



4: Ammi Phillips *Old Woman with a Bible* (ca. 1834)

Susan Nurse

Tugged by nationalism and nostalgia for a simpler past, under assault by wars, brute industrialization, and European modernism, Americans in the early twentieth century discovered a taste for their own folk art, much of which had been relegated to family attics. The portraits of Ammi Phillips have often been included in that category.¹ And indeed, what could be plainer and more reassuring than the quiet, staunch, finely dressed old woman in MAG's portrait, a small book in her hand and her elbow resting with full familiarity on the family Bible?

This new interest in folk art was institutionalized in 1930 when Holger Cahill of the Newark Museum mounted a groundbreaking exhibition: *American Primitives*. In June 1931, the Memorial Art Gallery became one of the first museums in the country to host the traveling exhibition.² Although MAG in the following decades made good on its early appreciation of American folk art, continuing to collect and exhibit it, not until 1984 did it add one of Ammi Phillips's notable paintings—*Old Woman with a Bible*—to its collection.³

But is it “folk art,” when, unlike many “pure” folk artists, Phillips was well known, was non-itinerant at the peak of his career, often knew and identified his sitters (many of them prominent people), and though probably self-taught, was aware enough of artistic trends and confident enough in his own talent to periodically adjust his style in response to changing tastes, his sitters' wishes, and his own evolving skill and experience? Phillips has been variously categorized as a folk, naïve, or primitive artist, but even if his work is similar in some respects to that conventionally so described, to insist on any of these terms blunts our understanding of his real talent and fails to acknowledge the compelling strength of his mature paintings like *Old Woman with a Bible*.

Phillips was born in 1788 in Colebrook, Connecticut, and given the Old Testament name “Ammi.”⁴ Early scholarship had attributed his work before 1820 to the “Border Limner” and the mature work to the “Kent portraitist,” but thanks to the diligent efforts of Barbara and Lawrence B. Holdridge in the 1960s, Phillips was shown to have been the sole painter involved.⁵ Obviously he was highly successful in his craft (by 1994 over six hundred of his portraits had been identified).⁶ Anyone wanting to see his work had only to look to neighbors or friends. Phillips's only advertisements occurred in 1809 and 1811, quite early in his career.⁷ While no paintings have been found dating from this time, his subsequent success in securing commissions to support himself and his family without further need for published advertisement indicates his ability to provide portraiture that people wanted.

His marriage in 1813 to Laura Brockway from Schodack, New York, set in motion a pattern of living that was unusual for those considered to be folk artists, who generally led the itinerant life seeking out commissions. Phillips himself had done so early in his career, primarily working the border regions of New York, Massachusetts, and Vermont in search of patrons, but in 1817 he and Laura purchased property in Troy, New York, near Albany, a region that would be booming in response to the building of the Erie Canal, where there would be great interest among the landed gentry for portraits of themselves and their families.⁸ Phillips began concentrating his travels to the upper Hudson Valley between Troy and nearby Albany. He became known to his neighbors and aware of local tastes, and thus was the obvious choice when the need or wish arose for a portrait.

Ammi Phillips,

1788–1865

Old Woman with a Bible, ca. 1834

Oil on linen, 33½ x 28 in.

Beatrice M. Padelford Trust,

84.22



Ezra Ames,
1768–1836
Portrait of Gideon Granger,
before 1822
Oil on canvas, 29½ x 23 in.
Bequest of Antoinette Pierson
Granger, 30.54

Phillips's early works (in the "Border Limner" style) were large, light, subtly colored, delicately painted "dreamlike" impressions.⁹ But beginning in the 1820s, and peaking in the 1830s (the "Kent portraitist" period) the work underwent a striking change to a darker palette and stylized, reductionist, background and costume features, albeit with the same and possibly stronger attention to the face and general likeness of the sitter. Mary Black has shown that this change of style coincides with Phillips's residence in Troy, part of the region dominated by the academically trained portrait painter Ezra Ames.¹⁰ Ames, Black notes, certainly became a strong influence on Phillips, who adopted Ames's three-quarters poses about this time as well as a number of other specific features of his style, without, however, ever rivaling Ames as a modeler of form. Phillips's painting at its best eschews effects of volume, his figures remaining largely flat, silhouetted, and in some ways reminiscent of twentieth-century modernists in their approach to the figure. As Anderson and Black suggest, this reductionist style owes as much to Phillips's limitations as a draughtsman as to his need to increase his output and fulfill his clients' expectations; however, it is also true that from these conditions he synthesized a highly original style, quite evident in the arresting power of *Old Woman with a Bible*.¹¹

In *Old Woman with a Bible*, the background gives no indication of depth or location of the sitter except for the dark maroon drapery filling the upper left corner and revealing a bit of wonderfully detailed crocheted and knotted fringe border below. The drapery, typical of many early American and European portraits, is an unusual touch for Phillips, who uses it to reinforce the sitter's right-leaning pose. Unlike the stiff, straight-ahead poses of many folk-art portraits, the old woman's slight lean seems to set her weight onto the arm that rests on the Bible. Her other hand, resting in her lap, holds a small book (a prayer book? a devotional?) in which she is keeping her place with her finger, and so adding an element of spontaneity and animation to the work. This is a classical European motif that found its way to America in the nineteenth century and that Phillips used throughout his career, both with male and female subjects.¹² Pretty clearly, the imagery of a book other than the Bible—rather than other "domestic" icons popular in female genre portraits—is intended to convey both the subject's literacy and a certain level of affluence.

Furthermore, our attention is drawn to this hand by the colorful border of red and green embroidery on the shawl angling down from her shoulders. These garments were modeled on the cashmere shawls, with the embroidered paisley trim, that became popular in London about 1786, woven on power looms in Paisley, Scotland, in imitation of expensive hand-made Indian originals.¹³ In turn, the American version, like that depicted by Phillips, was probably not imported English cashmere, but rather a homespun imitation with a detachable border (to facilitate laundering) either woven by the subject herself, or kept in the artist's stock of studio props. Phillips had made use of the shawl at least since ca. 1820.¹⁴ But as Patricia Anderson makes clear, it is from Ezra Ames that he derived the practice of folding the shawl to display both edges of the decorative embroidered trim, a motif he used in his female portraits for the rest of his career.¹⁵

These colorful borders show off most effectively against the black dresses worn by many of Phillips's older sitters. While black or deep blue was the color



Ammi Phillips,
1788–1865
Woman with Black Paisley Shawl
(Mrs. Zachariah Flagler),
undated
Oil on canvas, 32 x 27 in.
Princeton University Art
Museum. Gift of Edward Duff
Balken, Class of 1897
Photograph by Bruce M. White
Y1958–60



Ammi Phillips,
1788–1865
Old Woman with a Bible (detail),
ca. 1834
Oil on linen, 33½ x 28 in.
Beatrice M. Padelford Trust,
84.22

of mourning clothes, many older women regularly chose conservative styles of solid, dark colors. Here the dress is an area of flat black with no visible creases or body weight underneath. However, Phillips has lavished much time and attention on the woman's sheer muslin day-cap with its ruffles around the face and the satin bow with exquisitely trimmed sides. The white day-cap, however fine, signals inside-the-house apparel, as opposed to the fancy "bonnet" she would wear when going out. Even indoors, however, the conservative older woman keeps her hair covered.¹⁶ Phillips has turned the head slightly in order to show the woman's ear peeking through the gauze-like fabric, though by doing so the angle of ear to face is slightly off. Even so, while her face is one of well-earned age, her hands are, typical for Phillips, soft, almost limp, with long fingers, and more appropriate to a younger woman than the sitter.

Is Ammi Phillips a "naïve" artist? Is *Old Woman with a Bible* "folk art"? One value of folk art is its documentary specificity, affording us a more-or-less unvarnished look at the mundane life of a particular time in our history. Phillips's painting seems to serve that function. But Patricia Anderson also draws our attention to its "timeless immediacy and the formal beauty," qualities that certainly transcend merely "naïve" art. She tips her hat to Holger Cahill who, in his pioneering American Primitives exhibition, recognized "the formal sophistication of paintings previously regarded as mere family documents or quaint pictures of a by-gone era."¹⁷ According to Cahill,

*The best of the portraits have the same purity of line, the clear color, the incorruptible honesty which gives distinction to the early work of such men as Copley and Ralph Earl....*¹⁸

Perhaps the primary question for a painting is not "the whats and wherefores of how or when it was created," in the words of the Smithsonian's Virginia Mecklenberg, "but whether it pulls you in across the room."¹⁹ *Old Woman with a Bible* certainly does that.

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