

A Much-Loved Folk Artist



By Gregory LeFever

WILLIAM MATTHEW PRIOR GREATLY INFLUENCED THE STYLE OF AMERICAN PORTRAITS, CHOOSING TO PAINT IN A MANNER PEOPLE LIVING IN THE YOUNG NATION COULD AFFORD.

If you've spent any time admiring portraits of early Americans, you've likely seen the work of William Matthew Prior – whether you know it or not. An influential painter of the 1800s, he helped shape the style of the portraits we most commonly associate with the American folk-art tradition.

But Prior was something of an enigma. While he had the ability to paint in a sophisticated manner, he also offered his customers a choice: \$25 for an academic-style portrait, or \$10 or less for a flatter, less-detailed work. Judging by the number of his surviving portraits, his preference – and that of his customers – was to paint more portraits for less money rather than hold out for fewer, more-lucrative commissions. He even advertised that he could complete a person's portrait, start to finish, in under an hour to keep the price low.

William Prior is best known for his charming, simple paintings of children and adults posed in front of uncomplicated backgrounds. His

brushstrokes are broad, his colors bright, and his paintings often lack shading or shadows. Though his style is simplistic, he had an uncanny ability to capture both likeness and expression, and his portraits of children display a heart-warming sweetness and innocence.

For some reason, he left dozens upon dozens of his portraits unsigned, which has created considerable confusion for collectors and art historians due to the number of other artists who copied his popular style.

Lore of the Folk Artist

Portraits were by far the most popular type of painting as America entered the 19th Century. They far outnumbered landscapes, still lifes, and historical depictions. Until then, only a handful of wealthy Americans could afford portraits that were painted by a few classically trained artists. But with more people prospering as tradesmen and merchants, they too wanted portraits of themselves and their families – and a growing number of untrained yet talented folk artists stood ready to satisfy the demand.



William Prior captured the likeness of Phebe Ann Carlton in 1843, the year she married Philander Hawes in Frankfort, Maine. Prior painted her 14x10-inch portrait in oils on a cardboard backing.

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David R. Peirce was a house carpenter in New Bedford, Massachusetts, when Prior painted this portrait in 1845, along with his wife, Sarah Wilbur Peirce, age 37, as one of a series of portraits of the Peirce family. Both 16x12-inch portraits are painted in oil on academy board.

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For much of the past hundred years, popular lore has been that these early folk artists roamed far and wide across the American countryside in search of families who might want portraits painted. And during the months when the land was buried under snow, these artists supposedly holed up and painted anonymous bodies and backgrounds on otherwise empty canvases so they only had to add only the faces and a few other details when they found customers during the warmer months.

This is mostly myth, say today's art historians. Recent research has shown that most folk artists traveled only when they'd already found customers in other locales through family or business connections, others established their studios in towns or villages and preferred to remain close to home, and almost none of them pre-painted bodies or backgrounds in anticipation of future subjects. These artists did, however, tend to repeat the same type of settings over and over, creating a certain "sameness" for their paintings.

Yet there did exist a few artists who sometimes traveled from town to town in search of customers. And at times during his relatively long career, one was William Prior.

A Lifetime of Painting

Prior was born in 1806 in Bath, Maine, the son of a seaman. He was already painting by age eighteen and may have received some training as an artist. In 1828, he married Rosamond Hamblin (or Hamblen), whose family included several painters. A few years later, the couple and three of her brothers moved together from Maine to Boston, where Prior set up a studio he called his "painting garret" where he worked until he died in 1873.

Right: This 1845 painting of a girl with her cat is one of Prior's best child portraits. It shows a more sophisticated painting style than most of his portraits, featuring complex shading and a more detailed setting. The painting also is recognized for capturing the special bond between children and animals. The long yellow feather the child holds reveals the portrait shows a moment of light-hearted play shared by the child and her cat. The full length of the portrait, its detailed foreground and background, and 36x28-inch are typical of Prior's higher priced portraits.

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Below: Walter Adams Peirce was seven at the time Prior painted his portrait in 1845. Walter was one of nine children of David and Sarah Peirce and grew up to be a farmer in Berkley, Massachusetts. Walter holds a morsel of food in his right hand for his puppy.

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One of his brothers-in-law, Sturtevant J. Hamblin, painted in a simple style very much like Prior's – and the look became known as the Prior-Hamblen School. No one is certain how many other artists adopted the same popular style, because many of the Prior-Hamblen-style paintings are unsigned and otherwise indistinguishable as to who painted them.



William Prior was a deeply religious man who became a follower of William Miller's Advent Movement, believing the Second Coming of Christ would occur in the 1840s. He did a few paintings depicting Biblical prophecy and wrote four books with religious themes. Meanwhile, his wife was a known clairvoyant and Prior himself said he could visualize the spirits of deceased people, painting their portraits through what he called "spirit effect." In this way he painted many portraits of deceased children and adults, including an 1865 portrait of his brother Barker, who had drowned at sea in 1815.

He also was a dedicated Abolitionist and was among the first American artists to paint pleasing and dignified portraits of African Americans to counter the demeaning images found in popular culture.

For nearly 35 years, Prior did most of his work in his Boston studio, preparing canvases, grinding his own oil paints, and making frames for his paintings. While he did most of his paintings in the Boston vicinity, he is known to have traveled as far away as Baltimore to do commissioned portraits. On other occasions he traveled by horse-drawn wagon around parts of New England for portrait work and some decorative painting at customers' homes.

Refining the Folk Style

Though many paintings now attributed to William Prior are unsigned, there are some consistent characteristics of his portraits that have enabled them to be identified as his.

For example, he used white paint to distinctively highlight his subject's eyes, nose, and mouth. He also defined noses with a continuous line extending from an eyebrow down one side of the nose. He used brown lines to outline the edges of hands and fingernails, and he placed diagonal lines at the ends of the mouth to help define cheeks. He painted his portraits in either oil or gouache on canvas, academy board or cardboard.

Aside from his portrait painting, Prior is known to have painted several landscapes. Though his family had been seafaring and he spent his entire life on the New England coast, no seascape or other maritime painting has ever been attributed to Prior.

Prior also promoted himself as a skilled varnisher, japanner, oil gilder and bronzer. He was accomplished at sign painting, various forms of ornamental painting, reverse painting on glass, and decorating clocks and furniture – all skills that could increase his earnings when he traveled to customers' homes for his portrait work.

Appraisers place a wide range of prices on the many surviving Prior portraits. At the low end, his portraits can get between \$2,500 and \$5,000 at auction. A substantial middle range of Prior paintings in good condition will bring around \$15,000, while some of his finest work – signed and fully authenticated and in excellent condition – can fetch \$90,000 or more.

As a folk artist, William Prior has left an important legacy. He demonstrated that just because a portrait was painted in a simplistic or naïve style, it did not indicate that the painter lacked training or sophistication and could paint no better. The range of Prior's portraits showed that he had an exceptional talent regardless of the price he sought for a painting. And he proved that adopting the simplistic look of the folk artist often was just good business.



Another in the 1845 series of Peirce family portraits by Prior shows Mrs. Mary Hafford Peirce, mother of David Peirce. Sixty-seven years old at the time of the portrait, she also wears eyeglasses typical of the mid-19th century. Her 16x12-inch portrait, as with the others in the family collection, is painted in oil on academy board.

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