories that are associated with his work. Although the recycling of ideas and formats was the stock-in-trade of such nineteenth-century itinerant portraitists, Phillips was nevertheless able to breathe fresh life into familiar conventions through infusions of color, abstraction of form, and insight into

Revisiting Ammi Phillips FIFTY YEARS OF AMERICAN PORTRAITURE

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tive on American folk art—Phillips’s work supersedes such limitations and demands serious critical attention. The best of his work resonates with the spirit of the subjects portrayed and is expressed in structured compositions that have earned Phillips a solid place in the canons of American art history.

Ammi Phillips was born in Colebrook, Connecticut, in 1788. Although little is known of his early life, Phillips was already painting in Berkshire County, Massachusetts, by 1809, when he advertised his ability to produce “correct likenesses” in the *Berkshire Reporter*.¹ At this early point in his career, he also offered fancy painting, silhouettes, sign, and ornamental painting. By 1811, Phillips was gaining important commissions of influential members of Berkshire County communities, and establishing formats and techniques that he was to continue developing throughout his career. In the period immediately following, Phillips was painting in upstate New York. It was in the border areas of these three states—New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts—that Phillips was to ply his trade for over fifty years.

Unlike many itinerant painters of his day, Phillips moved with his family into the communities whose members he portrayed, traveling a circumscribed radius from each area. His integration into various communities and the ready examples of his

Phillips was chosen by his neighbors to depict entire families, as well as their extended family members. This practice emphasizes the important role the portrait painter played as recorder of society.

As Vanderlyn wrote in a letter to his nephew, “Were I to begin life again, I should not hesitate to follow this plan....Indeed, moving about through the country as Philips [sic] did and probably still does, must be an agreeable way of passing one’s time. I saw four of his works at Jacobus Hardenburgh’s the other day painted a year or two ago, which seemed to satisfy them....”² Clients such as the Hardenburghs would have felt comfortable turning to Phillips for their portraits. Educated in the same social environment, Phillips understood their values, and his straightforward portraits, free from European “pretensions,” supported the patriotic feelings of the still-young republic. As the Jacksonian age emerged, with its popular-based politics, men looked toward a type of portraiture that expressed their own political sympathies in a clearcut, unambiguous fashion. Phillips’s portraits of seated men holding newspapers whose mastheads proclaimed their political affiliations handsomely fulfilled that criterion. Some have argued that this type of portraiture was intended in direct opposition to urban styles, presenting a unified front during a

his sitters. Demonstrating an ability to capture the essence of each period in which he worked, this chameleon-like quality of the artist led to the attribution of his body of work to at least three different artists at various times. These dramatic shifts in style were reconciled in the 1960s through the painstaking research of Barbara and Larry Holdridge and Mary Black. Twenty-five years later, we have the luxury of a long acceptance of the artist’s diversity. No longer distracted by speculations as to the artist’s identity, today we can observe Phillips’s progression from one style to the next and appreciate the timeless appeal of this prolific American master.

Phillips showed an early ability to fulfill the narrative elements mandated by portraiture before the age of photography, but interpreted the expected conventions through unusual choices of colors and atypical compositions. His exactitude in depicting details of costume recalls his promise to provide “correct likenesses” of sitters in the “prevailing fashion of the day.” This did not always imply veracity in portraiture, however; people differentiated between a “likeness” and a “portrait” in that they sometimes specified how they wanted to be remembered, which on occasion resulted in less-than-accurate renderings.

The portraits of Dr. and Mrs. Crane were painted during the years

**BLOND BOY WITH
PRIMER, PEACH,
AND DOG**
Possibly Aaron D.
Smith (1830–1889)
Catskill, Greene
County, New York
c. 1838
Oil on canvas
48 3/8 × 30"
The Alice M. Kaplan
Collection



Gavin Ashworth

known as the Border period. Displaying the delicate colors of the Romantic age, these portraits communicate basic information about the sitters in a manner that reflects one of the basic tenets of gender differentiation in early nineteenth-century America. As noted by Jack Larkin, Chief Historian at Old Sturbridge Village, Massachusetts, "men were frequently shown in the act of writing or in the pursuit of information, while women were almost always portrayed in a receptive role: holding a book, or reading a letter rather than writing one."⁴

Dr. Crane's medical profession is apparent from the medical texts that line his bookcase and which he holds in his hand. In its romantic air, ethereal colors, and details of costume, the portrait of Mrs. Crane is emblematic of the Border period. Unlike many portrait painters of the period, though, Phillips made little attempt to place the sitters in realistic interior settings, relying instead on the strength of the characterizations, the interest provided by textural treatments of large areas of color, and the spatial relationships between the forms. The triangular arrangement of Mrs. Crane's arms derives from poses seen in the works of early Connecticut artists. The arm crossing horizontally at the waist remains true to the earlier tradition, but the other arm, which might once have been raised to hold a rose to the sitter's breast, has been inverted to form a closed circle revolving around the book held in the sitter's hands. This small change provides a new and dynamic movement to a static and formalized pose.

The abstractions of the Border period underwent a dramatic change in the 1820s. Though vestiges of the Romantic age occasionally linger, a new realism is visible in the work of this period. Darker colors and harder edges begin to replace the slightly unfocused, shimmering quality of the Border portraits, leading ultimately to the crystal clarity of the Kent period. It was during this period, from 1829 to 1839, that Phillips achieved his technical mastery in manipulations of space, volume, and color. *Blond Boy with Peach, Primer, and Dog* highlights Phillips's visual wiz-

ardry. The figure of the boy, who may be Aaron D. Smith, has become completely two-dimensional, yet the sheen and jewel tones of the velvety suit he wears lend a sensual and tactile quality to the image. Piercing the velvety darkness of the portrait are the peach on the table and the boy's brilliantly lit face nestled against the shadows of his suit and the background. The juxtaposition of large planes of color with stark contrasts, two-dimensionality, and volume creates a delicately balanced work

but is also evident in portraits such as *Woman with Pink Ribbons*. Shifting in tone from pink to green, Phillips captured the changeable quality of the fabric of the woman's dress. The "babette" bonnet of the period was sheer, with two or three extravagant ruffles. Large pink satin bows were popular on the top, and trailing ribbons were curled at the ends, sometimes dipped in milk, then wound around a broomstick till dry. Phillips took obvious delight in his ability to bring to life the transparent

artisans were subject to popular tastes and demands. To sell their product, they needed to meet those demands in a manner pleasing to the customer. The same problems of light and shadow that had always faced artists working with a brush now faced those working with a camera. One artist experimenting with the daguerreotype in 1843 complained, "I have tried the light as you proposed, but they do not like the dark on one side of the face, and I can't sell a picture that where one



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MRS. CRANE
Region unknown
c. 1814–1819
Oil on canvas
39 × 32"
The Alice M. Kaplan
Collection

DR. CRANE
Region unknown
c. 1814–1819
Oil on canvas
39 × 32"
The Alice M. Kaplan
Collection

whose ultimate success lies in the artist's confident juggling of these disparate elements.

Throughout the Kent period, Phillips continued to gratify his clients with decorative portraits that paid close attention to current fashion. By this time, fashions had changed and the new neckline was wider, dropping to the armhole line, giving a horizontal look to the new dresses. This horizontal emphasis is exemplified in the well-known portraits of children wearing red dresses,

material, extravagant folds, and curling ribbons of this fashionable headgear, and few portraits of women during this period were completed without such a bonnet.

In the later years of his career, Phillips shared many of the dilemmas confronting those working with the new technology of daguerreotype. As professional artists dependent for their living upon the patronage of the "mass of people," as Vanderlyn had referred to his rural clients, Phillips and other itinerant

side of the face is darker than the other, although it seems to stand out better and look richer."⁵

Based on the small number of portraits painted by Phillips after 1850, as compared to earlier periods, the daguerreotype and improved photographic processes certainly had an impact on the demand for his services. Phillips fought back with the weapons of painted portraiture: scale, color, and personal attention to the needs of his clients. His works from about 1850 until the time of his



HENRY E. HOTCHKISS
(1842–1917)
Torrington, Litchfield
County, Connecticut
c. 1850–1853
Oil on canvas
33 1/2 × 28"
(framed: 37 × 31 1/2")
The Torrington
Historical Society,
Torrington,
Connecticut

death underwent a noticeable shift in presentation. Ripe colors, stiff poses, and full faces showed a response not only to the aesthetic of photography, but to the full flower of the Victorian age. By 1860, Phillips had moved to Curtisville, near Stockbridge, not far from where he had started his lengthy career. In 1865, after a career of more than fifty years, during which he portrayed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people in dozens of communities,⁶ Ammi Phillips died quietly at his home. His passing was noted with only the simplest of obituaries: "Died at Curtisville, Stockbridge, July 14th, very suddenly, Mr. A. Phillips, aged 78."⁷ ★

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NOTES

- 1 See Eleanor H. Gustafson, "Collector's Notes," *Antiques* (October 1990): 662, 698.
- 2 John Vanderlyn to John Vanderlyn, Jr., 9 Sept., 1825, collection of Senate House, Kingston, New York.
- 3 Neil G. Larson, *The Politics of Style: Rural Portraiture in the Hudson Valley During the Second Quarter of the Nineteenth Century* (unpublished M.A. thesis, Winterthur Program in Early American Culture, Delaware, May 1980).
- 4 Jack Larkin, "Iconography: Representation of Respectability" in *Meet Your Neighbors: New England Portraits, Painters, & Society 1790–1850* (Sturbridge, Mass.: Old Sturbridge Village, 1992), p. 12.
- 5 Grant B. Romer, "The Mirror with a Memory: The Daguerreotype as a Portrait Medium," in *Face to Face: M. W. Hopkins and Noah North* (Museum of Our National Heritage, Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library, Inc., 1988), p. 33.
- 6 Howard P. Fertig has identified more than six hundred portraits by or attributed to Ammi Phillips. Based on dated paintings, it has been suggested that Phillips may have painted as many as two thousand portraits during his lifetime.
- 7 The artist's obituary in the *Berkshire County Eagle*, July 20 and 27, was discovered by Ann Wrenn in the course of research for the exhibition "Revisiting Ammi Phillips: Fifty Years of American Portraiture."



WOMAN WITH PINK
RIBBONS
Region unknown
c. 1830
Oil on canvas
32 × 27 1/2"
Collection of Peter
and Barbara Goodman