



Folk Art In New England

By William Hosley

WORCESTER COUNTY, MASS. — In his four-volume work *Travels in New-England and New-York*, posthumously published in 1821 and 1822, Yale president Timothy Dwight chronicled 13 trips made over the course of 20 years, covering 18,000 miles and featuring detailed descriptions of hundreds of towns and localities. It is our first American homegrown tourism literature. Of the hundreds of places Dwight visited, examined and described, not one surpassed the effusions of his reflections on the Quinebaug — a small river valley that begins on the outskirts of Sturbridge, Mass., and heads south through eastern Connecticut.

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“Two Children In Blue,” attributed to Mary B. Tucker (active circa 1840–1844), probably Massachusetts, circa 1840. Watercolor and graphite on paper, 20 1/16 by 24 5/8 inches. **“American Folk Art, Lovingly Collected”** at the Worcester Art Museum.



Overmantel, artist unidentified, circa 1830, probably eastern New Hampshire. Oil on wood, 33 5/8 by 44 3/16 inches. **“American Folk Art, Lovingly Collected”** at the Worcester Art Museum.



Crock, New England or New York, early Nineteenth Century, stoneware. "Kindred Spirits" at Old Sturbridge Village.

Dwight wrote, "The Quinebaug lined with handsome intervals ... varying gradations ... hills of every form ... from small knoll to the lofty eminence. No country ... when unaided by mountains, large rivers, lakes, or the ocean, can be compared with this for the beauty of its scenery. ... verdure which overspreads a great part of the whole region is of the finest tint and produces the most cheerful sense of fruitfulness, plenty, and prosperity. ... Trees ... handsomer groves cannot be found. Orchards ... everywhere. Herds of cattle ... grazing ... Neat farmhouses standing on hills, a succession of pretty villages with their churches ornamented with steeples, most of them white and

therefore cheerful and brilliant, lend the last touches of art to a picture so finely drawn by the hand of nature.”

This was interior New England at the birth of our nation. It was not Boston, Newport, Charleston or Philadelphia. It did not face east to the Atlantic. While most of New England was connected by varying degrees to the Atlantic trade, these American places were defined not so much by the ocean as by the astonishing abundance of fresh water that traveled south through hundreds of brooks and streams. Dwight continued, “There is scarcely a town in New England which has not a complete set of gristmills and sawmills ... probably no country in the world where millstreams are



“Mary Coffin,” attributed to John Brewster Jr (1766–1854), Buxton, Maine, circa 1810. Oil on canvas, 19 3/8 by 16 inches. “American Folk Art, Lovingly Collected” at the Worcester Art Museum.



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Trunk, New England, early Nineteenth Century; wood, brass, hide. "Kindred Spirits" at Old Sturbridge Village.

so numerous and universally dispersed." Water power, cheap land, with farms of several hundred acres often a mile apart — this was interior New England, especially in Worcester County, Mass. This was the birthplace and source of the notion of Yankee ingenuity. "Adapt and improvise" was its hallmark. The inhabitants of this region were truly more self-reliant and, by necessity, versatile and diversely skilled. Everyone was a multi-occupational jack of several, if not all, trades. Most inhabitants were not especially rich nor were they poor. Writing about inland

Massachusetts, Dwight further observed that it occupied "that middle state of property ... termed golden ... [where] few are poor, and few are rich."

This rich, water-powered interior world of plenty was the source of America's folk art and its middle class. It is the essence of Old



Overmantel, artist unidentified, circa 1800, found in Ashland, Mass. Oil on wood, 26 by 47¾ inches. "American Folk Art, Lovingly Collected" at the Worcester Art Museum.

Sturbridge Village, where “Kindred Spirits: A.B. Wells, Malcolm Watkins and the Origins of Old Sturbridge Village” is on view through January 15. It is what inspired Barbara and David Krashes to jump out of bed every day, passionate about unearthing more evidence that would tell the story of their chosen place. The Krasheses’ treasures are presented in “American Folk Art, Lovingly Collected” at

the Worcester Art Museum through November 29. These exhibitions are, of course, about things that are old and beautiful. But they are also about collecting, collectors and the cultural underpinnings that influence how we think about art, history, our localities and the American spirit...

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