

Painting the People

Alice Neel/Erastus Salisbury Field



Fig. 1: Erastus Salisbury Field (1805–1900)
Julius Norton, ca. 1840
Oil on canvas, 35 x 29 inches
Bennington Museum, Bequest of Mrs. Harold C. Payson (Dorothy Norton)



Fig. 2: Erastus Salisbury Field (1805–1900)
Sarah Elizabeth Ball, ca. 1838
Oil on canvas, 35 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 29 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches
Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Massachusetts
Photograph by Petegorsky/Gipe

BY JAMIE FRANKLIN

Erastus Salisbury Field (1805–1900) and Alice Neel (1900–1984) were masters of the portrait within their respective periods and cultural settings. Though separated by a hundred years and working in distinct styles and contexts, the portraits painted by Field, one of America's best known nineteenth-century itinerant artists, and Neel, one of the most acclaimed portrait painters of the twentieth century, have a remarkable resonance with one another. *Alice Neel/Erastus Salisbury Field: Painting the People*, an exhibition at the Bennington Museum in Vermont, examines the visual, historic and conceptual relationships between the paintings of these two seemingly disparate artists. Critics, curators, biographers, friends of the artist, and the artist herself, have referenced the relationship between “folk” or “primitive” painting and Neel's portraits. However, this is the first exhibition to examine this facet of Neel's work directly. By looking closely at Field's and Neel's political, social, and artistic milieus and the subjects depicted in their portraits, the exhibition seeks to reexamine the relationship between modernism and its romantic notions of the “folk,” while providing us with a more nuanced understanding of these important artists and their work.



Fig. 3: Alice Neel (1900–1984)
Jenny Brand, 1969
Oil on canvas, 35½ x 26 inches
Brand Family Collection, © Estate of Alice Neel



Fig. 4: Erastus Salisbury Field (1805–1900)
 Luman Preston Norton, ca. 1840
 Oil on canvas, 43¼ x 33 inches
 Bennington Museum, Purchased with funds
 from the Joseph H. Colyer Fund

Erastus Salisbury Field is one of the best known of the scores of itinerant portrait painters who traveled America's rural back roads providing the country's rising middle class with likenesses during the first half of the nineteenth century. These artists and the subjects of their paintings have often been perceived by modern audiences as uneducated, unsophisticated country bumpkins.¹ This is usually far from accurate. Field came from a family of successful yeoman

farmers with deep roots in the Connecticut River Valley of central Massachusetts. As a young man Field developed a considerable interest and skill in painting, and his parents encouraged his artistic inclinations, helping him secure an apprenticeship with Samuel F. B. Morse, one of the country's leading academic portraitists, in New York City. In the years that followed his time in Morse's studio, Field gained a solid reputation as a portrait painter. During the next two decades he provided the residents of western Massachusetts and environs with paintings that captured their rural elegance and unspoken pride.

Despite spending only three months in Morse's studio in 1824–1825, Field's limited training may have actually worked to his advantage. In 1832, the British travel writer Frances Trollope noted "the frequency with which I had heard this phrase of *self-taught* used, not as an apology, but as positive praise," in relation to Americans' artistic taste.² Field's sitters consisted largely of prosperous self-made members of the middle to upper middle classes, who may have seen in Field's largely self-taught "genius" a reflection of their own success. The Nortons, for example, for whom Field painted at least four portraits around 1840 (Fig. 1), were one of Bennington's leading families. They owned and operated a highly successful pottery throughout the nineteenth century—a business that grew out of their mainly agricultural pursuits in the late eighteenth century—and were intimately involved in town and state politics.

Most often perceived as a quirky "outsider," this misperception of Alice Neel has started to shift in the last decade or two, aided in part by major exhibitions of her work in 2000 (Whitney Museum of American Art) and 2010 (organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, it traveled to Whitechapel Gallery, London, and Moderna Museet, Malmö, Sweden). Yet, thanks to the artist's undeniably colorful biography and her brash, beautifully awkward handling of paint, this misperception of Neel as "neo-primitive" has been decidedly difficult to correct. In reality, Neel came from a comfortable, middle-class family, received excellent artistic training at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women (now Moore College of Art & Design), exhibited at well-respected, professional galleries throughout her career, and was friends with leading artists and intellectuals throughout her life.

While Neel's style evolved gradually over her nearly sixty-year career, her selection of subject matter and basic artistic approach remained remarkably consistent from her early years as a dedicated

professional artist in the 1930s until her death in 1984. Grounded in the socially progressive milieu of mid-twentieth century New York, she doggedly created humanistic, psychologically probing portraits of family, friends and acquaintances executed in an expressionist vein, noting, "I paint my time using people as evidence."³ Her "discovery" and rise to fame during the last twenty years of her life was vindication for her tenacity in sticking to her own very personal approach to figurative art in the face of an art world obsessed with abstraction. Neel's dedication to realist painting was rooted in her deeply humanist beliefs and desire to imbue all her subjects, regardless of their station in life, with the dignity and complexity of character they deserved—many of her sitters can be seen as embodiments of twentieth-century "folk."

Two portraits by Field were included in *American Folk Art: Art of the Common Man in America, 1750–1900*, at the Museum of Modern Art, from November 30, 1932, through January 31, 1933. Organized by Holger Cahill, this exhibition is widely cited as the first major museum exhibition to highlight early American folk art as a distinct field of interest.⁴ Both of Field's paintings in the exhibit (they were unattributed at the time, as were most of the works in the exhibition, playing to romanticized ideals of the anonymous "other") depicted young children full-length, standing on brightly patterned carpets, against a modulated, cloud-like, gray background, with a few small symbolic accessories. Neel created numerous paintings of young children and parents with their children throughout her career, which have a striking resemblance to Field's portraits of related subjects and to the work of



Fig. 5: Alice Neel (1900–1984)
Isabetta, 1934/1935 (the painting was originally executed in 1934, destroyed and repainted in 1935)
Oil on canvas, 43 x 25¼ inches
Brand Family Collection, © Estate of Alice Neel



Fig. 6: Erastus Salisbury Field (1805–1900)
Woman and Child, ca. 1840
Oil on canvas, 34¼ x 29¼ inches
Bennington Museum

other itinerant artists working in rural America during the 1820s through the 1840s (Figs. 2 and 3). Field and Neel both imbued their young subjects with an intelligence and personality that is rare for images of children.

A hypothetical pairing of Field's portrait of three-year-old Luman Preston Norton (Fig. 4) with Neel's intense nude portrait of her estranged daughter, Isabetta (Fig. 5) was the spark that ignited the idea of the current Bennington exhibition. Both children in these portraits stand confidently tall in the center of the composition, despite the fact that the floors and boldly patterned carpets below them are dramatically foreshortened, appearing to be tilted up almost parallel to the picture plane. Due to the shallow pictorial space, both children project incessantly outwards from the canvas, looking directly at the viewer with large, bright eyes and presenting themselves unabashedly. Field's portrait of a young woman and her baby (Fig. 6) and Neel's *Puerto Rican Mother and Child* (Fig. 7) and *Ginny and Elizabeth* (Fig. 8) illustrate similar striking parallels in the artists' works. Field and Neel empathetically capture both the inexperience and slight anxiety of young mothers and the tender bond between mother and child.

In the early 1930s, at the very moment of Cahill's exhibition at MoMA, Neel was beginning to establish herself as a professional artist in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. In the years leading up to that point, interest in the work of early American artists and artisans was becoming widespread amongst progressive artists, dealers, and collectors in New York City. The first ever significant exhibition devoted to American folk art was held at the Whitney Studio Club, February 9 to 24, 1924, titled simply, and notably, *Early American Art*. At this time, there was little perceived difference between early American art and what we understand today as "folk" art. Without a formalized academic system of artistic education beyond America's metropolitan centers until at least the late nineteenth century, much of the pictorial production in America prior to the twentieth century was by autodidacts. Juliana Force, longtime director of the Whitney Studio Club and founding director of the Whitney Museum of American Art—which were located just a few blocks from Neel's Greenwich Village apartment—and her stable of artists were strong proponents of the exploration of America's artistic heritage. In 1929, Holger Cahill, in collaboration with Edith Halpert, a prominent dealer specializing in the work of America's early modernists, opened the American Folk Art Gallery, an adjunct to Halpert's Downtown Gallery. Located at 113 West 13th Street, the gallery was a ten minute walk from Neel's Greenwich Village apartment.

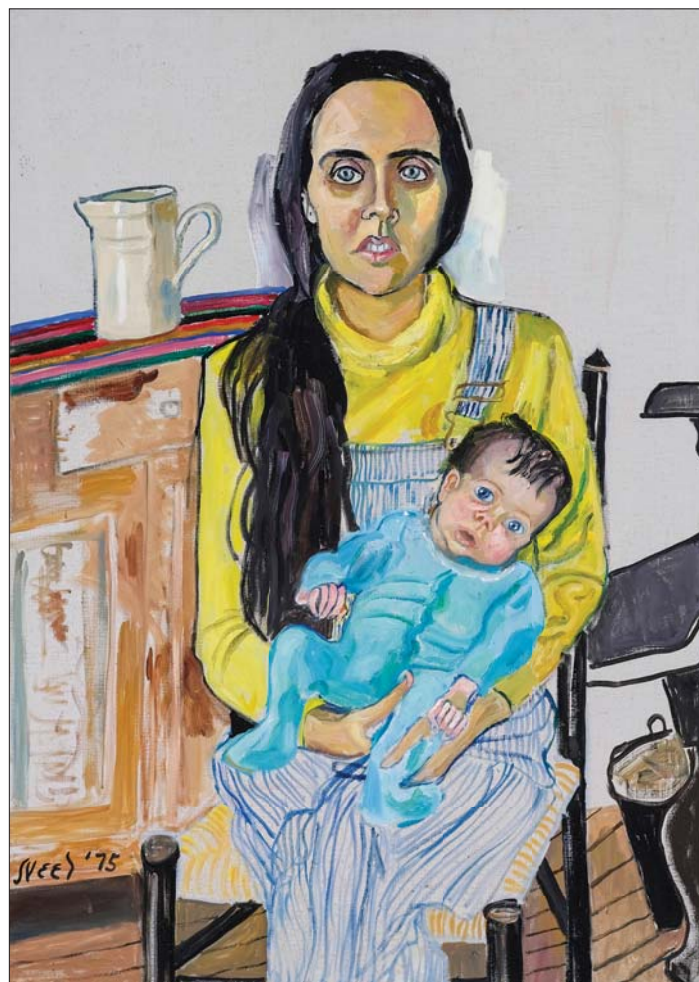
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Fig. 7: Alice Neel (1900–1984)
Puerto Rican Mother and Child, 1938
Oil on canvas, 30 x 24½ inches
Brand Family Collection, © Estate of Alice Neel



BOTTOM

Fig. 8: Alice Neel (1900–1984)
Ginny and Elizabeth, 1975
Oil on canvas, 42 x 30 inches
Estate of Alice Neel, © Estate of Alice Neel





Neel's attraction to portraits by largely self-taught "folk" artists of the nineteenth-century undoubtedly paralleled the attraction they held for many of her progressive artistic colleagues. Aside from a purely visual, formalist interest, they saw in the work of these earlier artists, seemingly not shackled by the expectations of the academy or any "art world" at all, a certain degree of "authenticity" or "sincerity." Neel, especially, with her socially progressive beliefs (she registered as a member of the Communist Party in 1935), was undoubtedly drawn to the concept behind the German word "Volk," meaning "common people," from which the term "folk," widely embraced by English speakers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was derived. During the 1930s, in the context of the Great Depression and the Works Progress Administration, which Neel depended on for more than a decade for income, the appreciation of work by nonacademic artists was predicated, in part, on a stereotyped view of these artists and their patrons as an idealized, undefined "common man." In 1938 Neel moved to Spanish Harlem and for the next few decades documented her friends and neighbors in paintings. In her portrait of Phillip Bonosky (Fig. 9), an editor at *Masses and Mainstream*, Neel seems to draw upon the visual precedent of so-called "folk" portraits, such as Field's portrait of Joshua Wales Munroe (Fig. 10), using books as a shorthand to convey the subject's intellect and employing a similar casual posture for the sitter.

After living in New York City from 1841 to 1848, exhibiting his paintings at prominent venues, including the American Institute of the City of New York, Field began to focus his artistic pursuits more on historic and biblical subject matter and less on portraiture. This decision was undoubtedly influenced by the introduction of photography to America in 1839, ironically, by Field's former teacher, Samuel F. B. Morse. Field's magnum opus, *Historical Monument of the American Republic* (Fig. 11), worked and reworked for a period of more than two decades after the end of the Civil War,⁵ and filled with deeply personal allegorical and historical content, is without question the most ambitious and sophisticated painting of the artist's career. The grandiose visionary architecture depicted in the painting—which Field had hoped would be turned into an actual building—is encrusted with over one hundred figural narratives painted in faux bas-relief, that tell an

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Fig. 9: Alice Neel (1900–1984)

Phillip Bonosky, 1948

Oil on canvas, 30 x 25¼ inches

Louis-Dreyfus Family Collection, © Estate of Alice Neel

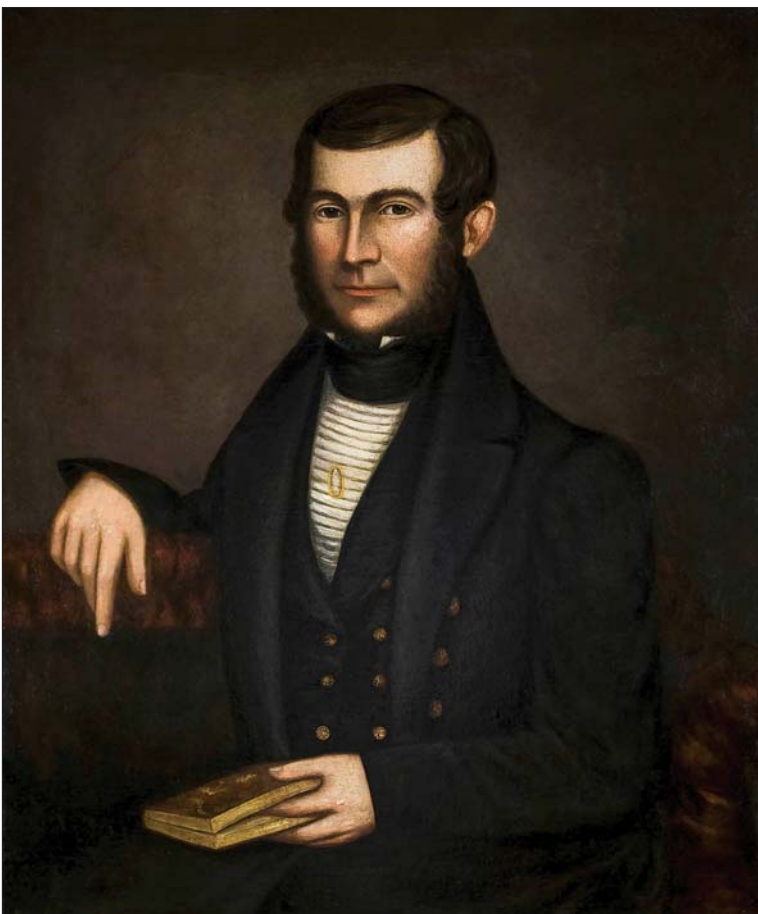
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Fig. 10: Erastus Salisbury Field (1805–1900)

Joshua Wales Munroe, ca. 1840

Oil on canvas, 35 x 29 inches

Bennington Museum Collection, Gift of Miss Tirzah J. Sweet



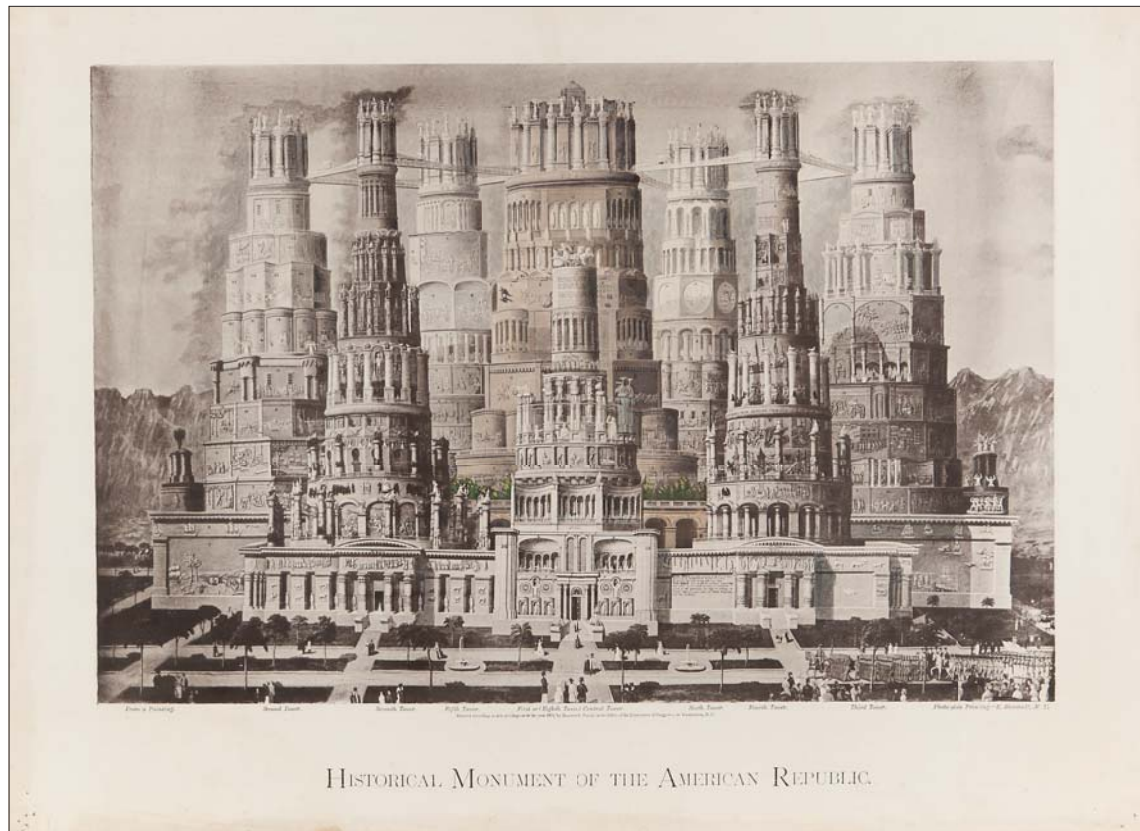


Fig. 11: Edward Bierstadt (1824–1906)
Historical Monument of the American Republic, 1876
 Photoengraving after Erastus Salisbury Field
 15½ in x 22¾ in (image), 20½ in x 27 in (sheet)
 Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Gift of Professor Reginald F. French

idiosyncratic history of the United States, celebrating not just the country's triumphs, but also recording many of her darker days. As Mary Black has pointed out, the painting may have been inspired by "the survival of the American Republic through the crisis of the Civil War."⁶ This theory is bolstered by Field's ardent anti-slavery views, a stance that parallels Neel's later championing of social and economic underdogs, and, especially, her embrace of the civil rights movement.

Referencing the figural tableaux in his monumental work, Field noted, "The rule of perspective is departed from in great measure, in order to show the illustrations more clearly..."⁷ Here, the artist makes it clear that the flattened space, skewed perspectives, and anatomical distortions seen in early American folk art were not always due to the artist being "untrained" or "naive." Rather, they were often highly conscious aesthetic decisions that stressed legibility and a straightforward presentation of facts. This visual extension of Jacksonian Democracy likely attracted Neel to the work of itinerant portrait painters such as Field and connects them conceptually. AFA

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1. Mary Black, *Erastus Salisbury Field, 1805–1900* (Springfield, Mass.: Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, 1984), 8. Black refers to the artist's Franklin County neighbors as "simple, uneducated farmers."
2. Frances Milton Trollope, *Domestic manners of the Americans* (London and New York: Printed for Whittaker, Treacher, & Co., 1832), 314.
3. Gerald Meyer, "Alice Neel: The Painter and Her Politics," *Columbia Journal of American Studies*, Volume 9 (Fall 2009): 166.
4. Holger Cahill, *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750–1900* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932), 29, 55, and 56. Cahill organized the first two museum exhibitions of American folk art at the Newark Museum in 1930 and 1931. He was the acting director at MoMA in 1932 when he organized this show, which arguably had a greater impact on the art world, given MoMA's prominent status as an arbiter of modern artistic taste.
5. Black, 46–47. Field had hoped to exhibit the painting at the 1876 Centennial World's Fair in Philadelphia. Stephen Ashley Hubbard, whom Field had painted many years earlier, worked for General Joseph Hawley, who served as President of the United States Centennial Commission for the fair. There is no evidence that the actual painting appeared at the fair, though one of the photoengravings after the painting that Field had executed by Edward Bierstadt may have been on view in Philadelphia. An original impression of Bierstadt's photoengraving will be exhibited in Bennington, not the original painting.
6. *Ibid.*, 41.
7. Erastus Salisbury Field, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Historical Monument of the American Republic* (Amherst, Mass.: H.M. McCloud, Printer and Book-Binder, 1876), 3.

Alice Neel/Erastus Salisbury Field: Painting the People, on view at the Bennington Museum, Vermont, through November 2, 2014, is supported by the S. Lane Faison, Jr. Exhibition Fund. Vermont Public Radio is a media sponsor.