

Animal Portraiture

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

AMERICA'S EARLY FOLK ARTISTS PORTRAYED ANIMALS WITH LOVE AND RESPECT. A HANDFUL OF ARTISTS CONTINUE THAT TRADITION, WHETHER PAINTING ANIMALS IN THE WILD, ON THE FARM, OR IN THE HOME.

Americans have long appreciated the animals that helped them conquer the colonial wilderness—those that cleared and plowed fields, supplied wool and fur for warmth, and provided milk and meat for sustenance. As a testament to their value, set-

tlers sometimes brought their livestock into their cabins to protect the beasts from winter's bitter cold.

In turn, America's early artists portrayed the animal kingdom with a sense of rapport seldom found among their European counterparts.

Early settlers' respect for the animal kingdom was depicted simply in

the primitive American art popular through the 18th and much of the 19th Centuries. Folk art dominated early American painting, with many artists gifted but untrained in professional methods and seldom exposed to the technically proficient portraits, landscapes, and animal paintings that hung on the walls of Europe's gentry.



COURTESY OF THE ABBY ALDRICH ROCKEFELLER FOLK ART MUSEUM, COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

Peaceable Kingdom, oil on canvas, 17¼" x 23¼", 1832-34. Edward Hicks's most famous painting, of which 62 versions survive, is based on the biblical prophecy of Isaiah and depicts the Quaker minister's view of the schism that split the Society of Friends in the 19th Century.

Several painters working today acknowledge their debt to their American artistic ancestors—three centuries later, they continue to create charming depictions of cows, sheep, rabbits, and poultry, as well as portraits of the pets we shower with love, imbuing their subjects with noble, intelligent, and sometimes whimsical sensibilities.

A TRADITION OF REALISM

Artists since time immemorial have had a mysterious relationship with animal subjects. We still stare with perplexed awe at mankind's earliest paintings at Grotte Chauvet in France, where horses, lions, and buffalo charge across stony cave walls. Created 32,000 years ago, these pictures might have been early man's attempt to capture the creatures' souls to improve the hunt, or they might have been a form of animal worship. We simply don't know.

Whatever the case, artists eventually emerged from caves across Europe and Asia to portray animals on the colorful murals, mosaics, and pottery of ancient civilizations. By the time of the European Renaissance, brilliant masters such as Italy's Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Germany's Albrecht Durer (1471-1528), and the Dutch Rembrandt (1606-69) drew upon their precise knowledge of anatomy—both human and animal—to create animal portraits of startling realism.

European animal painting came fully into its own with the early *animaliers*—skilled painters specializing in animals—such as the Flemish artists Franz Snyders (1579-1657) and Jan Fyt (1611-61), who frequently rendered beautiful yet fierce animals as either hunters or prey, symbols of nature's savagery.

Another animal artist of the period deserves mention. Paulus Potter, born in Amsterdam in 1625, produced about a hundred exquisite animal paintings before dying of tuberculosis at twenty-eight. Characteristic of animal painters through millennia, Potter “never went out without observing and recording some significant trait or action of ox, cow, or sheep,” wrote



COURTESY OF THE KIMBALL ART MUSEUM, FORT WORTH, TEXAS

Lord Grosvenor's Arabian Stallion with a Groom, by George Stubbs (1724-1806), c. 1765, oil on canvas, 39 $\frac{1}{8}$ " x 32 $\frac{3}{8}$ ". The Englishman is considered the greatest painter of animals of his day, celebrated especially for his physically accurate and sensitively rendered depictions of horses.

Victorian art historian Mary Margaret Heaton. “He seems, in fact, to have entered into the heart of his cows, if such could be, so thorough was his understanding of their natures.”

More pertinent to early American animal art was George Stubbs (1724-1806), son of a Liverpool leather merchant. A talented illustrator and author of a book on horse anatomy, Stubbs benefitted artistically as horses became a favorite painting subject of the English aristocracy. He painted horses standing, prancing, racing, and hunting, and eventually became preoccupied with depicting wild horses heroically fighting off attacks from lions and other savage beasts, mirroring the work of Snyders and Fyt in Flanders a century earlier.

RISE OF THE FOLK ANIMALIER

America's early colonists were far more intent on protecting themselves from wild beasts and relying on domesticated animals for survival than on capturing their likenesses in paint. Nonetheless, an artistic impulse stirred in the settlers' souls.

“Amid conditions in a land where life was reduced almost to bare necessities, with no painters to instruct and no examples of foreign masters to copy, it is strange indeed that art should have existed at all,” John Hill Morgan wrote in *Early American Painters* (1921), “and yet we find evidence of art in some form almost from the first.”

By the mid-1700s, American art split in two quite different directions.



Jacob Maentel often included animals in his folk art portraits, such as the roosters in *Amelia and Eliza Danner*, painted in Hanover, Pennsylvania, c. 1815, watercolor, gouache, ink, and pencil on paper, 10½" x 8¾".

A handful of gifted and educated American artists excelled in European styles of painting. Men such as John Singleton Copley (1738-1815), Benjamin West (1738-1820), Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827), and Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828) focused on satisfying the limited demand of the American market for portraits and large-scale historical paintings. All were competent animal painters—especially in depicting horses, in the manner of Stubbs’s paintings—but animals remained secondary subject matter.

Meanwhile, folk art took shape at the hands of farmers, merchants, and craftspeople who lacked artistic training but were inspired to paint the people, animals, and objects that populated their world. This naïve and often quirky art brightened

town homes and rural farms, often with horses, cattle, swine, poultry, and even family pets as the primary subjects.

Edward Hicks (1780-1849), a Quaker minister and sign painter from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, emerged as America’s first influential *animalier* with sixty-two known versions of *Peaceable Kingdom* and his 1846 *Noah’s Ark*, in which animals are featured in biblical contexts. *Residence of David Twining* (1845) and *Cornell Farm* (1848) show livestock in familiar rural settings. In both composition and palette, Hicks’s paintings display a simplistic harmony, calmness, and peacefulness seldom found in the academic paintings of the period.

Contemporaries of Hicks, such

as Troy, New York, house painter Joseph Hidley (1830-72) and Jacob Maentel (1763?-1863), who farmed in both Pennsylvania and Indiana, also incorporated household pets, horses, and livestock in their compositions. As with most folk artists of the period, their animals tend to be diminutive and primitively painted yet captivating in their charm.

These two schools of American animal painting—the realistic, academic approach derived from European artists, and the naïve techniques of America’s indigenous folk artists—are represented in the five artists featured in this article. All have been listed in the Directory of Traditional American Crafts.

Joanne Evans and Jacquelyn Trone frequently employ the dark backgrounds and vibrant realism derived from Europe’s old masters. The work of Donna Kriebel and Matthew McKeeby is clearly derivative of Edward Hicks and the early muralists, while Tim Campbell renders contemporary folk art with a playfulness he credits to the itinerant portraitists who rambled throughout early America.

MATTERS OF STYLE

Considering the artistic quality of their output and their varied styles of painting, one surprising fact unites these five artists—all are self-taught. Evans and Trone, for example, spent hours in museums studying the works of the old masters, teaching themselves how to emulate classic techniques. Likewise, McKeeby taught himself to paint by meticulously copying figures from Edward Hicks’s paintings.

“I didn’t go to school for this, which I think has helped,” Campbell declared. “Everyone I know who went to school for art paints the same. If I’d gone to school for it, I’m sure I wouldn’t be painting the way I am now.”

Evans, Trone, and McKeeby said painting in oil enhances their individual styles, while Kriebel and Campbell use acrylics. The oil painters enjoy the visual depth, hues, and longer drying time the medium offers,

while the acrylics advocates appreciate the tidiness, brightness, and faster drying time their paints afford.

"I love oil paint, the smell and everything," Trone said. When asked about medium, Kriebel laughed and said one reason she prefers her acrylics is "I can't stand the smell of oil paints." Again, it's all personal.

They also split on one of the hottest artistic debates among traditional artisans—to age or not to age. Only Campbell is a strong proponent of aging his folk-oriented paintings. "I want them to look like there's 200 years of smoke and grime on them," he said without hesitation, adding that their aged appearance contributes to their popularity.

Although Trone prefers a vintage look, she achieves it through her relatively dark palette instead of

through artificial techniques. "I try to be as close to an 18th- or 19th-Century style of painting as I can," she explained. "As a result, I don't crackle or stain anything; when the painting's finished, it looks old the way I want it to."

Once a proponent of crackling, Kriebel said her non-aged paintings are more authentic to the early American period. "It's like the old homes where it was finally determined they didn't use such dull colors—their homes actually had bright and brilliant color, and it was only years and years of smoke, dirt, and grime that toned down the colors."

McKeeby said he too tried crackling and other methods of aging, but viewing a large showing of Hicks's works several years ago changed his mind. "The paintings coming out of homes and antiques

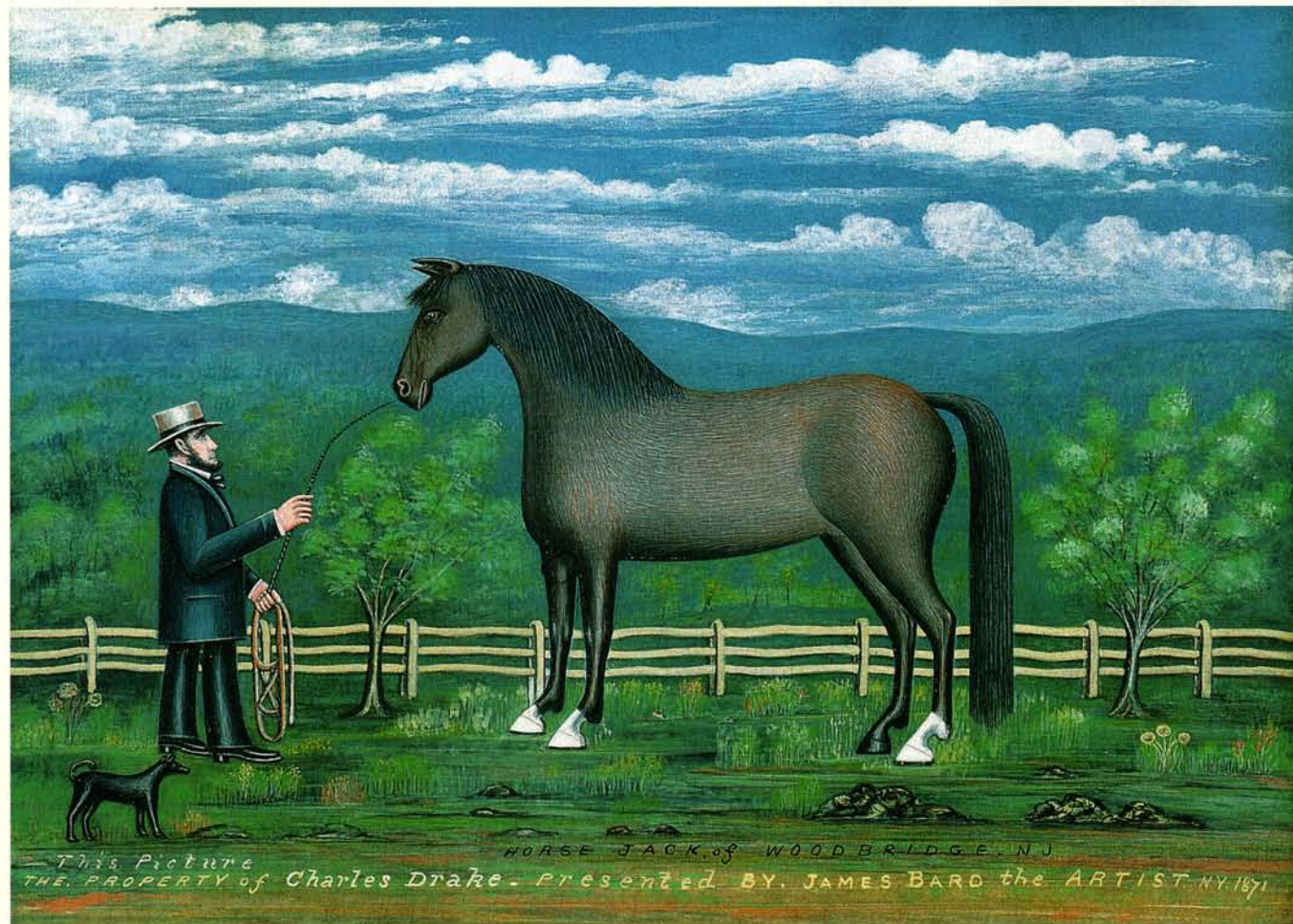
shops have this wonderful, distressed surface, but once the paintings have been cleaned and conserved, with Hicks at least you get this smooth, sharp and bright, bright, bright surface."

Now McKeeby adopts the style of Hicks's paintings as they originally appeared. "I've been told by some people that I'd sell more if I had a nice layer of crackle and grime on them, but I haven't been able to bring myself to do it."

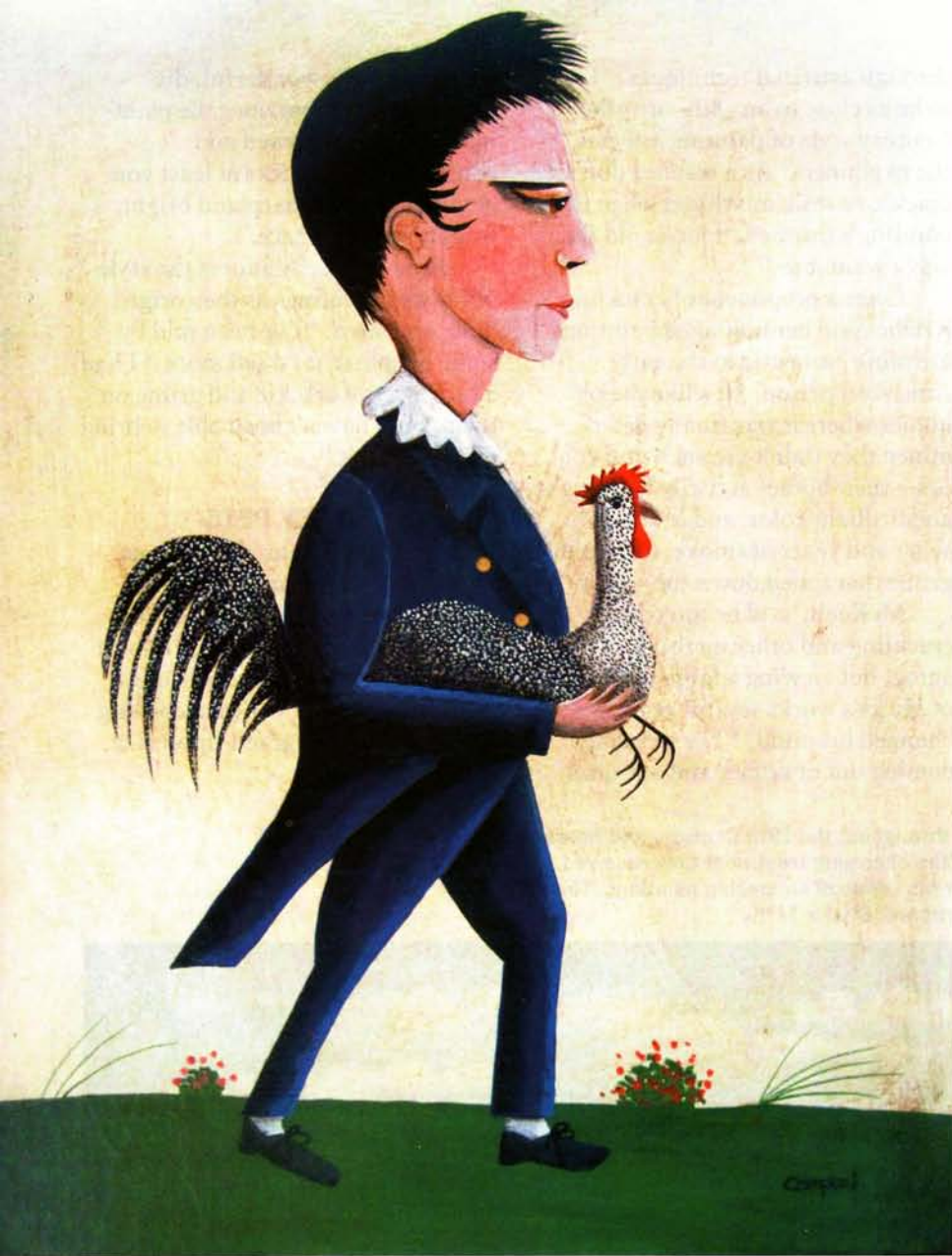
PAINTING FAMILY PETS

Aside from the animal paintings they design from scratch, all but Trone do commissioned portraits of people's pets, livestock, and other animals. Their process is quite similar, and price varies according to the portrait's agreed-upon size and complexity.

Horses were a mainstay of American folk art throughout the 19th Century, and *Horse Jack of Woodbridge, New Jersey* is typical of the charming treatment they received. Artist James Bard (1815-97) is best known for his series of steamship paintings. This painting, done in 1871, is oil and ink on paperboard, 8 $\frac{7}{16}$ " x 11 $\frac{13}{16}$ ".



COLLECTION OF THE AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM, NEW YORK, GIFT OF RALPH ESMERIAN



Tim Campbell puts his own spin on this modern version of the well-known folk art portrait *Boy with Rooster*, by Jacob Maentel, who painted the original watercolor c. 1815-25.

TIM CAMPBELL

Growing up in Keene, New Hampshire, Tim Campbell won an art competition for the entire K-12 school district—and he was in only the second grade. Since then, he has devoted himself solely to art.

“I can do abstract art. I can do folk art. I can do realism. It just depends,” he said. He loves the work of Pablo Picasso and American artist Edward Hopper. “And I love all of the itinerant artists who roamed around early America doing those portraits of people. They’d paint their pictures and get paid with a meal. They may be my biggest influence, but there are no names. They were mostly anonymous.”

Campbell now paints solely in acrylics for his folk-oriented paintings depicting animals, the nation’s founding fathers, landscapes and seascapes, among many other subjects. He ages his paintings and encases them in mostly antique frames.

“I’ve been painting animals for as long as I can remember. I mean there are so many cool animals. They’re better than people. And of course dogs. They’re my favorite. Best invention ever, the dog.” His constant companion as he works in his studio through the night until dawn—“fewer interruptions that way”—is Otis, his four-year-old Jack Russell terrier.

Campbell’s paintings and sculpture can be found in a dozen New England galleries, several of them on Cape Cod, and in private collections around the world. Most of his original paintings run from \$500 to \$5,000, but he also offers a variety of popular prints for about \$55.

JOANNE EVANS

Joanne Evans has been most drawn to the works of the Renaissance masters. “I love the paintings going back to the Dutch. I can see their pictures in my mind. They started with a dark background and then

All require photos of the animal to be portrayed. “The more photos you send, the better it’s going to come out,” Campbell said. “These animals have more personality than we do, and one photo isn’t going to show it.”

Kriebel wants photos of the animal from different angles. “I find out what background colors they like and if they want just a head or the whole animal.” Evans prefers to create portraits with simple backgrounds or confined to the head, much like a portrait of a human.

McKeeby has more back-and-forth with his clients, getting approval of sketches before he picks up a paintbrush. Kriebel prefers to send

the finished paintings to her clients, as does Evans, who said, “Normally I just put the finished painting in the mail and surprise them—people seem to like that.”

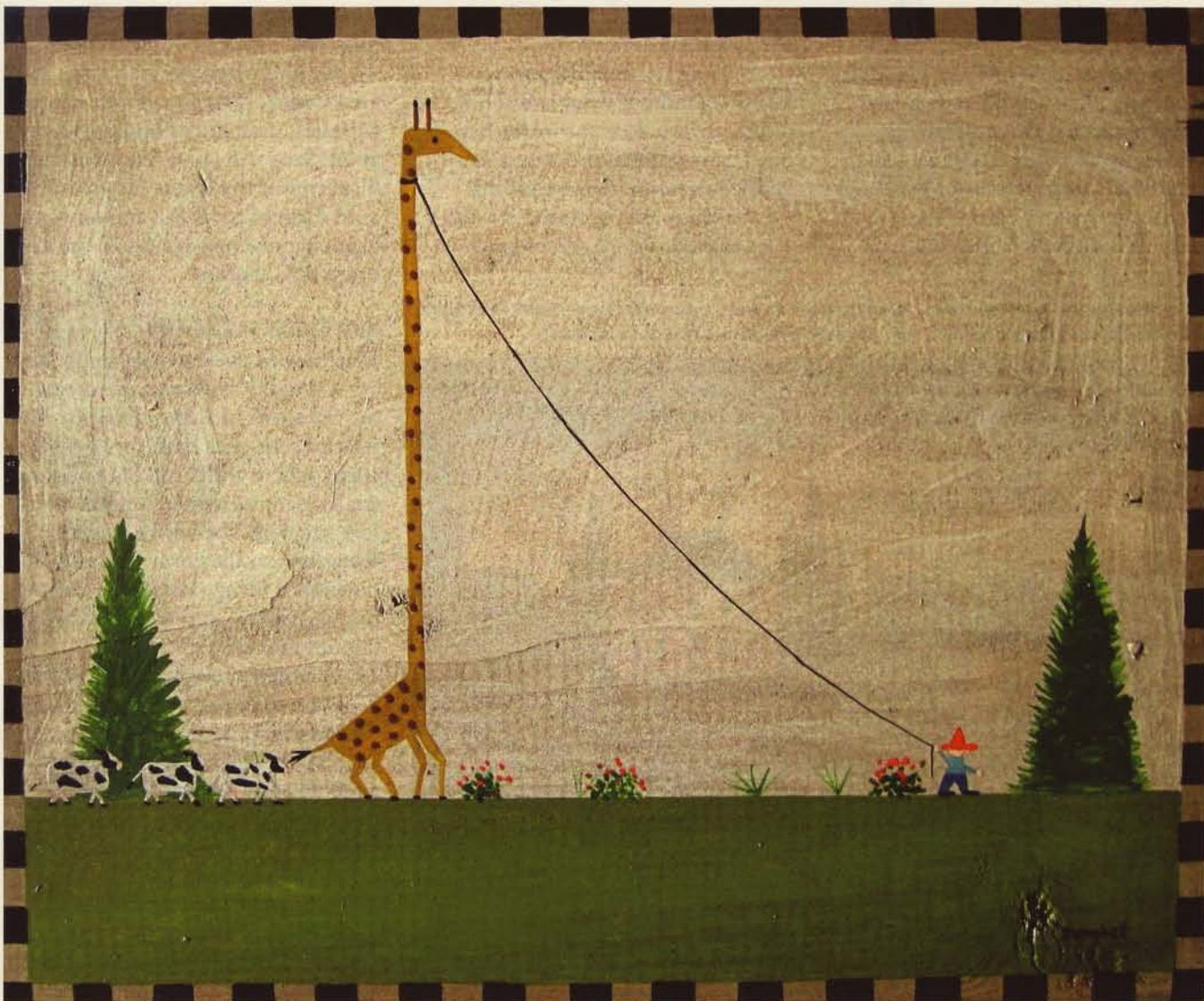
The feeling Trone puts into her painted animals comes from inside herself, she explained, which is why she doesn’t paint pet portraits. “They want the animal to look exactly like the real one, and when I do mine, I have to put my own feel to it.”

If you hire one of these artists to paint your pet, expect a turnaround of six to eight weeks, sometimes to allow drying time for oil paint and sometimes because of an artist’s busy time in spring and fall.



Joanne Evans photographed these heritage chickens and Berkshire hogs, the latter brought to America from England in the 1820s, before combining them in *Bacon, Eggs and Grits*.

Tim Campbell created this rendition of *Zarafa*, a giraffe given to Charles X of France by Mehmet Ali, Viceroy of Egypt, in January 1826. Captured as a young animal, she was transported by boat and ship with 3 cows that supplied her milk. On May 27, 1827, she set out on a 41-day walk to Paris accompanied by the cows. She lived in *Jardin des Plantes* for 18 years, and more than 100,000 people came to see her, approximately one-eighth of the population of Paris at the time. Her popularity inspired current fashion—ladies arranged their hair in towering styles, *à la girafe*, spotted fabrics were all the rage, and porcelains and other ceramics were painted with her image.



brought out these vibrant colors and then the light would hit those colors with such distinct feeling.”

That pretty much explains how the South Carolina artist paints today, although her subject matter reflects American settings, frequently farmyards and households, framed in hand-painted frames or large gold ones.

Her paintings reveal her love of animals and her willingness to let them determine content. “Often I’ll start a painting with the animal itself and then ask, ‘What’s that rabbit doing?’ and take it from there. Maybe I’ll also be influenced by some flowers or strawberries I just picked up at the store. With me, I never paint according to a plan—I just start and see where it goes.”

The origins of Evans’s highly individualistic way of painting go way back. As a child, she drew on everything in the house until her mother finally tried to channel her creativity by giving her a set of paints at age nine. Evans took some drawing classes in school and first was exposed to European masterpieces during art history class. “But I’m totally self-taught when it comes to

painting with oils,” she said. “I’ve learned by experimenting.”

Evans sells her art at select crafts shows and online. Prices for her original paintings range from \$130 to \$10,000. She also offers a line of prints for \$40 and up, depending on size.

“When people look at my work, I like to have them escape into a different world, to give them a sense of peace. My goal is to have them smile. If they smile, then I’ve been successful.”

DONNA KRIEBEL

Virginia artist Donna Kriebel characterizes her painting style as a mixture of realistic and stylized. She began nearly forty years ago painting watercolors but soon switched to acrylics and evolved a folk art style better suited to depicting the farms, animals, country homes, and arrangements of fruit and flowers she loves to paint.

“Being self-taught, you don’t know sometimes what you *should* be doing, so you do what works best.” She favors painting on wood, with special attention to the framing. “I’ve always felt the frame is a big part of the artwork. Years ago I

began doing hand-grained frames and it got to the point where people wanted to buy them, so we branched out and began offering them for sale by themselves.”

A woodworker builds the frames then she and her husband hand-grain them in many different colors and patterns. Their popular frames are a business separate from her painting, as are the classes she offers on topics such as graining.

Kriebel cites Edward Hicks as a key influence in her growth as a folk artist, “especially since a number of my paintings have scripture around them when the subject matter lends itself to biblical verse.” She has always painted animals. “I spin my own wool, so sheep have always been near and dear to my heart, and they were the first animals I painted.” Since then, she has mastered an entire menagerie of cows, roosters, pigs, and other animals.

Kriebel offers her paintings at East Coast crafts shows and select galleries, with prices ranging from about \$200 to \$2,600. Her work was displayed at the White House for the 2001 Easter festivities, and one of her original paintings resides in the Library of Congress.

In her landscape *Harvest Time*, Donna Kriebel depicts a dog chasing a rabbit. Her work is in the spirit of Edward Hicks, who painted local farms with their animals.



MATTHEW MCKEEBY

Matthew McKeeby is probably best among today’s artists at re-creating the work of Edward Hicks. The relationship goes back to when he was a young child and his antiques dealer parents owned a book about folk art with Hicks’s *Peaceable Kingdom* on the cover. “I can still remember being just a little kid sitting in the hall and trying to pet the lion on that cover.”

A couple of decades later, when he was in his twenties, his parents sent him a jigsaw puzzle of a Hicks painting. “I built the puzzle and sat back and looked at it and said, ‘Hmm. I wonder.’ So I started out with line-by-line copying of Hicks’s work. He gave me the color palette and the charm, and I love that. On the other hand, with Edward Hicks as your painting master, he wasn’t exactly a master of anatomy and the other things they

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD; I SHALL NOT WANT. HE MAKES ME TO LIE DOWN IN GREEN PASTURES HE LEADS ME BESIDE THE STILL WATERS

• PSALM 23 •



23rd Psalm represents two loves of Donna Kriebel. A spinner, she has always counted sheep among her favorite animals to paint. Also several of her works feature biblical quotes on handmade frames in the style of 19th-Century Quaker artist Edward Hicks, whom Kriebel cites as her main influence.

Hannah's Roses depicts two key traits of Joanne Evans's work—her frequent use of dark backgrounds and her realistic rendering of animals, here a Rex rabbit, in settings not normally associated with them, such as posed amidst flowers.

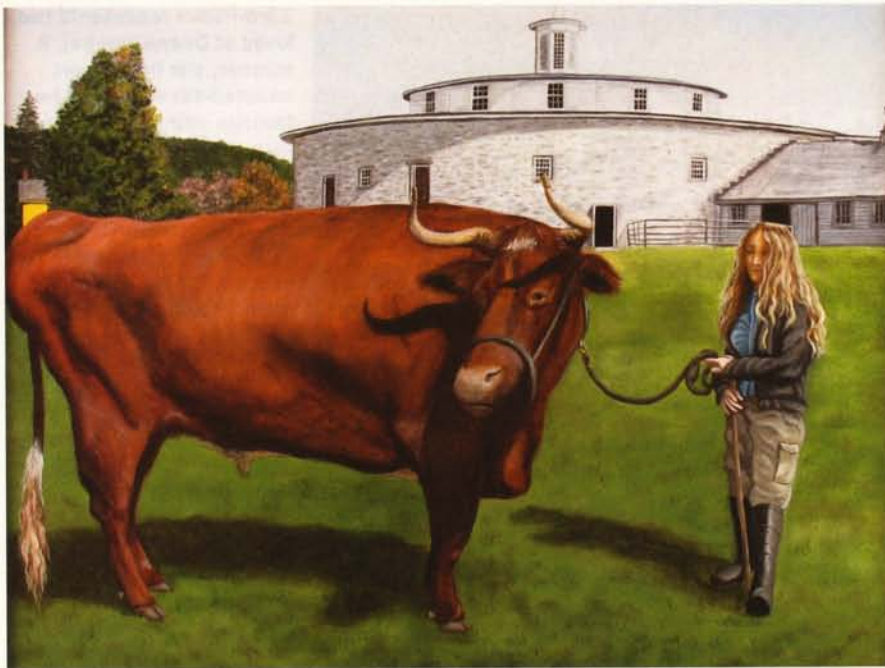
teach you in art school.”

McKeeby—a high school English and theater teacher in New York State—didn’t bother with art classes. “I don’t know if I should be proud or ashamed, but I’m totally self-taught.” It’s evident that he’s taught himself well, from the use of oil paints, hand lettering, building intricate frames, and conquering a variety of subject matter. “Hicks has influenced me above all, but so have the early portraitists. I have great respect for those folks who’d paint anything, on anything, for anyone.”

Explaining his switch from acrylics to oils, he noted, “Acrylic is bright and quick, but it’s not what they used in the day.” Similarly he no longer uses a crackle finish, “but in a commission situation, if someone said they wanted grungy, I’d do grungy and it would look good.”

“I have real respect for my artistic forbearers,” he continued. “I’m lucky enough to be able to go out





Matthew McKeeby calls the techniques used in his oil-on-canvas portrait of Buck, the resident ox at Hancock Shaker Village, “a proud mix of past and present.”

McKeeby taught himself to paint by studying and copying details from the works of Edward Hicks, as in his rendition of *Peaceable Kingdom* from an original, c. 1829-30. The handmade cherry frame is also in the style popularized by Hicks.



and buy a tube of paint when I want it. I don't have to get out a muller and grind the pigment and then find the right oil. I try to respect the surface of the painting, its look and the effort that went into it. I have a fascination with what the painting is supposed to look like and I try to remain true to that.”

His canvas paintings run from about \$500 to \$1,500, depending on size and complexity. He also paints on antique school slates with grained frames, starting at under \$100. He sells his work at local shows and online.

JACQUELYN TRONE

It's almost unheard of that a person deeply involved in restoring a 1740 farmstead would find the time and energy to learn various traditional

crafts, much less become expert at them. Yet, for Jacquelyn Trone, the drive to furnish her home with historically accurate pieces led her to learn oil painting, *fraktur*, *scherschnitte*, doll-making, and other early art forms.

"I enjoyed restoring the house so much, the plastering and everything. Every once in a while I'd paint a blanket chest or something, and it started from there," she said. Her husband bought her a set of paints and she set up an antique easel on the upper floor of their barn.

Since those days in the late 1960s, Trone has had her paintings exhibited at the Museum of American Folk Art in New York and has been featured in several national magazines as well as on HGTV.

As for being self-taught, she said, "The result is that I had no rules and could do what I wanted without having to second-guess the teacher. I probably use my paints all wrong, but if it comes out okay, it's okay."

Trone's influences have not been artists but their paintings. "I'm much more attracted to the old paintings that I've seen in pictures and in museums. I've always been very concerned about color." As a result, her oil paintings vary from simplistic American folk art to rich, dark, complex artwork resembling Europe's old masters.

She has painted animals from her earliest days as an artist, starting with sheep. Even today, when she and her husband take drives near their home in Audubon, Pennsylvania, they snap photos of livestock for subject matter.

You can buy Trone's paintings at major East Coast crafts shows, select shops, and online, with prices starting at about \$500 up to about \$2,000. Commissioned work can run higher, depending on size and content.

"From what I hear from my long-time customers, not only do they like the subtlety of the colors I use, but they say I somehow come out with a personality for an animal." *

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The Welsh Pony illustrates the realism with which Jacquelyn Trone depicts horses, much like the work of England's famed horse painter, George Stubbs. Trone is recognized for her distinctive palette, a fine eye for detail, and the ability to imbue her work with emotion.

Poultry is familiar subject matter in Trone's work, as shown in *The Family*. Her oil-on-canvas paintings reflect the influence of Dutch master painters. She doesn't artificially age her paintings but employs color and shading to give them an 18th-Century feel. Antique frames enhance the vintage appearance.

