



Fig. 1: The new discovery: *Woman in a Paint Decorated Chair*, ca. 1825. Oil on a poplar panel, 27 x 22½ inches. Courtesy, private collection.

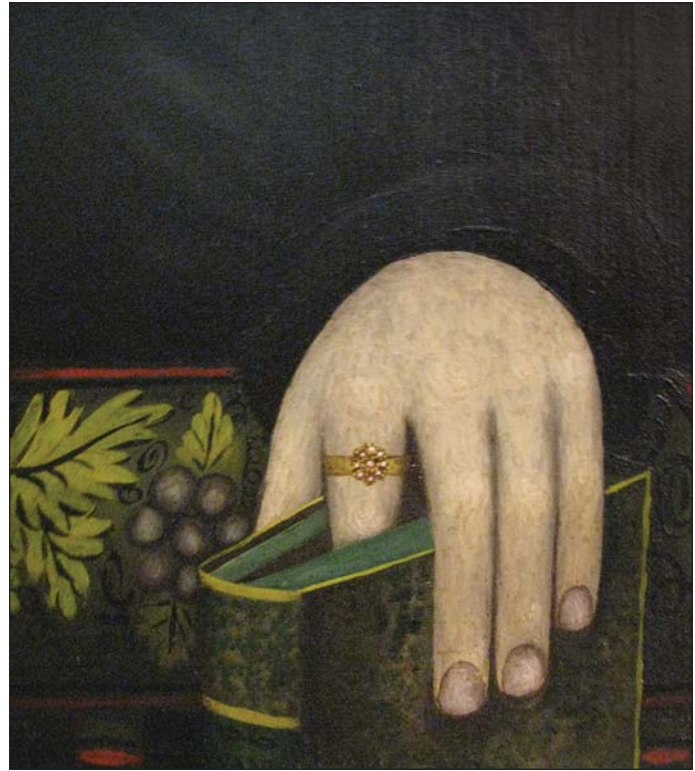


Fig. 2: detail of figure 1.

A New Discovery Widens Research Possibilities

by Joan R. Brownstein

RESEARCH ON A GROUP of related folk art portraits has yet to yield the identity of the artist. There are neither signed examples nor enough identified sitters within the group to help establish a geographic foundation to support an attribution. A recent addition to the group of known examples that can firmly be credited to this hand on a stylistic basis has been found, however, and opens up a new avenue for research.

The portraits in this group date primarily from the mid-1820s to the mid-1830s and fall into five categories based on their decorative elements. The newest example (Figs. 1–3), which appears to be related to a pair of portraits (Edward-Dean Museum of Decorative Arts) with which it shares an important feature (see below), makes clear that this unknown artist painted groups of works that share unique decorative details that might not have previously been recognized as his hand—but which can now be viewed as such. These new connections will perhaps bring forward the signed painting that has until now eluded scholars interested in the group's authorship.



Fig. 3: detail of figure 1.


One of the four previously identified groups includes sitters in paint-decorated side chairs of a yellowish ground color with salmon-colored striping and green leafage (Fig 4). The decoration covers not only the crest rail but also the upright members of the chair back.

Two other groups include sitters framed within elaborately draped and trimmed curtains (Fig 5). The curtains are sometimes primarily a red fabric or fabric of a bluish hue. The subjects are seated on either Federal sofas or on chairs with leaf-embellished crests and side stiles with prominent light colored or gold striping against a dark or black ground.

I know of only one example (private collection) of clearly related portraiture that includes neither drapery nor decoratively-treated seating furniture. It is also the only known example from the 1820s and 1830s that is rendered on canvas, the rest having been painted on panel.

Numerous distinct details are repeated within all the groups:

- Sitters often hold books or, occasionally, a different object, with similar finger placement and hand orientation.
- Woman often wear the same ring on the index finger and usually wear identical double-tiered earrings.
- White paint defines knuckles and red-brown paint outlines whiteish nails.
- Women usually wear black dresses that often have a black-on-black pattern within the fabric weave.
- Lace treatment may encompass several collar and bonnet styles, but paint handling is the same.
- Dress waist bands may be multicolored and have patterned cut edges.
- Hair combs are elaborate, of large size and often doubled, especially when of highly figured tortoise shell.
- Sitters' poses are standard. Women always face toward the right side of the canvas and men to the left. All figures are turned slightly to the side and are cropped to approximately the level of a natural waist position.

The newest example, found in a private collection in New York State, contains the classic details of this artist's hand, but the sitter, an unidentified young woman, is seated in a chair with a style of decoration only seen on one other pair of portraits from this group. Her chair has large yellow leaves, grapes, and red edge striping on the crest rail and around the top of the stiles, all on a gray ground. 

The author would welcome any information about related portraits.

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The three illustrated examples are of female sitters to allow easy comparison and to show major variations between the known groups of works by this artist.



Fig. 4: *Girl in Paint Decorated Chair*, ca. 1825. Oil on poplar panel, 25½ x 22½ inches. Courtesy, the author.



Fig. 5: *Portrait of Mrs. Seth Wilkinson*, New York, ca. 1825-1830. Oil on yellow poplar panel. Unframed: 30 x 25½ in.; and Framed: 39¼ x 33¼ in. (1960.100.2). Courtesy, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.