

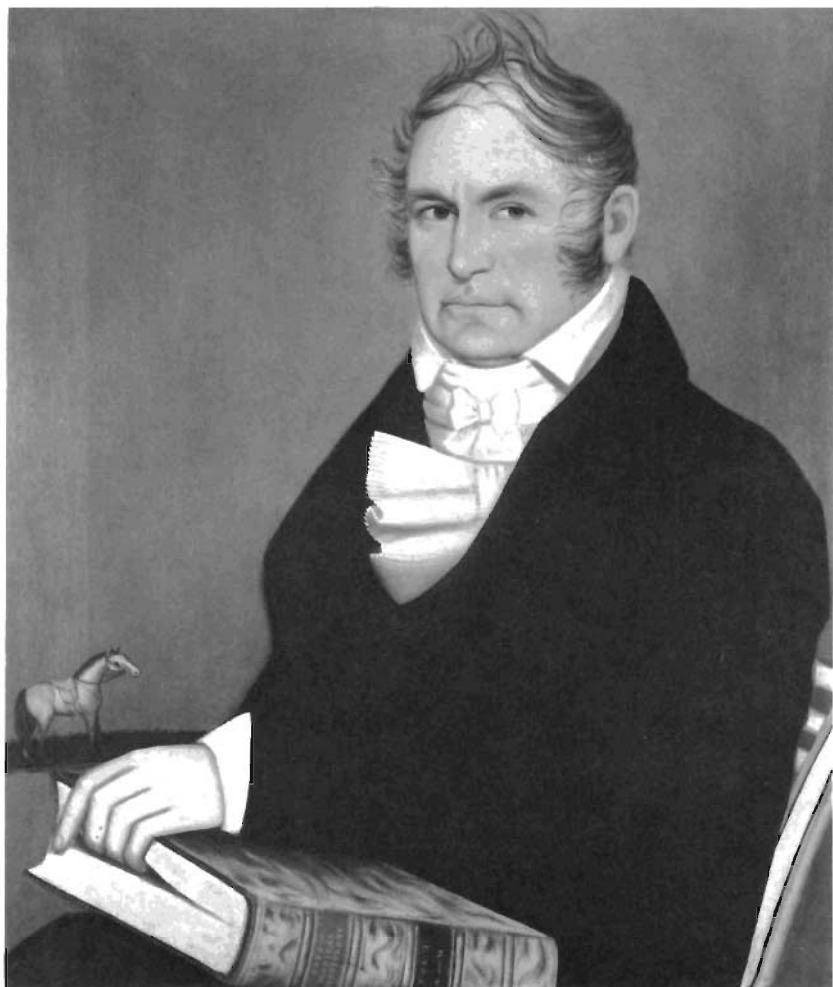
Ammi Phillips's Portraits with Animals

by Leigh Rehner Jones and
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Ammi Phillips (1788–1865), the nineteenth-century portrait artist, spent most of his working life in the Hudson Valley, where he painted its people—and yes, a few of its animals, too. Two years ago, his *Portrait of a Girl in a Red Dress* sold for \$682,000,¹ a record price for a work by this extraordinarily prolific artist who painted more than five hundred portraits during a career spanning at least fifty years.²

Nineteen of the surviving portraits by Ammi Phillips depict animals, and these are some of the most appealing works by the Connecticut-born artist. The child he painted in *Portrait of a Girl in a Red Dress* is charming; equally charming is the brown-and-white beagle-like dog at her feet. Together they make an especially winning double portrait.

While the people in Phillips's portraits are sometimes identified, more frequently their names are unknown. This anonymity extends as well to the animals in his paintings. Cats and dogs are nearly always found with children, but in two portraits of adults, a horse and a team of oxen are painted which are undoubtedly clues to the sitters' professions.



*D*r. Cornelius Allerton (1779–1855) was painted about 1825 in Pine Plains, Dutchess County, New York, where he practiced medicine. He was recalled later as having “perceptive faculties of high order” and as “quick and correct in diagnosis, and a bold yet careful practitioner. His quick repartee and ever-ready wit made him in his day the most conspicuous man in town.”³ In this portrait, Allerton holds Parr’s *Medical Dictionary*, while his saddled horse waits in the background, ready to take him to his patients. Clearly, his horse was essential to Dr. Allerton’s practice of medicine in this community of far-flung farms, and it therefore warrants inclusion in the portrait.



Gardner Hollow, Dutchess County, New York, was the locale for a group of portraits of the Haxtun family. *Benjamin Haxtun* (1779–1857), with a snuff box in hand, was painted about 1838–1840. The tiny team of oxen represented on the lower left side of the painting, illustrates Haxtun’s livelihood, farming, and was indispensable for portraying him in full measure. Although Haxtun was appointed Major of the Second Regiment of Cavalry in 1812, most of his life was spent on the family grange. His father had cultivated the same land; his son William would carry on.



Phillips also painted a standing full-length portrait of Benjamin Haxtun's daughter *Almira Haxtun* (1831–1841), about 1838–1840. The portrait included a frisky gray tiger kitten playing with a rose at Almira's feet. Her portrait introduces the first of four known portraits with cats. Some time after its completion, the painting was shortened, perhaps to match those of her parents and her brother William. The kitten-on-canvas was saved, however, and was presented to a youthful family descendant in the early 1900s. It is now framed as a separate painting entitled *Haxtun Kitten Playing With A Rose*.

While Phillips spent most of his time traveling up and down the Hudson Valley and into Western Massachusetts and Connecticut, he returned on occasion to see—and paint—friends and relatives, such as his cousins, the Nisus Kinney family. *Susan Kinney* (dates unknown), painted as a young girl in 1848, was portrayed with a cat and a flower on her lap. This portrait, like *Almira Haxtun's*, was cut down in size, in this case because it had been damaged. The location of *Susan Kinney's* portrait is unknown today. In addition, six other family members were painted at the same time in Colebrook, Connecticut, Phillips's home town. Nisus received the portraits from Ammi "in exchange for a fine horse."⁴

About 1814, Phillips portrayed *Catherine Van Slyck Dorr* (1803–1892), the daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Russell Dorr of Chatham, Columbia County, New York. Catherine's parents (mother *Polsianna* holds an infant daughter) and six individual portraits of her sisters and brothers were also painted, but only Catherine holds a pet, her black cat. Her vivid scarlet dress and the dark green drapery in the background contrast with other portraits painted in this early period when Phillips typically favored pastel colors. The bold colors and large black cat may have been employed to divert attention from Catherine's apparent eye defect.





The three portraits of little girls in red dresses are the first of fourteen paintings that include a dog. By including dogs in his portraits, Ammi Phillips follows a long tradition: *Fido*, from *fidelity*, symbol of faithfulness and watchfulness, has appeared in paintings and sculpture since people began to make images. What is unusual is that six of Phillips's portraits show the *same* dog, the brown-and-white beagle-type, and were painted in the mid-1830s. The dogs in the eight paintings produced after the mid-1830s to the end of Phillips's career are each different.

These various dogs have been observed by other writers. Noted folk-art historian Mary Black observes, "Phillips's dogs are . . . another repeated formula, with some very slight variations. . . . There are enough similar-looking terriers in Phillips's portraits to imagine that the entrepreneurial artist sold puppies to his clients as a sideline."⁷ Jean Lipman and Anne V. Warren, leading critics of folk art, state that "while it may appear that the little girl in red and the Ostranders owned the same dog, a study of Phillips's work reveals that the identical animal appears in a number of his paintings."⁸ Although these authors conclude that the various dogs are merely part of the stock-in-trade painting conventions of the time, it may not follow that they are simply props to enliven portraits. Indeed, a case may be made that these dogs may, in fact, hold special meaning for Ammi Phillips.

Could this "beagle" be Phillips's *own* dog who accompanied him on painting trips? Not only would the dog provide company for the artist, but such a charming pup would also delight a child needing distraction during the tiresome business of sitting for a portrait. In addition, the dogs in these six paintings gaze outward, making eye-contact with the artist himself. Typically, the dog's head rests on its front paws and displays an adoring expression that breaks into a canine smile, suggesting that Ammi and the dog care about each other. In two standing portraits, of John Yonnie Luyster and of Titus in *Mrs. Stephen Ostrander and her Son Titus*, the children hold the dog by a chain. Although the chain becomes a decorative feature, if this pup were indeed the artist's own faithful companion, the chain might have been necessary to keep the dog beside the children rather than at Phillips's feet.

In the portrait of *Andrew Jackson Ten Broeck* (1832–1850), our now-familiar dog grins at Phillips (and at us) from behind a hickory-nut tree. Young Andrew was painted in 1834, signed and dated by Phillips, at Clermont, Columbia County. The tree, the nuts on the ground, and those still attached to the tree form a pleasing design in which to place the little boy (who is dressed identically to the three little girls in red). The theme—emphasized further by the hull and hickory nuts in Andrew’s hands—is surely intended to be a visual word-play. The portrait was painted when Andrew’s namesake, “Old Hickory,” as Andrew Jackson was familiarly called, was president of the United States. It should be noted that James Mairs Salisbury, John Yonnie Luyster, and two of the little girls in red dresses all hold sprigs of strawberries and leaves, a far more usual motif with Phillips than hickory nuts.

Andrew Jackson Ten Broeck’s parents, Anna Benner and Jacob Wessell, and his eleven-year-old identical-twin brothers, Jacob Wessell and William Henry,⁹ also had their portraits painted by Ammi Phillips in 1834. Two sisters born by that date were either not painted, or are unlocated today. The twins married the Evarts sisters, also identical twins. The portraits remained in the family for some time, but suffered a very close call. “‘In the early 1920s,’ says a Ten Broeck relative, ‘Uncle Evarts went out to visit at Jacob’s house. The painting [of the twins] was on the junk pile to be pitched.’ Uncle Evarts retrieved . . . [it] and that of their younger brother Andrew.’”¹⁰ We may thank Uncle Evarts for rescuing these portraits, but must wonder how many others met a less happy fate, including some that may have portrayed animals such as this smiling dog who kept company with Andrew Jackson Ten Broeck.





Perhaps the best-known of all Phillips's portraits is the *Girl in Red Dress with Cat and Dog*. This work is similar in appearance to the *Portrait of a Girl in a Red Dress*, and *Little Girl in Red Dress*⁵ (all ca. 1835), but it is enhanced by a highly stylized white cat lacking in the other portraits. The child holds the cat around its neck with her right arm, its front paws barely touching her dress, while her left hand steadies its haunch.⁶ In contrast to the relaxed black feline in Catherine Van Slyck Dorr's portrait painted about twenty years earlier, this ornamental animal perches apprehensively in the girl's arms. Its uneasy pose may be purely a decorative device, contributing to the overall design of the painting. It may also be that the small brown-and-white dog at the child's feet is reason enough for the cat to feel a pang or two of anxiety.



With the portrait of *Mrs. Stephen Ostrander and Her Son Titus* (1810–1865; 1829–1915), painted about 1835, Phillips reveals almost the entire body of the smiling dog that again resembles a beagle—but one with a surprisingly bushy tail. As for Rachel Ostrander, she was originally from Saugerties, Ulster County, and had moved a few miles south to Marbletown in the early 1830s. Some of the evidence

makes her life seem like a nineteenth-century soap opera.

Daughter of the Reverend Peter Overbaugh, Rachel married three times. Her first marriage at age seventeen was to Stephen Nottingham Ostrander; the son of the Reverend Henry Ostrander. In addition to Titus, the couple had a daughter, Maria Louisa (1835–?), perhaps not yet born or too young to be included in the painting. (If a portrait of Stephen was painted at the same time, it is today unlocated, although portraits of Rachel's parents painted by Phillips about 1822 were sold at Cal Smith's Pleasant Valley Auction Hall in April 1987.) Stephen Ostrander died in 1840 of "the dropsey," and to alleviate the suffering from "the long and painful sickness,"¹¹ he took opium. The year before his death, Rachel became a battered wife when she was "cruelly and inhumanly and without provocation assaulted and struck with a club upon her head."¹² She was confined to her bed for more than a week, and was subsequently removed by her friends to the house of a neighbor. Stephen cut Rachel and the children from his will, leaving his property instead to his three sisters. Rachel attempted to recover her dower rights in property, but instead a cash settlement was awarded to her in 1842. That same year she married her first cousin, Solomon Fraligh Overbaugh (1819–1844). A son was born to the couple, Peter Tappen (1843–1844), who barely saw his first birthday—and whose death followed his father's by a week.

Two years later, Rachel was married for the third and final time to Captain William Teunis Swart (1804–1884) of Kingston, Ulster County, who ran a sloop on the Hudson River. Rachel and William appear to have lived uneventfully. When they died, Maria Louisa was remembered very generously in their wills, but Titus fared less well.

In the painting, the elegantly begowned Rachel wears her hair in a fashionable Apollo's knot, and her handkerchief displays her initials. Her left arm is draped around Titus's shoulder, and her hand on his arm is large and awkward, reminiscent of Phillips's rendition of hands on a number of his early masculine subjects. Titus wears the unisex frock-top of a young child, although at five or six years old he also displays long pants, perhaps his first pair. The colorful patterned rug in the portrait appears in several other paintings (in this article, *Blonde Boy with Primer*, *Peach and Dog*; and *Portrait of a Girl in a Red Dress*). This stylized carpet may indeed be a decorative device to draw the viewer's eyes downward, and not an actual carpet.



In addition to the six portraits with the same brown-and-white Beagle-type dog, Phillips painted eight works that include different dogs who share one common characteristic: Not one of them looks at the artist. Are these dogs, then, the family pets of the portraits' subjects? They appear in paintings from the ca. 1835 group of portraits, when all of the "same dog" works were executed, and later, toward the end of Phillips's long career.

James Mairs Salisbury (1834–?), painted ca. 1835 in Catskill Landing, Green County, is portrayed seated on a hassock with pantaloan-clad legs peeking out from under his blue dress. While he sits placidly, a small dog is poised at his feet, gazing outside the picture plane as if anxious to get up and run off. The dog bears a superficial resemblance to the brown-and-white "Beagle," but upon closer examination is clearly a different breed. With pointed nose and ears, it is not the snub-nosed floppy-eared dog we are accustomed to seeing.

James's parents were General William and Jane Mairs Salisbury, and he was the second of seven children born to the couple. Several of his brothers' and sisters' baptismal records are at the Leeds Dutch Reformed Church, near Catskill Landing, but James's is not among them and no further information has been found about him, suggesting that he may have died at an early age.

The portrait of a *Child in Pink with Her Spaniel*, painted ca. 1835, has neither name nor provenance. It was banished to the attic of a previous owner for some thirty years because she found the portrait unattractive. The blond wispy-haired child is so young that she clutches a coral teething ring in one hand, and with her other clasps the paw of a dog, perhaps a Brittany spaniel. The delightful animal looks somewhat like the one portrayed in John Trumbell's portrait of his wife (*Sarah Trumbell with a Spaniel*, ca. 1802),¹³ and one wonders if Phillips might have seen this portrait in his travels.

Blonde Boy with Primer, Peach and Dog (ca. 1838) depicts the fashionably dressed standing subject full-length, a small dog with pointed ears and a quizzical expression at his feet. The boy is a member of the Smith family of Catskill, Greene County. A present-day descendant recalls how the boy's black shoes and white socks fascinated her when she was a child visiting her grandmother's home where the painting hung.¹⁴ Perhaps no other painting by Phillips so clearly reveals his ability to form stunning overall abstract designs in his portraits. These designs may have pleased his clients almost as much as his ability to catch a likeness. The pleated white collar, the white globe of the peach, and the white socks beckon the eye to look at every part of the painting, and perhaps come to rest on the amusing dog.

Although the precise identity of the boy is unknown, a Smith family genealogy shows an Aaron D. Smith (1830–1889) whose dates make him a plausible candidate. Since the Smith and Overbaugh names are genealogically intertwined, there may be a blood relationship between Rachel Ann Maria and Titus Ostrander and the Smith boy.





William Wooley Haxtun (1829–1904), painted in Gardner Hollow, Dutchess County, New York, about 1838–1840, is the son of Benjamin and brother of Almira Haxtun seen earlier. William is portrayed seated with a hunting dog, the dog's chin resting affectionately on his knee. Phillips was not accustomed to painting full-length seated subjects, and William's head and torso appear to be disproportionately large for his legs, showing the difficulty Phillips had when he departed from his tried-and-true formula poses. Rachel Ann Maria Ostrander and several of the children are also depicted in a seated pose, but the voluminous skirts make it unnecessary to define the legs, as Phillips was required to do in William's portrait.

Although William and his sister both attended Amenia Seminary in Dutchess County, Almira died at age ten, leaving William to complete four years of study that included philosophy, mathematics, literature and calligraphy. Family descendants still own William's trunk filled with the books he used at the seminary as well as a number of well-executed calligraphic drawings made by him. Following four years at Amenia Seminary, William attended the Dutchess County Academy in Poughkeepsie, but because of "ill health he had to give up his studies and return home. . . . In 1873 [he] left the old homestead [in Gardner Hollow] and for the past fifteen years has resided near Green Haven where he is engaged in farming. He is fond of travel and has visited many points of interest in the west. He is a staunch Republican . . . and served two years on the Board of Supervisors in the Town of Beekman. For three years he was President of the Dutchess County Agricultural Society, Treasurer for seven years, and had charge of the ladies' hall for four years."¹⁵

William and his wife Maria DeLong had a son, Benjamin D. It would be interesting to know if Benjamin, too, had a fondness for dogs, for a later photo of William owned by his descendants shows him again accompanied by one. Certainly the hunting dog is an important and integral part of the portrait of William Wooley Haxtun.



*J*ohn Yonnie (*Youni, Younie*) Luyster (1828–1866) was painted about 1835 in LaGrangeville, Dutchess County. He looks somewhat uncomfortable in what was probably his first suit (with so many buttons!). The dog relaxes at his feet in that familiar pose of head-on-paws, and gazes intently at the artist.

John became a farmer. When he died at fifty-eight without a will, three children who lived to adulthood and their mother were called for the final settlement. The inventory, partially reproduced here, gives us a glimpse into his life. “Property set aside to the widow” included: “Family library; All Pictures in house; All bedding and wearing apparel; 1 Table & 6 chairs; 12 knives and fork 12 Tea Cups & saucers; 1 Cow; Looking Glass; Carpets; 1 Sofa; 1 Shell Case; English Bedstead; Palor Chandelier; Family Carriage; Light or Black Wageon:” and many tools of his trade including: “Cider Mill; 2 Grane Cradle’s; 20 Grane Bag’s; two Bob Sleighs; Saddlars Bench; 2 Team Horses.”

John and his wife Sarah (M.) share a gravestone with his parents and their children, Mary and John, who died when they were five and three, respectively. They are buried in the New Hackensack Dutch Reformed Church graveyard, not far from LaGrangeville.

Two other portraits painted very late in Phillip's life (ca. 1860–1865) are of a boy dressed in pink, *Portrait of a Boy with a Large Dog*, and a girl in a pale blue dress, *Portrait of "Libbie,"* both anonymous and without provenance. These full-length portraits illustrate the newly popular custom of keeping enormous dogs as pets, and the Victorian penchant for depicting small children accompanied by them in paintings and photographs. Clothing and hairstyles have progressed to new modes, and by this time Phillips has surely been influenced by photographic images. Nevertheless, the face of the boy is sensitively captured. The incongruity of tiny "Libbie" and the anonymous boy with their huge canine companions make both of these outstanding children's portraits of the Victorian age.





Apparently Phillips stopped painting dogs for a period, but in 1860 he painted *Boy in a Red Suit* (1858–?), and a dog reappears. The boy, who grew up to be a farmer in New Lenox, Massachusetts,¹⁶ with one arm embraces a dog resembling several seen earlier. The pup's head rests companionably on the boy's one bare leg, while the other is covered by a pantaloon, in a nicely balanced and informal presentation of the little boy dressed in red.

The last portrait to be considered represents a departure from Phillips's customary practice, for it features an adult—not a child—with a dog. *George W. Beckwith* (1814–1881) was painted ca. 1850 in the hamlet of Stissing, Dutchess County, and reveals a tender relationship between a man and his pet. According to family descendants, Beckwith was a farmer who cultivated groves of ornamental and fruit trees, and had dairying interests as well. Beckwith's charming dog, probably a Shetland sheep dog, is held on his lap for the portrait, with its paw clasped in his hand. There can be little doubt that Beckwith wanted his dog's likeness captured for posterity as much as his own. The dog in this portrait is surely neither a mere decorative device nor a way of entertaining a restless child. Neither is it a denotation of profession. It is abundantly clear that Phillips, who repeatedly painted that one small brown-and-white dog, probably his own traveling companion, in portraits of children, had a special feeling for dogs, both his own and others. He must have been delighted to oblige George Beckwith by including his pet—not a book, a newspaper or a tool of his trade, but the dog. For Ammi Phillips appears to have believed the ageless maxim that a man's best friend is his dog. □

Notes

¹ *Portrait of a Girl in a Red Dress* was purchased at Christie's in 1985 for the Daniel J. Terra Collection, Terra Museum of Art, Chicago. At about the same time *Girl in Red with Cat and Dog* was purchased by an anonymous donor for the Museum of American Folk Art, New York, at a reported "more than one million dollars," according to Director Robert Bishop.

² Credit goes to Barbara C. and Lawrence B. Holdridge for the discovery of numerous portraits by Ammi Phillips previously thought to be by several painters (the Border Limner; the Kent Limner; Phillips; and A. Phillips).

³ Isaac Huntting, *History of Little Nine Partners of North East Precinct and Pine Plains, New York*, (Amenia, New York, 1897), p. 297.

⁴ Barbara C. and Lawrence B. Holdridge, *Ammi Phillips—Portrait Painter, 1788–1865*, introduction by Mary Black (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1969), p. 17.

⁵ These portraits are discussed by Mary Black, "Ammi Phillips—the Country Painter's Method," *The Clarion*, Winter, 1986, pp. 32-37.

⁶ This arm pose was used repeatedly by Phillips with children's portraits. In this article see *Portrait of a Girl in a Red Dress*; *Little Girl in Red Dress*; *Girl in Red with Cat and Dog*; *James Mairs Salisbury*; and *Andrew Jackson Ten Broeck*.

⁷ Mary Black, *The Clarion*, Winter, 1986, p. 35.

⁸ Jean Lipman, Anne V. Warren and Robert Bishop, *Young America—A Folk-Art History*, (New York: Hudson Hills Press, Inc., 1986), p. 26.

⁹ Illustrated in *Antiques*, November, 1980, p. 835.

¹⁰ Kathryn McLaughlin Abbe and Frances McLaughlin Gill, text by Julie Szekele, *Twins on Twins*, (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1985), p. 41.

¹¹ Testimony in proving Stephen Ostrander's will, June 22, 1840. Surrogate Court records, Ulster County Office Building, Kingston, New York.

¹² Chancery suit in Manuscript Division, New York State Library, Albany, New York.

¹³ Illustrated in *Antiques*, January, 1983, p. 203.

¹⁴ Conversation between Shirley A. Mearns and Smith family descendant Evelyn Smith Wache, 1984.

¹⁵ Information from *Commemorative Biographical Record of Dutchess County, New York*, (Chicago: J.H. Beers and Company, 1897), pp. 846-847.

¹⁶ Information from *Life of George Dewey*, William and Orville C. Dewey (1898), Volume II, entries #7004 and #7563.

Thanks go to William Secord, Director, The Dog Museum of America, for discussing the dogs in the article. A few are identifiable breeds, but the majority are "hound-mix."

In the text, idiosyncratic spellings and punctuation from original source material have been retained.

Dr. Cornelius Allerton. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1825. 32½ × 27½". Pine Plains, New York. Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago.

Benjamin Haxtun. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1838–1840. 36 × 30". Gardner Hollow, New York. Privately owned.

Abmira Haxtun. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1838–1840, 28 × 19½". Gardner Hollow, New York. Privately owned.

Haxtun Kitten Playing w/a Rose. Oil on canvas, ca. 1838 . . . 1840. Gardner Hollow, New York. Privately owned.

Susan Kinney. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, 1848. Size unknown. Privately owned.

Catherine Van Slyck Dorr. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1814. 30 × 25". Chatham, New York. Amon Carter Museum of Western Art.

Portrait of a Girl in a Red Dress. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1835. 32 × 27". Provenance unknown. Daniel J. Terra Collection, Terra Museum of Art, Chicago, Illinois.

Little Girl in Red Dress. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1835. 32 × 26³/₄". Provenance unknown. Privately owned.

Andrew Jackson Ten Broeck. Ammi Phillips (Signed, dated, and inscribed with sitter's name on back). Oil on canvas, 1834. 39 × 34". Clermont, New York. Collection of Peter Tillou.

Girl in Red Dress with Cat and Dog. Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1835. 32 × 28". Probably New York, Amenia area. Collection of the Museum of American Folk Art, promised anonymous gift.

Mrs. Stephen Ostrander and her Son Titus. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1835. 58 × 44". Probably Ulster County, New York. Collection of Mrs. Alice M. Kaplan.

James Mairs Salisbury. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1835. 32 × 27". Leeds, New York. Privately owned.

Child in Pink with her Spaniel. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1835. 31 × 25". Provenance unknown. Collection of Dorothea Nelson.

Blonde Boy with Primer, Peach and Dog. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1838. 47 × 36". Catskill, New York. Collection of Mrs. Alice M. Kaplan.

William Wooley Haxtun. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1838–1840. 47 × 36". Gardner Hollow, New York. Privately owned.

John Yonnie Luyster. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1838. 46¹/₂ × 30³/₄". Lagrangeville, New York. The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia, Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch.

Portrait of a Boy with a Large Dog. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1855–1865. 41¹/₂ × 32¹/₄". Provenance unknown. Privately owned.

Portrait of "Libbie". Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1855–1865. 37 × 27". Provenance unknown. Privately owned.

Boy in a Red Suit. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1860. 33¹/₂ × 27". New Lenox, Massachusetts. Privately owned.

George W. Beckwith. Attributed to Ammi Phillips. Oil on canvas, ca. 1850. 36 × 30". Stissing, New York. Privately owned.

Thanks are gratefully offered to Lloyd Carter for providing editorial suggestions.