

An exhibition of four paintings of similarly posed children in red dresses, **Children in Red** by Ammi Phillips, offers an opportunity to see clearly the use of formulas by itinerant 19th century portrait painters. The exhibition and this article are part of continuing research by Mary Black on Ammi Phillips. The paintings will be on display at the Museum of American Folk Art until February 16, 1986, after which it is scheduled to be shown at the Terra Museum of American Art, Chicago, Illinois, from March 7 to April 27, 1986.

How did an itinerant painter go about his business? Almost all of us have encountered legends of failed artisans stumbling about the countryside in search of work and sustenance. And the word *itinerant* conjurs up visions of peddlers selling pots, pans, needles and pins. Closer scrutiny of the life and method of a rural painter in the first decades of 19th century America yields the surprising view that he was, in fact, the aristocrat of traveling salesmen.

We close in on the true vocation of the country painter when we begin to see him, and infrequently her, as an



Ammi Phillips

The Country Painter's Method

By Mary Black



Girl in Red Dress with Cat and Dog; *Probably New York, Amenia Area; 1834-1836; Oil on canvas; 30 x 25"; Promised Gift, Private Collection, Museum of American Folk Art.*

Portrait of a Girl in a Red Dress; *Region unknown; Date unknown; Oil on canvas; 32 x 27"; Daniel J. Terra Collection, Terra Museum of American Art, Chicago, Illinois.*

entrepreneur selling skills and moving only when there are new patrons to be found at the end of a recently explored road. He advertised his presence and his wares in local papers and posted the hours when he might be found. Most commonly that was the leading tavern in towns where he had familial or friendly connections. The itinerant painter learned early to overcome hur-

dles in expressing anatomy and form. To expedite his task — and satisfy a clientele not intent on originality — he developed formulas for drawing figures and faces. Since clients often saw recently completed works as examples of the painter's skill, a reasonably sure way of pleasing a patron was to repeat a pose, costume or possession from a just-finished portrait.

Writings and portraits together give us a picture of the firmament in which these artisan travelers were stars. The works supply painted evidence. But primary information comes from Joseph Whiting Stock's journals of fourteen years; Erastus Salisbury Field's advertisements and letters; and John Vanderlyn's testimony to, among other things, the progress of "one Phillips... moving about through the country" in the 1830s.

The path of 19th-century itinerant painters logically follows the opening of new territories for settlement throughout New England and the Mid-Atlantic states. While in colonial America painting was concentrated in the cities, by the time the itinerant artist was triumphant, the population centers had moved up river to new locations. The artist followed Sullivan's soldiers and their families to land grants in central New York and pressed further to the Western Reserve in Ohio. He followed Pennsylvania settlement as pioneers moved westward. An example is Jacob Maentel, who journeyed from Pennsylvania's eastern counties to relocate in the Rappite community of New Harmony, Indiana.

Despite hundreds of lost canvases and vanished subjects, there are enough identified paintings surviving from this period to direct the modern inquirer to the right doors. There one finds family names woven together like garlands. And scattered throughout those inter-

locking families are portraits attributed to men like Winthrop Chandler, John Brewster, Jr., Noah North, Joseph Whiting Stock, Erastus Salisbury Field and Ammi Phillips, who overlapped in their service to the patron families of the day.

Virtually all these artists relied on formulas in their work. Erastus Salisbury Field painted both his sister Marquette Field Marsh and one of his sisters-in-law, Aurilla Field Field (who was also his cousin) in identical costume. Similarly, Clarissa Gallond Cook and her sweet-faced sister Almira Gallond Moore are both dressed exactly the same except for the way they wear their accessories — the carnelian pin, belt buckle and tortoise-shell comb.

Joseph Whiting Stock who worked in the same time and place as Field, as well as Phillips, was less dramatic in his repetitions than the other two artists. Nonetheless, Stock's dark costumes, which strikingly emphasize the pale faces of his women, are often of a similar fashion and frosted with little collars that are almost alike. The men's suits — dark, to contrast with their snowy shirts — seem cut by the same tailor from one endless bolt of broadcloth. In providing his child subjects — alive and "from corpse" — with pets, Stock's playfully mixed species, inventing canines who looked like sphinxes, and cats that resemble a race of Chinese temple dogs.

Ammi Phillips, with more than 500 portraits surviving, is, in fact, the artist whose several painting formulas are the most readily available for study. Repetition enabled Phillips to work efficiently even though many of the details of his faces and costumes required time-consuming and meticulous brushwork. There are, for example, the four identical portraits that he painted of Sarah Totten Sutherland of Amenia early in



the 1840s — one for each of her four daughters. The only difference among them was the number of interlocking circles of painted embroidery on the right side of four lace collars.

Phillips used other formulas, as well. Three standing life-sized portraits of children hung together for the first time in 1968 in the first comprehensive exhibition of Ammi Phillips' work at

Andrew Jackson Ten Broeck; Hudson, New York; 1834; Oil on canvas; 39 x 34"; Collection of Peter Tillou.

Little Girl in Red Dress; Region unknown; Circa 1835; Oil on canvas; 32 x 26 3/4"; Private collection.



the Museum of American Folk Art.¹ *Harriet Leavens* and *Harriet Campbell*, both painted about 1815, were dressed alike with identical green-fringed parasols, red-and-green reticules and deep pink slippers. *John Yonnie Luyster*, from about 1838, was the sole standing boy's figure known at that time. Since then, several girls and boys, as well as two brother and sister pairs, have been

found to illustrate Phillips' use of the standing child figure. Examples appear from the earliest part of his career — the Barstow children of 1811 — to the late *Boy in Pink with his Dog* of about 1855.

Like Stock's domestic creatures, Phillips' dogs are a breed apart. They represent another repeated formula, with some very slight variations. With the exception of the lone mastiff (the

dog shown in *Boy in Pink with his Dog*), there are enough similar-looking terriers appearing in Phillips' portraits to imagine that the entrepreneurial artist sold puppies to his clients as a profitable sideline.

Within the last year, however, it is four portraits of children, all seated by Phillips in one familiar formula, that have captured special attention. One portrait, with an announced purchase price of \$1 million — reportedly a first for folk art — is a promised gift to the Museum of American Folk Art. Another was recently acquired by the Terra Museum of American Art in Chicago at a Christie's sale where it set an auction record for folk painting. The other two are in private collections. The only identified portrait — the one boy — is owned by collector and dealer Peter Tillou. The subject is Andrew Jackson Ten Broeck of Hudson, New York, and it was painted in 1834 when the boy was a year and a half old. While the set of his arms and figure — as well as the costume — is the same as that of the three girls, the boy's image is flipped to face the viewer's right.²

All four children are dressed identically in red dresses with waist sashes piped in white. Appearing discreetly below the dresses are flared pantaloons finished off with at least one row of pleated ruching. The Museum of American Folk Art's girl has an extra flourish on her pantaloons and a gathered lace edging on her puffed sleeves. Two of the girls wear black slippers, but young Ten Broeck and the Terra little girl sport scarlet slippers. All three girls are seated on green-upholstered benches with brass tacks securing the leather or fabric to the frames.

One of the most interesting elements in the portraits is the coral beads — a 19th-century charm against evil, according to legend — which all three

girls wear. Each has a different number of strands: MAFA's has four; the private collector's has three and the Terra Museum's has two. It is just possible that Phillips was playing a numbers game — similar to the one he played with the interlocking circles on the Sutherland portraits — and the number of strands were to indicate the age of the sitters. If we can believe that every birthday brought another string of coral, the girl in the MAFA portrait — the most elaborate one, with an extra ruffle, extra lace, extra fillip in the upholstery and an extra critter (a very unfeline white cat) — was painted on or after her fourth birthday.

When Daniel Terra purchased his painting, shortly after the MAFA's promised gift was announced last year, some observers advanced the idea that the subjects of these two folk portraits were sisters. But the existence of four identical poses suggests this is unlikely. Indeed, if we look at the well-known family assemblages painted by Phillips — the unidentified journalist, his wife and two children in the Princeton Art Museum collection or the Russell Dorr family at Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center — we see that Phillips made a special effort to individualize the dress and details of children within a single family. In the children in red, Phillips individualized the faces while making little attempt to vary the dress and pose.

When and where were these similar portraits painted? The 1834 likeness of Master Ten Broeck suggests an answer. That summer Phillips quit Rhinebeck where he had lived since 1929. Two summers later he had returned to Kent, Connecticut — not far from his birthplace — where, known as the Kent Limner, Phillips developed the formula for the graceful forward-leaning ladies of the period.



Photo: Geoffrey Clements

Two More by Phillips

Since the discovery of these four remarkably similar portraits of children by Ammi Phillips, others using the same formula are coming to light, as well. In *Portrait of James Salisbury* (above), for example, Phillips used the same pose and strawberry plant, but altered the details of the dress and changed the color from red to blue. In *Mrs. Mayer and Daughter* (right), Phillips painted a miniature version of the child and put her on her mother's lap. The Mayer child is posed the same as the others, wears the same red dress and scarlet slippers, and holds a small spray of greens. It is assumed, because of the three strand coral necklace, that she is a girl; however, she is seated in reverse like Andrew Jackson Ten Broeck.

Left: Portrait of James Salisbury; *Circa 1835; Oil on canvas; 32 x 27"; Private collection.*

Right: Mrs. Mayer and Daughter; *Circa 1835; Oil on canvas; 37 7/8 x 34 1/4"; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch.*



But from 1832 to 1834, Phillips was portraying the aristocracy living on both sides of the Hudson below Albany — the intermarried DeWitt, Ten Broeck, Sanders and Livingston clans. There, in almost all the great houses he visited, the painter would have encountered great shadowy ancestors of all these families formally painted by eminent colonial artists Pieter Vanderlyn and Nehemiah Partridge.

It was probably in this environment, that Phillips, seemingly uninfluenced by the massive portraits on the walls, evolved the icon of the seated child in red. Here the old Dutch and English families — and their friends and neighbors — had the chance to drop in on each other to see how the latest round of portraits might be going. The survival of at least twenty paintings dating to this brief time period — four of them these little figures — attest to neighbors successively employing Phillips to paint their children in a format that they found attractive.

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NOTES

1. The catalogue for that exhibition *Ammi Phillips Portrait Painter 1788-1865* was written by Barbara C. and Lawrence B. Holdridge with an introduction by Mary Black; published by Clarkson N. Potter, Inc. for the Museum of American Folk Art.
2. *Andrew Jackson Ten Broeck* is, so far, the only known Phillips portrait set into a landscape. It is really only a suggestion of a landscape; he sits beneath a leaden sky on a flattened rock under a hickory tree, an allusion to his namesake, holding a burr and a hickory nut. In contrast to the girls, his dog is at the right, the head visible, but the body hidden by the tree trunk.