

One of the most significant collections of early New England painting, sculpture, and decorative arts was assembled over a period of more than fifty years by Bertram K. and Nina Fletcher Little. From 1925—soon after they were married—until their deaths last year, the Littles applied an impressive intelligence to their antiquarian interests, creating a collection of early New England arts renowned for its quality and depth. Nina Fletcher

Little made another, perhaps even more important, contribution through the careful scholarship and documentation that attended each purchase and through her extensive writings on related topics. In January 1994 the first part of the Little collection was offered in a landmark sale at Sotheby's New York, generating tremendous excitement in the folk art field. As the delighted recipient of an anonymous gift of a pair of important eighteenth-century portraits that were featured in the sale, the Museum of American Folk Art had particular

MARY KIMBERLY THOMAS REYNOLDS (1754–1833)
c. 1789
Oil on canvas
45 × 36"
Museum of American Folk Art, New York, anonymous gift

Reuben Moulthrop

Artist in Painting and Waxworks

STACY C. HOLLANDER



reason to be gratified by the aftermath of the auction. The portraits of James Blakeslee Reynolds and Mary Kimberly Thomas Reynolds first came to the attention of Bertram and Nina Little in the 1940s, and have appeared in the public eye from time to time since. These portraits descended in the family of the sitters and were purchased by the Littles years after the collectors first learned of the paintings.

In the chronicle of their collecting history, *Little by Little: Six Decades of Collecting American*

Decorative Arts, Nina Fletcher Little attributed the portraits of the Reynoldses to an early Connecticut painter named Reuben Moulthrop. The radiant faces of the couple are the focal point of these imposing works. The poses of the three-quarter-length figures, derived from academic sources, are treated in a decorative format that is especially effective in the flowered fabric of Mrs. Reynolds's dress, the pot of flowers, and interior details. This decorative quality is enhanced rather than diminished by the almost shimmery,

silvery surface of the paintings that is the result of the network of fine cracks that seems to refract light bouncing off the images. The dignified figures communicate a palpable sense of pride, understandable in the wake of the War for Independence. Fascinating for the insights they offer into the material trappings of the newly independent nation, these paintings also lead to a reopening of the inquiry into the puzzling attributions of works to Reuben Moulthrop, a talented portraitist to whom many Connecticut portraits of varying

JAMES BLAKESLEE REYNOLDS
(1754–1834)
c. 1789
Oil on canvas
45 × 36"
Museum of American Folk Art, New York,
anonymous gift



This decorative quality is enhanced rather than diminished by the almost shimmery, silvery surface of the paintings...

quality and technique have often been attributed in the past.

Moulthrop was best known in his day for his traveling waxworks exhibitions. He has been the subject of some debate since art historian William Sawitzky first began a serious consideration of his work in the 1930s. Following Sawitzky's death, the study of Moulthrop's paintings was continued by his wife, Susan Clay Sawitzky, resulting in an exhibition at The Connecticut Historical Society from November 1956 through February 1957. Almost thirty paintings were included in the exhibition, many of them new attributions made by William Sawitzky. Shortly after Sawitzky's death, fifteen more attributions were made by his wife, bringing the total of paintings by or attributed to Reuben Moulthrop to near forty-five. It was particularly appropriate for The Connecticut Historical Society to host the only comprehensive examination of works attributed to Reuben Moulthrop as the Society's first librarian, the Reverend Thomas Robbins, left the Society not only his own extensive library, but his portrait painted and signed by Moulthrop in 1801, as well as written documentation of Moulthrop's artistic activities recorded in the pages of

a diary that the Reverend Robbins kept from 1796 to 1864.

The exhibition created a great deal of controversy, and the ensuing discussions were carried on in the pages of *The Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin*. The first response came from Ralph Thomas, then curator of the New Haven Colony Historical Society. Although he had difficulty accepting many of the paintings as the work of Moulthrop, after explaining his hesitation he allowed the correctness of the attributions and congratulated the

In the same advertisement, Moulthrop offered miniature and portrait painting, as well as likenesses taken in wax

Sawitzkys on their visual acuity.¹ It took the courage of Professor Samuel M. Green II, with many apologies for his temerity, to challenge and reject several of the attributions.² The effect of these rejections was twofold: First, two of the paintings mistakenly attributed to Moulthrop were found to be the work of an artist named Captain Simon Fitch, and an exhibition of his work was soon organized. Second, the integrity of Moulthrop's work was preserved. One of the greatest charges repeatedly levied against the artist has concerned his apparent inconsistency of style and method. When comparisons are made among the few paintings that we know for certain to be his, though, they present a logical and steady progression toward an elegant and identifiable style.

Reuben Moulthrop, the son of John and Abigail Holt Moulthrop, was baptized on July 24, 1763. His father was the owner of a good deal of property acquired in the settlement of a land and boundary dispute between residents of East Haven and those of the larger township of New Haven.³ Other than the facts that he grew up in East Haven and that many Moulthrop relatives lived in and around East Haven, nothing is known of Reuben Moulthrop's child-

hood. The house in East Haven in which the artist was raised continued to be his home well into adulthood, until his success as the proprietor of a traveling waxworks museum enabled him to build a much larger home on Townsend Street. In 1792 Moulthrop married Hannah Street, the daughter of the Reverend Nicholas Street and Hannah Austin Street. The couple had seven children, one of whom, Sidney, followed in his father's footsteps as an artist.

The earliest documented record of Moulthrop's painting activity exists in the signed portraits of Job Perit and his wife Sarah (Sally) Sanford Perit, both dated 1790. He was probably also working in wax by this time, though his first known advertisement did not appear until 1793, one year after he was married. In fact, according to Sarah E. Hughes in her *History of East Haven*, "The business was in full blast soon after the Revolution."⁴ In the *Connecticut Journal* of September 4, 1793, Reuben Moulthrop advertised that "Artist in Painting and Wax-Work" would be in residence at the "Sign of the Goddess Iris in State Street," exhibiting sensational representations in wax such as "the KING OF FRANCE in the Act of losing his Head, under the GUILLOTINE, preserving every Circumstance which can give to the Eye of the Spectator a realizing View of that momentous and interesting Event. Also A SPEAKING FIGURE, which, even in its unfinished State, has afforded the highest Satisfaction to the Curious."⁵ In the same advertisement, Moulthrop offered miniature and portrait painting, as well as likenesses taken in wax. The artist cleverly timed this initial exhibition to coincide with commencement week at Yale, hoping that it might prove "a valuable Addition to the entertainment of Commencement Week." That he continued this tradition for many years can be surmised from the Reverend Thomas Robbins's diary entry for September 9, 1806: "Rode to New Haven to attend Commencement. Went to see the figures of wax-works."⁶

Moulthrop was an inventive showman, offering not only wax-work but also music: he had a nine-

year-old boy play the pianoforte accompanied by his father on the violin.⁷ To further the realism of his wax vignettes, Moulthrop hired two dressmakers from England to live in his home and sew costumes for the figures, which were constructed from a wooden framework, stuffed, and dressed. The heads, hands, and feet were cast in beeswax and painted in oil colors, and natural hair and glass eyes were used to complete the semblance of life.⁸

Over the next several years the exhibit was installed in Middletown, Hartford, New London, Norwich, and New York. By June 17, 1800, according to an advertisement placed in New York's *The Daily Advertiser*, Moulthrop's waxworks exhibition offered twenty-five life-size figures, including that of the late Dr. Ezra Stiles, whose portrait Moulthrop had painted in 1794. Many of the figures were variations on previous themes and reflected the popular taste of the period. Likenesses of George Washington "Represented as reassuming the Sword in defence of his Country" were always popular, as were sentimental themes such as "Maternal Affection, represented by a Lady with two Children." The earlier scene of the "Late Gen. Butler, who fell at St. Clair's defeat, represented as wounded in the leg and breast, an Indian rushing upon him to

REVEREND THOMAS ROBBINS (1777-1856) 1801 Oil on canvas 30 1/2 x 29 3/4" The Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford





CAPTAIN AMOS MORRIS
 (1723–1801)
 c. 1785–1789
 Oil on canvas
 43 × 34"
 New Haven Colony
 Historical Society,
 Pardee-Morris House,
 New Haven,
 Connecticut

tomahawk him" seems to have been abbreviated by this time to "An Indian Chief, dressed in his war habit, with a tomahawk and Scalping-knife in his hands." And the figures of two ladies, a blond and a brunette, were always included in the show. After Moulthrop or his partner had ascertained whether the belle of the town was dark or fair, Moulthrop would affix to the appropriate figure a placard reading "The beauty of this place."⁹ Topical figures were sculpted almost as soon as the originals had attained sufficient public status to warrant their addition.

Portrait painting, however, was no longer advertised with the traveling waxworks, perhaps because Moulthrop did not always travel with his exhibition (he had a succession of partners, including his brothers-in-law, who assisted with or managed the exhibitions). As the show had by now traveled as far as "several of the West India Islands" and Moulthrop had a growing family in Connecticut, it is likely that he preferred to remain at home. By 1803, Moulthrop's brothers-in-law, Nicholas and Elnathan Street, had established a

permanent waxworks museum in New York City at Snow's Hotel, No. 69 Broadway, where they continued to present tableaux similar to those earlier developed by Moulthrop.

Though painted three years before his first advertisement for the waxworks museum, Moulthrop's early portraits of Job and Sarah Sanford Perit display the unmistakable influence of his work in wax. The figures are stark and sculptural against the dark background. The deeply etched folds of Mrs. Perit's shawl and hat ribbon, the monochromatic blue tones, and the three-dimensionality of the faces seem to derive from a plastic milieu rather than from a two-dimensional medium. Each figure is sitting in a blue-painted Windsor armchair with a table situated to the left. Mr. Perit rests his elbow on a book, next to which there are an inkstand and quills. Moulthrop's intention to represent his sitters in a specific spatial context is demonstrated by one of the quills crossing the space in front of Mr. Perit's arm and casting a shadow onto the book. His fascination with skin texture is already evident in the faces, and both figures are placed on the canvas in a manner consistent with documented examples from throughout his career. Mrs. Perit is shown with her right hand entwined by a cord with a pendant oval miniature, one of the few clues to his activities as a miniaturist, and care has been taken to show the hand turning over the wrist in a natural manner. Each portrait is inscribed on the back with the sitter's name and age, the year, and the portraitist's signature "Ruben Moltrop, Pinxit." This pair of portraits is a key to this earliest phase of Moulthrop's work.

Moulthrop was not the only artist working in the New Haven area. In fact, he named his first son after Daniel Bowen, another well-known sculptor in wax originally from Connecticut and the proprietor of the New York Museum, which he established in New York City by 1789. Abraham Delanoy was a portrait painter who took up residence in New Haven for a few years. He advertised his presence in Connecticut from 1784 through 1786. He had studied briefly with Benjamin West

in Europe and was the first American artist to use that association as a selling point for commissions. Delanoy painted in New York City in the 1760s and 1770s, after which he seems to have stopped painting for a time. His trail is picked up again in the 1780s in New Haven, where he advertised portrait, sign, ornament, and plain painting and also sold art supplies and window glass. His advertisement of 1786 is noteworthy for its mention of a "good steady Workman to assist" and an added note that "A Method is found, by repeated Experiments, to cause Fish Oil to dry, by which means Money is saved." Delanoy's presence in the area is intriguing, and it has been suggested that the "good steady Workman" of whom Delanoy boasted may have been Moulthrop. A third painter who worked in New Haven in the 1780s was John Durand, who is best known for his many portraits of Virginia subjects, but also worked in New York City, where some of his most memorable paintings were commissioned. The influence of these artists, especially Durand, seems to be present in a group of highly decorative paintings attributed to Moulthrop that includes the portraits of the Reynoldses recently given to the Museum of American Folk Art.

Attributions to Moulthrop have sometimes been proposed because known family ties suggest him as the plausible artist, though the visual evidence raises questions. The portrait of Moulthrop's father-in-law, the Reverend Nicholas Street, for instance, shows characteristics of Moulthrop's established style, while the portrait of Mrs. Street is stylistically related to the group of early portraits that exhibit the influence of John Durand. The portrait of Captain Amos Morris, one of East Haven's most important citizens, also belongs with this group. Morris himself was close to Moulthrop's family circle through the marriages of his granddaughters to Moulthrop's brothers-in-law Elnathan and Nicholas Street, and his activities as deacon at the Reverend Street's Congregational Church. But family ties or acquaintanceship should not be the deciding factor in attributing works to any

artist. We know that portraits of the Beardsleys and the Daggetts have been attributed to Moulthrop and that the Beardsleys and the Daggetts knew each other, and even served on the same school committee.¹⁰ This does not, however, support the theory that they were painted by the same artist—John Sherman also served on that committee, yet he had his portrait painted the same year by Abraham Delaney.

Nina Fletcher Little vacillated in her opinion as to whether Moulthrop was the artist of the group of

Ezra Stiles...of Yale
College...termed
Reuben Moulthrop a
"self taught painter"
who "pleased with
his genius."

paintings to which the portraits of James Reynolds and Mary Reynolds belong. In her 1975 exhibition catalog, *Paintings By New England Provincial Artists 1775–1800*, the Reynolds portraits are grouped with others by anonymous artists, and the possible attribution of them to Moulthrop is discussed. Yet in *Little by Little*, published in 1984, the paintings are attributed to Moulthrop, albeit with the caveat that his work is particularly hard to identify with confidence. Moulthrop's familiarity with the Beekman residence in New York City (his home on Townsend Street was modeled after it) suggests the possibility that he knew the portraits of James Beekman's children painted by John Durand. This is further supported by the similarity of the Mary Reynolds painting to the portrait of Catharine Beekman. Both figures—the mature woman and the young girl—are situated next to a square table with a pot of tall flowers. In the Reynolds painting, as in the Beekman portrait, some of the flowers are presented from the stem side, lending a naturalness to the display. In both portraits some of the stems end in a starlike form where they attach to the flowers. Mrs. Reynolds sits in Durand's classic pose of one hand raised to her breast

holding a rose, her other arm crossing at her waist. This stylized pose is accentuated by the gesture of the fingers, with the delicate fluttering typical of Durand's work heavily outlined in shadow. The portrait of James Reynolds also has a parallel in the work of Durand. Mr. Reynolds is posed in an attitude close to that of Rufus Lathrop, which was also in the Little collection. Lathrop was the brother of Martha Lathrop Devotion, whose portrait was painted by another Connecticut artist, Winthrop Chandler. The spread fingers of the one hand resting on the hip with the other arm extended, a pose derived from European mezzotints, are reinterpreted in the portrait of Reynolds. Other elements, such as Reynolds's curled finger, are seen in Durand's portrait *The Rapalje Children*, painted in New York about 1768.

The disparities between the portraits of the Reynoldses and the Perits at first make it seem unlikely that Moulthrop painted both pairs. Similarities of style do exist, though, in the sculptural folds of the curtains in the Reynolds portraits, the ruffles of Mr. Perit's shirt, and Mrs. Perit's extravagant costume. The star-shaped motif on each of Job Perit's buttons is similar to that seen on the flowers in the portrait of Mrs. Reynolds, and there is heavy outlining in the portraits of the Perits, though used with greater discrimination than in the Reynolds paintings. The portrait of Amos Morris, painted by the artist of the Reynolds portraits, provides another link to the painting of Job Perit in the unusual scalloped treatment of the coat hem that appears in both portraits.

The accusation that Moulthrop was indifferent to the quality of the materials he used has been based on the surface of paintings such as those of the Reynoldses. William L. Warren proposed that Moulthrop may have used bitumen as a medium for his pigments, which gave wonderful, glossy effects, but had a tendency to deteriorate with time, causing eventual cracking and loss of paint. Delaney's experiments with "fish oil" might offer another explanation, should Moulthrop prove to have been the assistant working with the older artist. A medium such as

fish oil, without a proven ability to bind the pigment, could experience a variety of problems over time. These might include shrinkage cracks as the drying process caused stresses within the paint, or stresses between the paint, ground, and support layers. Correspondence between Joseph Battell and his brother-in-law Thomas Robbins suggests a last possibility. In a letter posted from Norfolk, Connecticut, on January 18, 1812, Battell writes, "Should you conclude to be here early next week wish you to buy 6 yds of suitable



canvas, to paint on—otherwise we shall be obliged to use white linen at 4 a yard."¹¹ If Moulthrop was dependent on materials supplied by his sitters, they may sometimes have been of inferior quality, perhaps explaining the inconsistent condition of the paintings today.

The round of letters among Thomas Robbins, his family, and Moulthrop in the collection of The Connecticut Historical Society reveal a great deal of information about the client-artist relationship. Thomas

JOB PERIT
1790
Oil on canvas
36 1/8 x 29 1/4"
Metropolitan Museum
of Art, New York,
gift of Edgar William
and Bernice Chrysler
Garbisch, 1965

Inscribed: "Job Perit
AETAT 38/AD
1790/Ruben Moulthrop
Pinxit"

Robbins had been trying for five years to have Moulthrop paint his parents; this commission was interrupted first by Moulthrop's thriving waxworks business, then by a bout of "tipus fever" that left Moulthrop weak and unable to work for some time and may have been the extenuating cause of his death two years later in 1814. A second item of interest is that Moulthrop was able to paint seven portraits in seven weeks, including two of the elder Reverend Robbins, who complained to his son, "I had no idea it would take so

of a similar size, the exception being the five-foot-square, full-length portrait of the Reverend Ammi Ruhamah Robbins documented in his correspondence with his son Thomas Robbins. This is the only full-length portrait known to have been done by Moulthrop. Almost all other signed or documented portraits by Moulthrop, from his portraits of the Perits to the second portrait of the Reverend Robbins, feature a similar placement of the figures on the canvas.

The portrait of Sarah Battell and her two daughters is documented in the correspondence between father and son, yet poses a problem in terms of mood and composition when compared with Moulthrop's other work. There are tantalizing affinities, though, between this portrait and that of Mrs. Reynolds that emphasize the need for further research. The decorative quality and treatment of lace in the Battell portrait is reminiscent of the earlier work. The stiff, heavily outlined arm reaching across her child on Sarah Battell's lap recalls Mrs. Reynolds's stylized arm crossing at her waist. The strong face is delineated in a manner similar to that of Mrs. Reynolds, with highlighting along the length of her nose and its distinctively curled nostril, and her direct expression is reminiscent of Mary Reynolds's penetrating gaze.

Ezra Stiles, President of Yale College from 1778 to 1795, termed Reuben Moulthrop a "self taught painter" who "pleased with his genius." That he was profoundly influenced by other artists of his generation and that he in turn influenced many of the artists that followed is unquestioned. He was an artist who approached his work with a serious and psychological orientation, creating penetrating portraits of friends and neighbors. The confusing and conflicting styles attributed to his hand are perhaps a reflection of the enthusiasm of earlier scholarship rather than proof of the inconsistency of Moulthrop's work, but as Nina Fletcher Little neatly phrased the problem, until new paintings, letters, or other documents are discovered, "There the matter presently rests until consideration of further evidence indicates a firm attribution for these handsome pictures."¹⁴ ★

Author's Note: My thanks to Robert Eglerton of the New Haven Colony Historical Society and Sotheby's New York, for their help during the preparation of this article.

Stacy C. Hollander is the Curator of the Museum of American Folk Art. She was the curator of the exhibition "Revisiting Ammi Phillips: Fifty Years of American Portraiture" and coauthor, with Howard P. Fertig, of the accompanying catalog. Hollander lectures widely on folk art and has written for Antiques and Country Living magazines, as well as for this publication. She is also the author of Harry Lieberman: A Journey of Remembrance (Dutton Studio Books, 1991).

NOTES

- 1 Ralph W. Thomas, "Reuben Moulthrop, 1763-1814," *The Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin*, Vol. 21, no. 4 (Oct. 1956), p. 98.
- 2 Professor Samuel M. Green II, "Some Afterthoughts on the Moulthrop Exhibition," *The Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin*, Vol. 22, no. 2 (Apr. 1957), p. 33.
- 3 Sarah E. Hughes, *History of East Haven* (New Haven, Conn.: The Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor Press, 1908), p. 41.
- 4 *Ibid.* p. 45.
- 5 "Reuben Moulthrop, 1763-1814," *The Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin*, Vol. 20, no. 2 (Apr. 1955), p. 45.
- 6 Reverend Increase N. Tarbox, ed., *The Diary of Thomas Robbins, D.D., 1796-1854* (Boston: 1886).
- 7 "Moulthrop," p. 46.
- 8 Mabel P. Stivers, "Wax Figures in Old Museums," *Old Time New England*, Vol. 17 (July 1926-April 1927), p. 46.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *New Haven Gazette and Connecticut Magazine*, May 30, 1786. The names are listed together in the following advertisement: "The Public are hereby informed, That the School for Young Ladies under the patronage of the Subscribers, and under the tuition of Mr. Leavitt, is continued at the usual place; where the most faithful instruction will be given to all who may attend either from town or country. Committee: Charles Chauncey Henry Daggett Ebenezer Beardsley John Sherman Elias Beers John Goodrich."
- 11 *The Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin*, Vol. 20, no. 2 (Apr. 1955), p. 50.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.* p. 15.
- 14 Nina Fletcher Little, *Paintings by New England Provincial Artists 1775-1800* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in association with The Leather Press, 1976), p. 38.



**SARAH (SALLY)
SANFORD PERIT
1790**
Oil on canvas
36 1/4 x 29 3/4"
Metropolitan Museum
of Art, New York,
gift of Edgar William
and Bernice Chrysler
Garbisch, 1965

Inscribed: "Sally Perit
AETAT, 29/AD
1790/Ruben Moltthrop,
Pinxit"

long."¹² We also learn through these letters that Moulthrop used portraiture as a commodity of exchange for services, in this instance for the care and feeding of his horse. Perhaps of greatest interest is the fact that the sessions provided an opportunity for other artists to see the work being done locally. Reverend Robbins wrote to his son, "Our pple came in plenty day after day as into a Museum—all agree that the likenesses are admirably drawn..."¹³ Moulthrop tended to paint canvases