

# Love and Need What Makes Folk Art Great



David Wheatcroft  
in conversation with John Fiske

Painted Dower Chest, Dauphin County, PA, dated 1803, 27" x 48" x 22".

*The title of your book is *The Authentic Eye*. That's an intriguing choice and raises the question – what do you mean by “authentic”?*

The choice of the word “authentic” refers to the unselfconscious integrity that I find in traditional eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American folk art. Many of these early artists were constrained by both their sensibilities and economic need. For me, the strongest folk art objects, including those in *The Authentic Eye*, are the

result of a unique marriage of social and economic needs joined to artistic impulse. To crib a phrase from Robert Frost, “only where love and need are one ... is the deed ever really done.”

*How is this idea of “love and need” different from the traditions of fine art – doesn't the impulse to create something spring from the same source?*

There's a particular confluence of conditions that anchors the context of traditional folk art and marks it as

something distinct from fine art. We can see love or passion in both, but in fine art, need – in the sense of the utilitarian – is often not a part of the process. Accentuating the difference is the fact that in folk art you rarely find what you often do in fine art – a sense of the artist's professional ambition. Ironically, in folk art the object produced often exceeds the artist's intentions, while in fine art inversely there are the grand intentions that are not often met. This unequal relationship between production and conscious intentions is a pervasive and defining characteristic of American folk art. The conventions of folk art were frequently shaped by economic need; the need on the part of the artist to make a living. This is not to say that fine artists didn't need the financial reward of payment, but rather that the pinch of economics in each of these traditions produces contrasting responses.

*So perhaps you would describe the folk artist as an artisan or craftsman? Is there a difference in the social roles played by folk artists and fine artists?*

There are some very broad historical trends that can help us to better understand the contrasting social and emotional context that nurtures the fine artist or the folk artist. In a sense, folk art and fine art were not distinct entities until the rise and concentration of populations into urban centers. This social organization of rural versus urban life helped to delineate the differences, although even today fine art and folk art still exist in a continuum that produces many gray areas.

Throughout much of human history, art has been tethered to religion and politics, illuminating a communal vision or glorifying either mystical or earthly powers. For literally thousands of years, artists worked for others. They labored for the crown or the church, under a system of apprenticeships and guilds. Broad social changes that began in the Renaissance and blossomed in The Enlightenment engendered a new sense of social and cultural identity. The artist as a celebrated individual personality began to evolve. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this new identity, a sophisticated world view and membership in an elite and ideal practice thoroughly pervaded the fine art tradition.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century the evolutionary track of fine art again changed: a small group of Europeans embraced a sort of individual reformation, consciously rejecting former social conventions and the confinement of artistic possibility to economic need. The seeds of the twentieth century's anti-art movement were sown and cultivated. What began as reformation, developed into a full blown cult of disdain for the useful or the readily sold. Separating himself from the everyday world, the fine artist became both philosopher and possessor of a unique and alternative vision; someone elevated beyond mere artisan or journeyman. Much of contemporary art exists in a baroque evolutionary cul-de-sac, a place where visual expres-



Bank Box, pine decorated with watercolor on paper under glass, New England, c. 1825, 5 3/8" x 10" x 5 5/8".



Trinket Box with Compass Decoration, Lancaster County, PA c. 1800, 7" x 12" x 12".



Tavern Sign, painted wood, South Hadley, MA, 1825-1830, 36" x 56".

sion is often abandoned in favor of an art form that is marked by self-involved ravings and ephemeral or non-material actions; all supported by jargon-laden apologies. This state of affairs provides a dramatic counterpoint to the unselfconscious and direct, distilled and authentic expressions of the traditional folk artist.

*So let's talk about what folk artists do, about their process in creating works of folk art and what you mean when you describe "need" as an important element.*

In the works illustrated in *The Authentic Eye* the object's context or function often contributed heavily to its form. The painter of the tavern sign for the Village Hotel, for example, needed to attract clients to the business as well as create a satisfying visual image. Function dictated that the painting would be hung high enough to be viewed both from a distance and from the ground below. In choosing his images, the sign painter embraced powerful sentiments of patriotism that pervaded the young American nation following the War of 1812. The elements of the sign were not defined in literal detail; rather, the eagle, the flag and the boat were conceived as both symbol and image in service to the local inn. This task of simplifying for both functional as well as economic reasons, finding the "less that will suffice," is one of the broad trends found in much of traditional folk art.

The same idea can be found in the form of weathervanes. The purpose of the object—seen both from a distance and from below,

influences its shape. Some of the most important and valuable American weathervanes were produced by small manufacturers: intent on making a living from their trade, they nevertheless created beautiful forms. Their designs reflect the functional need for a simple, bold image as well as the economic forces at play.

*You talk about simplifying for functional and economic reasons — "The less that will suffice." Can you illustrate this point with another image from your book?*

The influence of economic need is well illustrated by the work of Sturtevant Hamblin. His *Portrait of a Young Boy* (illustrated here) is the type and size of work that was Hamblin's stock in trade. It's a work that would have taken little more than an hour, certainly less than two to execute. The necessity of working quickly produced a freshness; you can still see much of the brushwork which is assured and to the point. Economic need engendered a discipline, a set of conventions that allowed the artist to work quickly. Yet he was still able to create appealing paintings that attracted and satisfied his clientele. Aside from the economy of brushwork, there's an economy of selection. Hamblin chose to paint only the features that were necessary — just what was needed for an effective portrait of that child, but no more. The ripples on the fabric of the pants are not literal. There's just sufficient indication, enough paint to suggest the fabric without describing unneeded detail.

*Hamblin was a fairly prolific painter, why did you choose this particular work to include in the book?*

In this portrait everything comes together to make a great painting. The subject is appealing; a young boy with a toy. The face is painted with subtle, strong colors and it exudes an unusually literal expression. The facial features are painted with greater attention than the body, which is executed more economically.

Incidentally, I must dispel an old myth here: folk portraitists did *not* paint a generic body first and then put on an individual head. They no doubt had a system for the bodies in the sense of limiting choices, but they still had room to particularize each portrait and attempt to get the head to fit with the body. As nobody has ever found a "blank" (a canvas or panel with only a headless body), we can safely say that this was simply not the practice of the folk portrait artist. This myth likely arose as a response to the unequal attention to detail and sometimes the disproportionate size of the head that is found in many folk portraits.

Getting back to your question about this portrait – Hamblin has placed his subject slightly off-center, the visual weight of the boy's right hand and left hip keep the composition just in balance. The aesthetics of this portrait are terrific, everything from the abbreviated checkering of the jacket right down to the juice of the paint application, it all works together.

Artists like those of the Prior-Hamblin school found their clientele among the growing middle class of New Englanders. Their patrons were not connoisseurs or collectors with large amounts of time and money at their disposal. This social construct dictated that the painter needed to work quickly and for a living wage. The time spent on a painting was related to the potential take-home pay. Perhaps a portrait didn't hit all the high notes, but unless it was a disaster for the customer, we can assume that this group of artists anxiously collected their fee and went on to the next one.

*Why do some paintings have an attribution to Hamblin or Prior, while others are described as part of the Prior-Hamblin School? Why are some works more valuable or successful than others?*

There's often confusion about which member of the school painted which portrait. There were at least five painters associated with this group of portraitists: William Matthew Prior and Sturtevant Hamblin were brothers-in-law, and George Hartwell was related. There was also William Kennedy and at least one anonymous artist dubbed both the "pointed finger" and the "double swag" artist. Prior, Hamblin and Hartwell were the most consistent performers, but all were capable and even the lesser lights could hit it right on any given day. There are many misattributions of these artists and people most often assume they have a Prior, perhaps because he is best known. Kennedy and the "double swag artist" are generally felt to be inferior to Prior, Hamblin and Hartwell. Telling them apart is an acquired skill that calls for keen attention to many details including the stylistic execution of hands, ears and facial features.

*The images on the cover of the book are quite bold, can you tell us something about these paintings?*



Sturtevant J. Hamblin: *Portrait of a Young Boy*, oil on academy board, New England, c. 1840, 19 5/8" x 13 7/8".

The pair of portraits of a man and woman that are illustrated on the cover of the book (and here) are a rare and early example of American folk art. Most paintings from the early 1700s exhibit a distinctly English influence and signs of formal training or apprenticeship. Keep in mind that at this stage in our history the colonists lived either in the port cities along the east coast or in small rural communities with sporadic access to European culture. The portraits shown here would not likely have been acceptable in a city such as Philadelphia or Boston where tastes favored Anglo-flavored art, and a need to be fashionable could be indulged.

These portraits are the work of an artist unanchored from cosmopolitan constraints who provided his customers with a unique rendition of the time-honored tradition of formal portraiture. I don't think it's going too far to claim that in this diptych we can see something distinctly American issuing from the social context that germinated folk art in the rural areas of a young nation. Each of these paintings on its own is wonderfully arranged, but as a diptych they are even more effective. The figures of the man and woman are extremely stylized. Here the minimum detail does the maximum work. Some might criticize



Pair of Portraits, oil on pine panels, New London County, CT, 1720-1730, 32" x 19" each panel.

the painting of the hands, saying that the artist lacked skill and didn't understand anatomy. Perhaps this is true, but more important is his sense for the anatomy of the painting and his intuitive understanding of composition.

*How does the work of artists in the more cosmopolitan areas differ from the work of folk artists in the countryside?*

A striking example of the cross pollination of city and country can be seen in the illustration of the tall case clock. Think about painting a clock like that. There is no sense of being constrained by the traditions of clock case making. There is no simulation of wood or timid use of color here. The maker was not a member of a hide-bound system and he was not dwelling in one of the fashionable centers but was living in an isolated valley of central Pennsylvania. This freed him to incorporate a variety of elements that are gleaned from almost 50 years of stylistic

developments that took place in metropolitan areas. The feet, moldings and decorative elements are sampled from mid-eighteenth-century cabinetry designs through the Empire style of the mid-nineteenth century. The attitude of this clock case maker, unencumbered by the rigid aesthetic and social traditions that might tie the hands of a Philadelphia artisan, found a happy marriage of a half-century of styles. Amazingly and uniquely the rosettes on the broken arch are repeated seven more times on the clock case. The distinctiveness of this piece of furniture hits you between the eyes and yet it is still a clock – with a bonnet, a waist, and feet. It still had to perform as a clock and it does. This design would have appeared as a monstrous hodgepodge to a skilled formal clockmaker or his Philadelphia client. Considering these prejudices it is truly amazing that this beautiful monster has somehow impressed each generation enough to preserve and pass it on.