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Francis O. Watts with Bird, 1805,
by John Brewster Jr. (1766–1854);
from the collection of the Fenimore Art
Museum in Cooperstown, New York.

The Observer of Silence

John Brewster Jr.'s portraits helped define the character of rural New England.

BY CATHERINE RIEDEL

I live in a house with two small boys, two large dogs, and one boisterous husband. Silence is truly golden. I find myself cherishing the kind of peace and solitude that in my youth would have left me with a bad case of cabin fever.

Time and maturity have taught me to embrace silence. In the absence of clamor, things previously gone unnoticed are suddenly revealed with sharp clarity: Beyond the window, an army of tall pines sway in unison atop a windy ridge; a beam of sunlight illuminates dust settling on a glass-topped table; a Matchbox car, long since forgotten, peeks out from behind a chair leg. Though these glimpses of life are ever-present, it's only now that I'm acutely conscious of them.

If two minutes of silence unveils this much truth, imagine what can be seen over a lifetime spent in its midst. This was the fate and destiny of the deaf itinerant artist John Brewster Jr. Hailed as one of the best Early American portrait painters, Brewster helped create a style of portraiture that was purely American and would come to define the character of rural New England.

Brewster was born in Hampton, Connecticut, in 1766, a seventh-generation descendant of *Mayflower* voyager and Plymouth Colony elder William Brewster. Deaf from birth, he lived his early life in the cloister of his large, close-knit family. Since no formal schooling for the deaf existed at the time, Brewster came of age unable to speak, and likely unable to read or write, either.

He learned to paint under the tutelage of a local artist, Reverend Joseph Steward, and in the 1790s began traveling throughout Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, and eastern New York in search of portrait work: an amazing feat, considering that his only means of communication was probably through signs, symbols, and gestures. Around 1795, he moved to Buxton, Maine, to live with his brother, Dr. Royal Brewster, a physician, and it was there that he painted portraits for wealthy and merchant-class families in Portland, Kennebunkport, and surrounding towns. Brewster charged \$15 for full-sized portraits, \$5 for miniatures.

Ironically, the seed of Brewster's talent was not in overcoming his deafness, but rather in tapping into it. In a world uncluttered by sound, Brewster could see and then depict his subjects in

a way that hearing artists couldn't. In a Brewster portrait, the sitter gazes directly at the viewer, and the eyes nearly pop from the canvas—not surprising, since most of Brewster's communication relied on direct eye contact and his ability to read minute facial expressions.

His portraits convey a quiet intensity, a stillness that is almost unsettling. It's exemplified by Brewster's simple yet elegant settings, broad areas of soft, flat color, and pleasing flesh tones. Brewster's portraits of children are among his finest works. He managed to paint them in a manner that was sweet and innocent yet straightforward, without sentimentality.

In 1817, at the age of 51, Brewster left portraiture behind for three years and enrolled in the first class at the Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons (now the American School for the Deaf) in Hartford, Connecticut, becoming among the first in the nation to learn American Sign Language; he also developed his literacy skills there. He returned to Maine sometime after 1820 and continued painting, although we don't know very much about his life after the early 1830s. He died in 1854 at the age of 88.

When a Brewster portrait comes to auction, the sky's the limit. Simple portraits can bring as little as \$1,000, but one of his finest brought \$825,500 at auction in 1988. John Brewster Jr. may have lived his life painting in silence, but he left a legacy of portraiture that speaks for itself. 🎨

Maine's Saco Museum houses the largest permanent public collection of Brewster's work, 13 portraits. 207-283-3861; sacomuseum.org

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