

# Couple & Casualty

The Art  
of Eunice  
Pinney  
Unveiled

By SUSAN FOSTER

Connecticut watercolorist Eunice Griswold Holcomb Pinney (1770–1849) was both typical and exceptional as an amateur artist of the Federal period in America. This paradox animates her character as well as her art and bespeaks the complex nature of her fledgling society, which was struggling to exert its independence while at the same time clinging to many past traditions. Eunice Pinney has received no individual scholarly attention since 1943, when Jean Lipman published an article in *Art Quarterly* that provided a biographical sketch of the artist as well as an in-depth analysis of her art and a complete list of her works known at that time.<sup>1</sup> Since then, Pinney's paintings have been featured in numerous publications on a variety of topics. However, the limited amount of biographical information available on the artist has obscured the essence of her work as a whole. This article presents new information about Eunice Pinney's life that calls for a reinterpretation of her paintings and her significance in the field of American folk art.



**COUPLE IN A LANDSCAPE**  
Connecticut  
c. 1815  
Watercolor on paper  
11 × 14 ¾"  
Private collection

MRS. CLARKE, THE YORK  
MAGNET  
Connecticut  
Dated 1821  
Watercolor, ink,  
cutout engraved  
collage, and thread  
on wove paper  
9 7/8 x 9 15/16"  
Abby Aldrich Rockefeller  
Folk Art Center, Williams-  
burg, Virginia. 58.300.8





**COUPLE AND CASUALTY**  
 Connecticut  
 Probably 1805–1825  
 Watercolor and ink on laid  
 paper  
 7 ¼ × 12"  
 Abby Aldrich Rockefeller  
 Folk Art Center,  
 Williamsburg, Virginia.  
 58.301.1

Born to Eunice Viets and Elisha Griswold in Simsbury, Connecticut, in 1770, Eunice Pinney was the fourth of eight children. She evidently grew up in comfortable circumstances, for the marriage of her parents is said to have “brought together two of the most considerable families and estates of the town.”<sup>2</sup> The families were both wealthy and influential in the affairs of the town and the Episcopal Church. Eunice’s uncle Roger Viets (1738–1811) was assistant rector of Saint Andrew’s Church in Simsbury from 1763 to 1777 and later, first rector of Trinity Church in Digby, Nova Scotia. Her brother Alexander Viets Griswold became bishop of the entire eastern diocese of the Episcopal Church, which included Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island, and in 1836 was named presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States. Alexander Griswold’s memoirs, written by John Stone and published in 1844, provide a flavor of the upbringing of the Griswold children.

Religion and education distinguish Eunice Pinney’s heritage. Her uncle Roger Viets was not only a very pious man but also extremely learned, having graduated from Yale College in 1758, after which he traveled to England to be ordained. In Simsbury, Reverend Viets supplemented his meager salary by farming and teaching, and among his pupils was Eunice Pinney’s brother Alexander. Eunice apparently received a significant amount of instruction herself, for her brother describes her in his memoirs as “a woman of uncommonly extensive reading.” Their mother, Eunice Viets, was “a woman of remarkable intelligence and uncommon energy,” and Reverend Griswold remembers

that “though a fond mother and grandmother, she was yet a strict disciplinarian.” Alexander is said to have read at the age of three, and both he and Eunice were kept constantly engaged in bone-lace knitting, which Eunice began at age five. A favorite pastime of the Griswold children was performing plays for the neighborhood, and Eunice’s penchant for drama manifests itself in both the style and subject matter of her artwork.

In 1789 Eunice Pinney (then Eunice Griswold) married Oliver Holcomb of Granby, with whom she had two children, Oliver Hector Holcomb and Sophia Holcomb (Phelps). Scholarship has previously maintained that Pinney was soon widowed, when Oliver Holcomb died fording a stream en route to Ohio. However, a series of entries discovered in the *American Mercury* discloses some shocking new information about the circumstances of this first marriage.<sup>3</sup> On June 16, 1794, the following notice appeared in the *Mercury*:

Whereas my wife Eunice has eloped from my bed and board for reasons best known to herself—therefore I forbid all persons harboring or trusting her, as I will pay no debts of her contracting after this date.

OLIVER HOLCOMB  
 Hartland, June 6, 1794

The notice is repeated the following two weeks. On June 30, a response notice from Eunice Holcomb (Pinney) “TO OLIVER HOLCOMB” appeared in the same newspa-

per. The tone of the communiqué—quite humorous in parts—is of sarcasm combined with bitterness and despair. Her purpose in writing is, in her own words, to “obtain remission from public opinion.” She explains that her husband was a drunk who, after only two months of marriage, deserted *her* for the West Indies, presumably with the military. She recounts, “When your friends had made the usual search in barns and ditches, and under hedges and the like, they were very much surprised to find they did not meet with the success to which they had been accustomed in like cases....” Mr. Holcomb apparently returned six months later to beg her forgiveness and to ask that she take him back, which she reluctantly did—only to please his parents. The result is best described in her own words:

...very far have I been from finding any alteration in your conduct, except for the worse. Your own conscience, if you should happen at this time to have any about you, will bear me witness, with what patience I bore with all your extravagances; such as frequent intoxication and profane swearing, destroying the gardens and fruits of your peaceful, industrious neighbors...<sup>4</sup>

Apparently, Mr. Holcomb went out regularly and spent the family’s money on gambling and alcohol, only to return home in a foul mood and abuse his wife, who was

caring for two sick children. Sparing further detail, Pinney concludes that she left to save herself, for she too was “sick and in constant danger.”

Upon leaving her husband, Pinney most likely returned to the home of her parents in Simsbury, from whence she wrote her notice. According to Mary Nason, who has done extensive research on the women of early Connecticut, Pinney actually managed to obtain a divorce from Oliver Holcomb.<sup>5</sup> Her second marriage, to Butler Pinney of Windsor in 1797, was apparently

more successful: the couple remained together until Eunice died in 1849. (Butler died the following year.) Eunice had three children with Butler Pinney. Their eldest son, Norman, became an Episcopal reverend like his uncle and great-uncle, as well as a professor who cofounded a school in Mobile, Alabama. Their daughter, Emeline Minerva, also went to Mobile, “at the urgent request of her brother.”<sup>6</sup> After

teaching for a time there and in Virginia, she returned to Middletown, Connecticut, where she established a young ladies’ school before marrying Henry Bright of Northampton, Massachusetts. Pinney’s youngest son, Viets Griswold, died at age fifteen after falling from a cherry tree.

Clearly, Pinney’s first marriage represents a temporary but tragic deviation from an otherwise peaceful and prosperous life. With the information available, we can only conjecture that these unfortunate circumstances led her to take up watercolor painting. Painting apparently provided her a means of expressing the anger, resentment, and sorrow she must have felt. Financial need may also have played a part, since she was most likely supporting herself and the children from her first marriage. Eunice Pinney would undoubtedly have qualified for a teaching position in one of the many new schools in the area, and there she could have become acquainted with the technique of watercolor painting.<sup>7</sup>

Pinney was a pioneer in watercolor painting, which was introduced in the Hartford area in the early 1790s.<sup>8</sup> Until the second quarter of the nineteenth century, watercolor painting was pursued by young girls as part of their schoolwork. Pinney’s style and subject matter, while indebted to schoolgirl art, are nevertheless unique and reflective of her mature character. Yet Pinney was not a nonconformist. Like many naive painters, she derived a number of her compositions from the designs of other artists. Moreover, she chose a medium that was considered socially acceptable for a woman of her era. The authors of *Artists in Aprons* explain that watercolor painting was well-suited to the domestic role of women because it was “readily available, relatively inexpensive, quickly executed, and easily put away.”<sup>9</sup> While we may never learn why or when Pinney took up painting, our new understanding of her circumstances enables us to reinterpret not only individual paintings, but the entire body of her work.

Pinney painted predominantly genre scenes, mourning pictures, and illustrations from literary sources, all of which were also the most common subjects in schools and drawing academies at the time. She drew inspiration from a variety of sources, including engravings, woodcuts, ceramics, printed textiles, and illustrations from such printed sources as books, magazines, and almanacs. Copying was encouraged in American drawing academies and female seminaries, and Pinney used many motifs that were common in schoolgirl work of the time. She also employed some of the techniques taught at academies, such as pin-pricking to simulate the appearance of embroidery stitches. Yet Pinney was not strictly a copyist, and she freely adapted compositional elements to create imaginative and original works. Moreover, her choice of subjects reflects several other influences, including her extraordinary personal life and extensive education. The themes of love, marriage, and family relationships predominate in her genre pictures, expressing her own preoccupation with these concerns. Even her scenes that derive from printed sources seem to have been very purposefully selected based on their subject matter. Most of Pinney’s pictures relate somehow to events in her own life; thus, the entire body of her work can, in a sense, be considered autobiographical.

**MASONIC MEMORIAL  
PICTURE FOR REVEREND  
AMBROSE TODD**

Connecticut  
1809  
Watercolor on laid paper, pen  
and ink inscription  
14 × 11 7/8"  
Museum of American Folk Art  
purchase. 1981.12.7



Helga Photo Studio

Pinney's earliest dated work is a 1909 Masonic memorial for the Reverend Ambrose Todd (see page 33). Like all of her mourning pictures and family registers, the Todd memorial commemorates a figure who was important to Pinney personally. Reverend Todd succeeded Roger Viets in the Simsbury parish, and he also married Eunice to Butler Pinney in 1797.<sup>10</sup>

Pinney likely painted various of her undated pictures earlier than 1909, for many of them demonstrate less skill in technique and composition than the dated ones. More important than reconsidering the dates of these paintings, however, is reconsidering their content. Details of Pinney's letter to Oliver Holcomb provide clues to the meaning of numerous curious works that have previously been considered simple, "bucolic" scenes. The twentieth-century eye tends to equate simplicity with peace and harmony and to assume that these are what the folk artist intended to convey. It is the viewer, who is naive, however—not the artist. We regard scenes involving conflict as amusing representations of life's occasional ups and downs. Rather than seeing the ongoing battle alluded to in Pinney's *Mother and Daughter*, we see a trifling spat between two women, set in a quaint interior, conveniently documenting furniture, dress, and hair styles of the period. The scene undoubtedly recalls arguments between the artist and her mother-in-law, who initially supported Pinney but betrayed her when she finally left Oliver Holcomb. Similarly, we fail to question the significance of such bizarre elements as the oversized bunch of grapes in *Love at Harvest Time* and the meaning of such compositions as *Couple in a Landscape*, wherein the female figure struggles against her overly eager suitor.

The grapes in *Love at Harvest Time* probably allude to the excessive indulgences of Pinney's first husband, grapes being the symbol of Bacchus, the God of Wine.<sup>11</sup> The man grabs at another bunch of grapes that the woman struggles to keep from him. The broken chain dangling from the urn of fruit in the foreground may symbolize the precarious state of a man bound by his earthly desires. Since the urn was probably copied from a print source, one could argue that Pinney intended no such profound message; however, it is unlikely that such an intelligent and well-read woman would copy images randomly. Many writers have commented on the strange stumplike trees in the picture. Perhaps they refer to the neighbors' gardens and fruits, which Oliver Holcomb apparently destroyed on at least one drunken occasion. With these things in mind, it becomes apparent that the distraught expression on the woman's face is *not* that of a woman playing some sort of game with her lover, but that of a wife trying hopelessly to prevent her husband from destroying their marriage—and her own dignity—with his drinking. The same distraught expression appears on the face of the woman in *Couple in a Landscape* (see page 30), in which the man pours some beverage (though milk-white, it is nevertheless suggestive of wine) for the woman, who seems to be concerned primarily with removing his arm from around her neck. Not insignificantly, the dog, a traditional symbol of marital fidelity, looks away. Though likely copied from one of many Dutch genre scenes that were popular during the period, this painting should nonetheless be considered autobiographical.

Several other paintings may be autobiographical as well. In *Courtship*, a man with a guilty countenance sits atop a tree stump holding a hat full of grapes. The more industrious woman, who holds a basket full of fruit she has gathered, regards the man with skepticism. At the top, an oversized bunch of grapes provides a central message for the picture, which becomes the portrait of a family broken by alcoholism. In the background of *Courtship* there is a child carrying a bundle of sticks. The child most certainly represents Pinney's daughter, who, according to Eunice's newspaper communiqué, helped her carry firewood from the mountains during the direst of times. Pinney expresses tenderness and pity for this unfortunate child in *Mother and Child in a Mountain Landscape*. The background of this picture contains a fortress-like building on a hill, possibly representing Old Newgate Prison, to which Pinney had several connections.<sup>12</sup> These and other details provide clues to an underlying story. Unaware of the story, however, the viewer tends to see the backgrounds as generically quaint and well-balanced settings typical of folk paintings of the period.

Also unrecognized until now is the significance of many of the compositions that Pinney copied from print sources. Barbara Luck, curator of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, has uncovered many of these sources. Pinney evidently copied *Couple and Casualty* (see page 32) from a copperplate-printed English fabric that features engravings by the British artist Henry Bunbury.<sup>13</sup>

One cannot help but wonder whether Pinney's selection of this scene relates to the physical turmoil and ultimate "casualty" of her first marriage. The couple on the right half of the composition assumes the same pose as couples in numerous other paintings, wherein the man holds the woman tightly, obviously against her will. The man may represent Oliver Holcomb, whom Pinney seems always to have depicted in uniform.

Pinney's literary illustrations derive from some of the greatest works of prose and poetry of the Romantic period, as well as from classical literature. Pinney probably had access to a great number of beautiful and inspiring books



**LOVE AT HARVEST TIME**  
Connecticut  
c. 1815  
Watercolor and ink on laid paper  
8 7/8 × 12 7/16"  
Philadelphia Museum of Art:  
The Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch  
Collection. 67.268.12



through her uncle Roger Viets, who “indulged his taste in collecting one of the largest and best-selected libraries, then known in those parts.”<sup>14</sup> Reverend Viets was also keeper of the parish library, apparently a collection of considerable value. Reverend Viets was reputedly a Greek scholar, and Reverend Griswold mentions that his uncle’s tutoring was particularly strong in the classics. Pinney’s painting *Hector and Achilles*, an illustration from book XX of *The Iliad*, indicates that she too read such tomes. Pinney painted many other illustrations of identifiable scenes from well-known literary works, and she often included titles and text that provide clues to her sources. *Lolotte et Werther* depicts a scene

from Goethe’s popular novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, for which Pinney apparently relied on an engraving (or some derivation thereof) by French artist F. Bonnefoy.<sup>15</sup> *The Cotters Saturday Night* is related to a quilt owned by the Brooklyn Museum that is composed of copperplate-printed handkerchiefs illustrating two scenes from the poem by Robert Burns.<sup>16</sup> *Valencourt and Emily* depicts a scene from Chapter Thirty-eight of Anne Radcliffe’s Gothic romance *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and *Charlotte’s Visit to the Vicar* illustrates another recognizable scene from *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Apparently, Pinney identified with the characters of Charlotte and Emily, whose virtue remained

steadfast despite the deceit, greed, and other vices rampant in the world around them. Likewise, she admired the virtuous family of cottagers in Burns's poem—a simple family whose religious faith is untainted by the pretenses of wealth and social status.

Two of Pinney's paintings may have been inspired by periodicals, through which she would have had access to world news. Both pictures depict events that occurred in Great Britain during the time Pinney was painting, and each is undeniably analogous to Pinney's own life. *Mrs. Clarke, the York Magnet* (see page 31) refers to a woman who was the subject of many satirical articles and images in England in 1809. Mary Anne Clarke, the infamous mistress of Frederick, Duke of York, was known to have accepted bribes from aspiring military officers, which money she used to pay for the lavish furnishings and lifestyle to which she quickly became accustomed. In 1809 the Duke was brought to trial in the House of Commons for abuse of military patronage, and while the charges remained unproven, the scandal became popular among political satirists. Much attention was focused on an elaborate pair of Grecian sofas owned by Mrs. Clarke that were specifically referred to in one of several corollary court cases.<sup>17</sup> Pinney carefully renders a very elaborate Grecian sofa in her depiction of Mrs. Clarke, and in a related picture entitled *Forlorn* she depicts the same distraught-looking woman reclining on a nearly identical Grecian-style chair. Both paintings include a young girl (similar to the girl in *Lolotte et Werther*) proudly displaying a doll; this transforms the image into a domestic scene, perhaps an autobiographical one. It is not surprising that Pinney would have identified herself with Mrs. Clarke, considering that Clarke's first husband was a drunk and in debt, and that the Duke, during the time of their affair, spent the greater part of his time gambling.<sup>18</sup> Mary Anne Clarke ended up serving nine months in prison for libel, but only after successfully avenging herself on the Duke by testifying in an investigation that led to his resignation as commander-in-chief of the army. The analogies between Clarke and Pinney are striking, though their lives and characters were quite dissimilar. Pinney's fascination with the Clarke scandal may be related to her concern with her own reputation.

A second work relating to British current events tells another story concerning public image and may refer directly to Pinney's first husband. *Collingwood, the Ever to be Lamented Lord Nelson*, introduces an interesting episode from British naval history. The *Dictionary of*

*National Biography* indicates that Cuthbert Collingwood and Horatio Nelson are two different figures who were often confused because their careers as vice-admirals in the British navy were so closely intertwined. In reality, Lord Nelson was a truly brilliant commander-in-chief, while Collingwood, only average as an admiral, enjoyed a reputation for greatness achieved mainly through his confusion with Lord Nelson. Careful reading of Pinney's newspaper communiqué to her first husband reveals several parallels between Collingwood and Oliver Holcomb, who also traveled to the West Indies and enjoyed an undeserved "heroic" reputation, at least among his family and friends. In Pinney's picture Collingwood gestures toward an unidentified third uniformed man, while Lord Nelson gestures toward Britannia. Britannia holds her head in her apparent



**THE COURTSHIP**  
Connecticut  
c. 1815  
Watercolor and ink on  
paper  
12 ½ × 9 ¼"  
Collection of Erving and  
Joyce Wolf

resignation to the unidentified man, who kneels solicitously at her side and holds her other hand.

Many of Pinney's paintings contain several layers of meaning, which become clear only with careful scrutiny of details and research into sources. Much has yet to be learned about the events of Pinney's life and the significance of many of her curious works. A variety of factors and influences contributed to the development of Pinney's technique and style, as well as to her choice of subject matter. The result is a body of work that is both typical and unique within the larger body of early nineteenth-century watercolor painting. Pinney's life and work embody many universal values, concerns, opinions, and tastes of Federal America. As a pious citizen with a strong interest in classical education and in current events at home and abroad, she was a representative member of a typical Connecticut River Valley community in the early years of the American republic. At the same time, however, Pinney was an extraordinary figure whose extensive knowledge, keen intellect, and unusual domestic circumstances provided her with the independence and the inclination to express her views and sentiments artistically. Examination of Pinney's work tells much about the origins and nature of amateur watercolor painting in America. She helped to popularize the medium, and both her style and subject matter reflect her connection with other amateur artists of her time. Yet Pinney's work is exceptional and demonstrates the possibility of personal contribution and originality in a tradition so often connected with copying and schoolgirl work. A fuller understanding of amateur watercolor painting during this period requires that other artists like Pinney be considered individually for their unique artistic contributions. ★

#### Acknowledgments

The author began her research on Eunice Pinney for a graduate seminar on American folk painting taught by Colleen Heslip at Williams College. She would like to dedicate this article to Ms. Heslip, who passed away in 1993, and to her own grandmother, Bertha Pinney Alcorn, who still lives in Suffield (near Simsbury), Connecticut.

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*Susan R. Foster received a bachelor's degree in American studies from Yale University in 1987 and a master's in art history from Williams College in 1991. She currently works for the National Portrait Gallery as Field Surveyor for the Catalog of American Portraits.*

#### NOTES

1 Jean Lipman, "Eunice Pinney—An Early Connecticut Watercolorist," *Art Quarterly* vol. 6 (no. 3, 1943), pp. 213–221.

2 John S. Stone, *Memoir of the Life of the Rt. Rev. Alexander Viets Griswold, D.D.* (Philadelphia: Stavely and McCalla, 1884), p. 22.

3 *The American Mercury* (Hartford), June 16, 23, and 30, 1794.

4 *Ibid.*, June 30, 1794.

5 Nason discovered this information in the manuscript divorce records of the Connecticut State Archives in her research for the unpublished manuscript "The Goodwives of Simsbury." (Curatorial files, Museum of American Folk Art.)

6 Henry R. Stiles, M.D., *History of Ancient Windsor* (New York: Charles B. Norton, 1859), p. 751.

7 According to announcements in the *American Mercury*, Granby Academy was to open in November 1794. Pinney may have been involved with the new academy. On the committee was Joseph Jewett, who was later named guardian for Pinney's son Oliver H. Holcomb, aged about sixteen, in an 1809 document (Granby Probate Records, no. 961—Granby).

8 Advertisements in the *American Mercury* indicate that watercolor paints were available as early as May 9, 1791, when Reuben Smith & Co. first advertised "Water paints in large and small quantities. Reeves genuine Patent Water Paints, in Boxes," received from London and Bristol.

9 C. Kurt Dewhurst, Betty MacDowell, and Marsha MacDowell, *Artists in Aprons: Folk Art by American Women* (New York: E.P. Dutton in association with the Museum of American Folk Art, 1979), p. 43.

10 Albert C. Bates, *Records of Rev. Roger Viets, Rector of St. Andrew's, Simsbury, Conn.* (Hartford, 1893), p. 62. (Curatorial files, Museum of American Folk Art.)

11 Grapes appear on the seal of the Commonwealth of Connecticut, dating from 1784. However, Pinney's treatment of the motif suggests they held a greater significance for her.

12 Pinney's grandfather, Captain John Viets, was keeper of Old Newgate in 1774, and her uncle, the Reverend Roger Viets, was sentenced in 1777 to one year's imprisonment there for his alleged loyalist activities. Evidence suggests that Pinney was familiar with the work of Richard Brunton, an engraver who was imprisoned at Newgate for counterfeiting money. (See William Warren, "Richard Brunton—Itinerant Craftsman," *Art in America* 39 [April 1951], pp. 81–91, and "Richard Brunton," *Art in America* 41 [Spring 1953], pp. 69–78.) Brunton is best known for his companion portraits of Major Reuben Humphreys, then keeper of Old Newgate, and his wife. Pinney is known to have painted another picture of Old Newgate, listed in Jean Lipman's 1943 article.

13 For details, see Beatrix T. Rumford, gen. ed., *American Folk Paintings: Paintings and Drawings other than Portraits from the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1988), p. 379.

14 Stone, op. cit., p. 37.

15 This information was provided by Barbara Luck to the National Gallery of Art, which owns the picture. The source for the winter medallion pasted on the wall at the upper right is described in *American Folk Paintings*, p. 212, notes 7 and 8.

A second amateur watercolor painting of the scene is known, but Pinney's is closer to the original. An extant Chinese export reverse painting on glass also depicts this scene, indicating its popularity. This piece was sold in 1984 at Shreve, Crump & Low in Boston, and it is illustrated on the back cover of *The Magazine Antiques*, July 1984. (Curatorial files, National Gallery of Art.)

16 The illustrations on the handkerchiefs were evidently drawn by David Allan and engraved by Robert Gray. The quilt is illustrated in the *Catalogue of a Loan Exhibition of English Chintz*, Victoria & Albert Museum (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1960), p. 36. This information was also provided by Barbara Luck to the National Gallery, whose files contain information on another amateur watercolor painting of the scene, this one even closer to the printed handkerchiefs.

17 Barbara Luck, "A Connecticut Matron and the Duke of York's Mistress," *Antiques World* vol. 3, no. 5 (March 1981), pp. 76–77. See also Rumford, op. cit., pp. 210–212.

18 This and the following information from D. Pepys Whiteley, "Who Was Mrs. Clarke?" *History Today*, May 1966, pp. 297–305.