

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Cornwall Couple Lives On Through Art

Jan Albers, former Executive Director, Henry Sheldon Museum

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You never know what will come through the door at the Henry Sheldon Museum. On a blustery day last March, Shoreham orchardist, Sandy Witherell, phoned to tell me that he was bringing in a donation his father, long-time trustee Sanford Witherell, had bequeathed to the Museum in his will.

I knew Sanford was leaving us paintings, but I had never seen them until Sandy walked in an hour later with two bulky bundles. The staff gathered around while he unwrapped them in the Museum shop. We found ourselves staring into the eyes of a young couple of the settlement era, their striking faces painted on two curved wooden boards. The faces looked as if they were literally emerging from the wilderness of trees their families had been busily hacking back as they cleared their land for farming.



The paintings were done by an artist named Sheldon Peck (1797-1868) of Cornwall, who would go on to become one of the best-known primitive portraitists of America's Early Republic. These were two of his earliest efforts, done around 1824, showing two family members, his younger brother, Alanson Peck (1800-1897), along with his young wife, Mary Parker Peck (1802-1877).



In his engaging portrait, Alanson is the picture of an earnest young farmer, dressed in his best, his intense blue eyes fixed on the horizon. But it is the companion portrait of Mary that keeps grabbing our gaze. She is dressed in the standard black of the era, and her lovely white bonnet frames a face that is not a happy one. She looks...what? Angry? Petulant? Disappointed? Is she dissatisfied with her life; or is her brother-in-law, the painter, expressing his ambivalence about her by giving her this expression? Looking at Sheldon Peck's later portraits, Alanson and Mary are early examples of a pattern Peck developed of painting bland husbands and angry wives.

Alanson had married the girl next door, for Mary was the daughter of the Parkers from the farm just over the fence on South Bingham Street. Whatever ripples there might have been on the pond of this

young marriage, they were to spend over fifty years together on the original Jacob Peck farm. One of their many children, Mary Antoinette, married Henry Lane, and their daughter was Sandy Witherell's grandmother. The portraits have been passed straight down through the family to the present.

I asked Sandy whether he was going to miss them, and he quipped, "I don't know...Mary's been giving me that look all my life." I told him I hoped it wasn't the only thing that's been keeping him on the straight and narrow all these years; and he allowed that he didn't think so, but was about to find out.

In family lore, it turns out that looks can be deceiving, for it is the portrait of Alanson that has spawned the more striking tale. If you look closely, a long vertical crack runs the length of the picture. Sandy told us that family lore has it that, as an old man, Alanson went through a period of self-loathing, and one night he hauled off and punched his image in the portrait. The warped board cracked right down the middle, and the family had to glue it back together. It's all too long ago to know if this is true.



The portraits of Mary and Alanson have made two trips out of Vermont over the years. In 1975 they were lent to the Whitney Museum in New York for a show of the work of Sheldon Peck. Just last month, the Museum took them down to the Williamstown Art Conservation Center, where they were cleaned up and readied for our current exhibit, *Face to Face: Vermont Portraits, 1795-1930*. When they came back from Williamstown and we unwrapped them, someone on the staff quipped, “She looks cleaner...but she doesn’t look any happier.”

We are glad to give these paintings a permanent home, where they can be enjoyed by generations to come. And we are very grateful to Sanford Witherell, both for the paintings and for the many decades of dedicated support and work he gave to the Sheldon Museum over a long life. People like him have made the Sheldon the chief cultural repository for the memories of this community.



The Sheldon Museum has another painting in its collection by Sheldon Peck, *Lady in Painted Chair*, c.1827.

We know nothing about the sitter in this portrait, or the circumstances of its having been painted. It is a remarkable character study of a woman carefully dressed in her best clothing, her sausage curls and bonnet in perfect order. The cut velvet design on her belt is beautifully rendered. She sits on a painted chair of the period, another symbol of her middle class status.

The painting was donated by the late Middlebury College art historian, Arthur Healy, who dubbed her “everybody’s mother-in-law.”