

The Brock Family Artist: A New Discovery in Virginia Folk Portraiture



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MT. CRAWFORD, VA.- The recent discovery of the present group of Brock family watercolor miniature profile portraits sheds new light on an as-yet unidentified itinerant portraitist working during the first decades of the 19th century primarily in the northern piedmont region of the Virginia backcountry. The group will be offered for sale in the [Jeffrey S. Evans & Associates](#) Premier Americana Auction, June 26-27, 2020. We have already documented 20 works attributable to this hand, peaking interest in the identity of the artist and the lives of his sitters. In addition to the eight Brock Family portraits, there are at present four examples recorded in MESDA's object database by the artist and eight others in private collections, two of which were sold by JSE & Associates. While the artist's identity remains unknown, the appearance of these eight watercolor profiles, completely fresh to the market, adds a new dimension to the story while more generally enhancing our understanding of the role of art and portraiture in the lives of rural middle-class Virginians in the early years of the Republic.

The profile portrait, as an art form that touched all socioeconomic levels in the United States, was at its peak of popularity during the first half of the 19th century. Given the deeply-rooted cultural appetite for all things Classical during the formative years of the American republic, it is no surprise that the profile portrait (a common Classical device employed in coinage, architectural ornament, and other decorative arts in Ancient times) became an important part of the national aesthetic during the Federal period. Additionally, the invention of mechanical devices, such as the physiognotrace, that facilitated production and enhanced verisimilitude, as well as widespread interest in the pseudo-

science of physiognomy, played a vital role in the rise of profile art in early America. From the depiction of Liberty on silver coinage, to the portrait engravings of well-known individuals by St. Memin, to the significant number of silhouettes produced during this period, it is clear that the profile as a distinct genre had permeated the popular imagination to a substantial degree in Federal America. It is no surprise then, that many of the patrons of backcountry portraiture from the early 19th century elected to have a profile likeness taken of themselves, rather than a traditional frontal view. Indeed, the demand for profile portraiture amongst the middle class was great enough in the early decades of the 19th century to spur a new generation of itinerant folk artists to travel the countryside in pursuit of commissions (think of William Weaver, Francis Cezeron, Jasper Miles, Silon Henkel, and Rufus Porter, to name just a few). With smaller, lightweight materials to transport, mechanical devices to aid in the work, and a whole new class of customers eager for profile likenesses, these new artists thrived in America's rural areas.

Joseph Brock (b. 1771), the patriarch depicted in the Brock Family portraits, was just such an eager customer. Around 1810, Brock commissioned this unknown profile artist to take likenesses of himself, his wife, and his growing family. Census records for the year indicate that the Brock household in Madison Co., Virginia was a busy one, with over 28 people recorded, 12 of them enslaved. By 1820, those numbers had grown to 34 individuals recorded in the Brock household, 18 of them enslaved. Clearly, Joseph Brock was established, and he choose to mark this moment in the growth of his family through profile portraiture. His oldest son, Anselm Brock (b. 1797), would remain in Madison for some time, where he is recorded in the 1850 census as a tavern keeper with \$2,400 worth of real estate. It appears that Anselm may have moved in the late 1850's to Richmond, Virginia, where he is documented in an 1858 carte-de-visite photograph from a Richmond photography studio and later buried in the city's famous Hollywood cemetery. With the destruction of Richmond during the Civil War, the Brock Family migrated south, settling in Alabama and Georgia, where the portraits have descended to the present owner.

The appearance of the present group of Brock Family watercolor profile portraits on the open market represents a rare opportunity to acquire an intact, fresh-to-the-market group of Southern backcountry family portraiture from the Federal period by an as-yet unidentified individual hand.

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