Self-portraiture and Self-Fashioning

Two early American ministers construct themselves through painting

Self-portraits by itinerants and other nonacademic early American painters provide insights into how artists conceived their identities when they took up

the brush while pursuing numerous other strategies for surviving economically. For most artists in the early national period, art making was not and could not be an exclusive pursuit. As Neil Harris has commented, “when geographical and occupational mobility were the norm rather than the exception, the experience of moving from trade to trade before settling on one of the arts was not as dangerous or demoralizing as it might have seemed in Europe.” Although the two Maine artists whose self-portraits I examine here—Jonathan Fisher (1768-1847) and John Usher Parsons (1806-1874)—were of different generations, both produced images of themselves that compellingly constructed their identities less as romantic geniuses than as mobile and flexible participants in their seaport communities. Fisher and Parsons were well-educated ministers who pursued a number of different trades and professions in addition to making art. The two men used similar strategies of self-fashioning to produce images that provide overlooked evidence for how artists fit into the commercial culture of the early national period. Fisher’s and Parsons’s self-portraits emphasized the values of virtue and intellectual achievement, at the same time that they demonstrated the painters’ participation in New England’s maritime communities.

The two self-portraits have been considered examples of folk art, despite the fact that neither Fisher nor Parsons was uneducated or unfamiliar with academic culture, as folk artists are often assumed to be. Fisher, the son of a Revolutionary War widow, was educated at Harvard College in the late 1780s and early 1790s where he was trained in the use of perspective for representing three-dimensional objects and spaces on a flat surface; at the time, this was a standard part of the mathematics curriculum. Parsons was educated at Bowdoin College where James Bowdoin III had donated a part of his collection of European paintings, old master drawings, and family portraits by 1811. Although we do not know whether his formal education touched on art in any way, it is possible that Parsons received some instruction from Josiah Fisher, Jonathan’s son, who was a classmate first at Bowdoin and then at the Andover Theological Seminary where they completed their studies in 1831. Both Jonathan Fisher and John Usher Parsons were thus well educated and to some degree familiar with the conventions of academic art.

Self-portrait, Jonathan Fisher, oil on canvas (1824). Courtesy of the Collection of the Jonathan Fisher Memorial, Blue Hill, Maine. Photo by Tad Goodale.

That said, these two portraits display formal affinities with images made by less sophisticated limners of the nineteenth century and earlier. The relatively unmodeled faces, stark color contrasts, and somewhat awkward rendering of the human form in each man's self-portrait connects it with works by itinerants and other artists who operated far from centers of urban culture. Such terms as "plain" and "simple" have been used to distinguish folk from academic painting, while the concerns of folk artists have been assumed to be primarily with formal issues such as color, geometry, and pattern. For instance, Stacy Hollander, curator of the American Folk Art Museum, notes Parsons's "sense of abstraction and decorative playfulness." Their manifest concerns with form notwithstanding, Fisher and Parsons used painting to interrogate their own positions as artists, intellectuals, and moral authorities, as their relatively deep engagement with self-portraiture shows. Although Fisher enjoyed a permanent position as a minister where Parsons was peripatetic, the two men found that painting did not preclude engaging with commercial life but was instead part of it, a point they made in complex ways in their self-portraits.

Self-portraiture constitutes a substantial proportion of the men's oeuvres. Of about twenty-five known oil paintings by Fisher, four are self-portraits. Parsons did two self-portraits, one of which is arguably his most complex composition. Each man must then have had a keen interest in representing himself, although in each case the artist's concern was not so much in conveying a unique personality as it was in documenting his varied contributions to the community around him at a particular point in time. While both artists foreground their solitary intellectual achievements, they also placed themselves in wider worlds. For Fisher as well as for Parsons making a self-portrait was, finally, an act of self-memorialization. In Fisher's case

this impulse is particularly clear since we know that the self-portraits were made for his four daughters, to whom the paintings descended after his death to keep his memory alive in their homes.

What is memorialized in the two cases is primarily the men's intellectual labors, reflecting an emphasis on the learnedness of the minister rather than on his piety. Both men chose not to represent themselves in traditional ministerial garb but instead in relatively up-to-date clothing. In this sense, the portraits are of a piece with other images of the early nineteenth century, when ministers exchanged the white linen bands and black "Geneva" gowns, which Congregational ministers had worn since the seventeenth century, for clothing that was generically professional. This sartorial shift registered the decreasing authority of the Congregational ministry in early nineteenth-century New England; ministers were demoted to an occupational status shared by doctors, lawyers, and others. Fisher's self-representation fits this nineteenth-century formula in that he wears a black coat and vest with a white shirt and cravat, similar to the way in which merchants and other "upper middling" portrait subjects appeared. Showing himself pointing to his own literary and religious work is also consistent with ministers' portraits of the early national period, which were often more amply provided with props than in earlier times and especially with those things that signaled the minister's learning, such as books and writing implements. Fisher's attire and his inclusion of an array of telling objects in his self-portrait may reflect the lessening status of the Congregational ministry in relation to other professions, but his finger jabbing at a page of his Hebrew Lexicon seems to insist on his authoritative role in the community. In all of his self-portraits, Fisher depicted himself at a table with a paneled door behind him. That architectural detail is quite revealing for it suggests that he had a room with a door that closed for his reading and writing. Like other frontier families, the Fishers depended upon paid boarders and family members to participate in a variety of activities to make ends meet. Braiding straw hats and weaving cloth to earn cash and store credits, not to mention the daily household work of a small farm, could create noise and disrupt the parson, but the 1814 addition he made to his house included a study with a door to close out the distractions of home production.

John Usher Parsons, Self-portrait, oil on canvas, 30 1/2 x 26 7/16 in. (1835). Courtesy of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine. Gift of Mrs. W. W. Tuttle and Miss Catherine Tuttle.

Fisher's assertion of authority in his self-portrait compensated for the actual erosion of his position between the time of his being called to Blue Hill and his retirement in the mid-1830s. Following his Harvard graduation in 1792, Fisher pursued his theological studies in Cambridge and received his M.A. in 1795. Fisher's theological positions became more distinctly Calvinistic as time went by. He remained a staunch religious conservative over the course of his decades in Blue Hill, despite the increasing migration of his parishioners from the Congregational Church to newly established Protestant sects. The first Anglo-American settlers came to Blue Hill on the eastern shore of Penobscot Bay in the District (after 1820, the State) of Maine in the 1760s. Many, like Fisher, came from southeastern Massachusetts. They profited from the vast reserves of timber further inland and eastward. A village grew up around Blue Hill Bay from where vessels traveled to the Canadian Maritime Provinces to the northeast and to Portland, Salem, Boston, and other ports to the southwest. In the new settlement, Fisher took advantage of his ability to make things by hand and his uncommon skills in drawing and painting to add to his minister's salary. In some of these enterprises he had the assistance of his wife Dolly Battle Fisher (1770-1853) and some of their eight children, born between 1798 and 1812. Fisher himself painted shop signs and the names of ships on their stern boards and made furniture, buttons, and household utensils—all for cash payments, barter, or store credits. He applied his drawing skills, garnered at Harvard, in different sorts of paid work, such as surveying land and designing a small number of buildings for the new settlement. Fisher also produced broadsides, and he attempted to sell oil paintings, although the market for those was extremely small. His best-known work, *A Morning View of Bluehill Village, Sept. 1824* (1824-1825, Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine), was painted for his own pleasure and displayed in his own home in Blue Hill, which is now the Jonathan Fisher Memorial.

Parsons came from a large family in York County Maine, in the southwestern part of the state, where his family settled in the seventeenth century. They were so closely associated with the place that the town where the artist was born was called Parsonsfield. Parsons received his early education at Latin schools in Parsonsfield and in nearby Effingham, New Hampshire. Parsons was ordained in New York City in 1831, and like Jonathan Fisher in the previous generation, he then headed to the frontier. In Parsons's case that meant the western frontier—Indiana, Wisconsin, Kansas, and elsewhere—where he traveled in the company of his wife Harriet Hinckley Nye who was also from Maine. Harriet died in Indiana in 1832, and in the same year, Parsons married Rosetta Hebard, a minister's daughter. The two returned to New England, where Rosetta "lived to share [Parsons's] labors ten years" before she died; Parsons was married a third time, to Eliza Safford of Kennebunk, Maine, in 1843. By that time Parsons had accomplished a good deal in a wide variety of enterprises, including founding a college in Wisconsin and a mutual insurance company in Georgia.

A dozen or so paintings by Parsons date to the period just after his return to the East Coast. Most are portraits of subjects who lived in the area around Parsonsfield and in New Bedford, Massachusetts, the whaling port near Berkley, Massachusetts, where Parsons was settled as minister for several years. The works appear to have been executed during a four-year span from 1834 to 1838. At the beginning of that period, Parsons was recuperating from one of the many illnesses that dogged him throughout his life; he became Berkley's minister in 1836.

Like Fisher, Parsons shows himself in his self-portrait dressed similarly to other subjects of relatively high social standing whom he painted, including an unidentified but obviously prosperous man from Union, Maine (1836, Private Collection), who wears a similar black suit, white shirt, and dark tie. Parsons signals his learning in his self-portrait by the books on the shelf behind him, some with partial Latin titles. Parsons was as prolific an author as Fisher (who published poems, religious essays, and other works) and produced a number of tracts, especially on religious topics. Interestingly, both Fisher and Parsons emphasized in their self-portraits the material circumstances that made intellectual work possible. Parsons is less specific about the space in which his intellectual labor takes place, but he does carefully depict the cabinet in which his books are stored, showing it to have a sliding door with a brass ring to close it and a lock with a diamond-shaped escutcheon in the style of the day. Like Fisher, Parsons places his hand on a book to claim intellectual authority. The abilities to read and write conferred one kind of power, as the two self-portraits make clear, while the possession of a substantial collection of books also distinguished ministers in the period. Although Fisher, in contrast to Parsons, does not actually show us his books, inventories demonstrate that his library was very large by the standards of the day.

Other texts in addition to books figure importantly in these self-portraits, suggesting the connectedness of writing and painting in the careers of the two men. Both artists illusionistically depict handwritten notes that help to fix

the identity of the sitter as well as his place in time and space. In Fisher's self-portrait, on the desk is a letter which has been sent from New Jersey where one of the parson's brothers lived, while a paper to the left indicates the artist's name and date. These bits of writing then connect Fisher with Blue Hill but also with the world beyond the village. Fisher intended the self-portraits as memorials to himself, but he could not rely on his face alone to identify the subject for future generations: he had to resort to words. Fisher accommodates the labels in his self-portrait by showing them to be part of the three-dimensional picture space. Parsons on the other hand simply labels his painting. (Before the conservation of the picture in the 1980s, it was even speculated that the paper label belonged on the back of the canvas, but it appears never to have been adhered there.) The label, which reads, "Painted Jan. 27. 1835. By J.U.P.," asserts the flatness of the picture surface and undermines the illusion of a three-dimensional space inhabited by the sitter; this confounds the expectations of modern viewers for a consistent treatment of the picture space—hence the speculation that the label belonged on the back—but evidently did not bother the artist himself. Indeed, Parsons was not troubled by the quality of flatness in his paintings: witness the relatively planar quality of his face in the picture, especially as compared to Jonathan Fisher's self-portrait where the artist is at some pains to map the wrinkles on his face, which give it some three-dimensionality.

Parsons's one other self-portrait (in a private collection) is inscribed on the reverse of the canvas "John Usher Parsons, by himself." The face in this second self-portrait is nearly identical to that in the self-portrait we're discussing. This similarity is the basis on which the first is identified as a self-portrait, for in many other respects it seems as though the subject must be somebody other than the artist. Previous commentators have been confused by Parsons's decision to depict himself in front of a landscape background that shows a coastline planted with a neat row of trees with ships at sea beyond. Such a treatment would have been expected in the portrait of a merchant or seaman, but it makes little sense for Parsons who did not travel abroad and was not a merchant involved in the coastal trade. The fact that he shows himself wearing a gold hoop in his left ear—a fashion adopted by sailors (and notoriously, by pirates)—has even led to speculation that the picture is not a self-portrait. However, if the picture is thought of as a work of self-fashioning, then these inclusions become more understandable. Parsons gives considerable attention to the shells lined up on the top of his bookcase, he shows himself in proximity to the coast, and he even includes a sailor's personal adornment all to the end of fashioning himself as the intellectual and spiritual leader of a seaport. Parsons labels his self-portrait as one would an object of trade. In a way that parallels Jonathan Fisher's self-portrait, Parsons shows himself to be part of larger intellectual and commercial networks: where Fisher included a letter mailed from New Jersey and addressed to Blue Hill to indicate his participation in those larger systems, Parsons gives us the coastal trade itself. In the one piece of autobiographical writing left by Parsons, occasioned by the thirtieth anniversary of his Bowdoin graduation, he never mentioned having been a sailor, and in fashioning himself

as such in his self-portrait, Parsons was not so much claiming to have been a seaman as indicating his identification with the men who populated the busy seaports nearby. At once gentleman, scholar, and sailor in his self-portrait, Parsons effectively captures the fluid identities of early American artists who moved between many different professional categories, not only on the newly settled frontier but even in New England's more established centers of manufacturing and trade.

Fashioning oneself in a self-portrait was a way for artists, even for those whose careers were played out far from major urban centers and with relatively few resources at their disposal, to articulate particular ideas of how making art fit with other pursuits in early America and of how the artist fit into his community. The two examples examined here are not as psychologically resonant as the portraits and self-portraits of their well-trained and well-known early American counterparts such as Gilbert Stuart, who was praised for having produced in his images of people "the portrait of the mind itself." Nonetheless they speak to the self-conceptions of men who did not call themselves "artists" and whose images indicate that they saw themselves as fully integrated into communities of merchants, professionals, and even, in the case of John Usher Parsons, seaport workers of early New England. Neither man fashioned an emotionally charged image of a romantic artist detached from the world around him: instead, each showed himself to be a person who played many roles in his community and, in so doing, subtly demonstrated the seamless connection between art making and other kinds of self-expression (especially writing)—between intellectual and artistic work on the one hand and commercial enterprise on the other.

Further Reading:

Jonathan Fisher's life is well documented in archives at the Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine, and the Jonathan Fisher Memorial, Blue Hill, Maine. The one primary source for John Usher Parsons's biography is an 1858 autobiographical note in the Bowdoin College Archives, Brunswick, Maine. Fisher's biography is described in Mary Ellen Chase, *Jonathan Fisher, Maine Parson, 1768-1847* (New York, 1948) and in my forthcoming book, *Jonathan Fisher of Blue Hill, Maine: Commerce, Culture and Community on the Eastern Frontier* (Amherst, Mass., 2010). One modern biographical treatment of Parsons exists: Ralph and Susanne Katz, "In Search of John Usher Parsons," *Folk Art* 30 (Spring 2005): 46-53.

On the subject of portraiture in early America, see Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society; The Formative Years, 1790-1860* (New York, 1966); Jack Larkin, "The Face of Change: Images of Self and Society in New England, 1790-1850," in Caroline F. Sloat, ed., *Meet Your Neighbors: New England Portraits, Painters & Society, 1790-1850*, exh. cat. (Sturbridge, Mass., 1992): 13-14. In the same volume, also see Jessica F. Nicoll, cat. entries 44 (Portrait of Rev. Nathanael Howe's by Zededkiah Belknap, c. 1815) and 61 (Portrait of Rev. John Perrin by

Royall Brewster Smith, 1835): 102-3, 119-20. The concept of portraiture as self-fashioning is developed in T. H. Breen, “The Meaning of ‘Likeness’: Portrait-Painting in an Eighteenth-Century Consumer Society,” in Ellen G. Miles, ed., *The Portrait in Eighteenth-Century America* (Newark, Del., and London and Toronto, 1993): 37-60 (originally published in *Word & Image* 6:4 [1990]: 325-350). A more recent treatment of colonial portraiture is found in Margaretta Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution: Painters, Artisans, and Patrons in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2005).

On Maine in the early national period, see Laura Fecych Sprague, *Agreeable Situations: Society, Commerce, and Art in Southern Maine, 1780-1830* (Kennebunk, Me., 1987) and Charles E. Clark, James S. Leamon & Karen Bowden, eds., *Maine in the Early Republic: from Revolution to Statehood* (Hanover, N.H., 1988). The classic account of Maine’s transition to statehood is Ronald Banks, *Maine Becomes a State*: *The Movement to Separate Maine from Massachusetts, 1785-1820* (Middletown, Conn., 1970). Detailing the religious, political, economic, and social relations between Maine settlers are Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1982) and Alan Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: the Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1990).

The literature on the folk art “problem” is vast. Some important contributions are: Henry Glassie, “Folk Art,” in Richard M. Doorson, ed., *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction* (Chicago, 1972): 253-80; Daniel Robbins, “Folk Sculpture without Folk,” in Herbert W. Hemphill Jr., *Folk Sculpture USA*, exh. cat. (Brooklyn, N.Y. and Los Angeles, 1976): 11-30; George A. Kubler, “The Arts: Fine and Plain,” in Ian M. G. Quimby and Scott T. Swank, eds., *Perspectives on American Folk Art* (New York, 1980): 344-46; and John Michael Vlach, *Plain Painters: Making Sense of American Folk Art* (Washington, D.C., 1988). Also see Stacy C. Hollander, *American Anthem: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum* (New York, 2001).

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