JOHN VALENTINE HAIDT
A Little Known Eighteenth Century Painter

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The name and work of John Valentine Haidt have been kept hidden like a secret in the town of his activity—Bethlehem in Pennsylvania. This has not been the result of any conscious reluctance to share him with the world, but rather that family modesty which fails to recognize the work of one member as of interest to those outside the circle. For the painting of Haidt has belonged very definitely to Bethlehem; his work and the beginnings of the town are inextricably interwoven.

Haidt thought of himself primarily as a preacher and looked upon his painting as of secondary importance. Today, however, nothing is remembered of his ministerial efforts; but his paintings, especially the portraits of the founders of the community, are treasured evidence of his artistic skill. Although Haidt loved his painting he looked upon it almost as though it were an enticement of the evil one to wean him away from his soul's main purpose—almost, but not quite! For Haidt came to consider his painting as a means of "testifying to his Savior's death and passion."

His position is hardly comparable to that of Fra Angelico, but nevertheless Haidt saw in his art a means of serving God and went about it prayerfully and conscientiously. During the ten years in Moravian church history known as "The Period of Sifting," when less worthy devotional emphasis was placed upon the sufferings of Christ, Haidt felt that here was his opportunity to demonstrate in paint the truth as he found it, that by this means he "might bear testimony." About 1747 while Haidt was still in Germany, he had been attempting to preach for the Moravians but they reproved him for having no joy in his religion. When he argued with them they replied that he had not yet learned to know Jesus. "I knew indeed," he writes, "that children of God have a right to be joyful but their joy should be in the Lord."
But since I gained nothing by this except to make them suspicious of me I wrote to the dear Disciple,¹ without telling him the reasons, and asked him to let me continue my painting instead of preaching. For I thought if they no longer want to preach the martyrdom of God then I will paint it the more industriously.”

This insight into his own attitude toward his work is revealed in a brief autobiographical sketch recently brought to light by the assistant archivist of the Moravian Church, Kenneth Gardiner Hamilton. The essay, dated October 8, 1767, is written in scarcely decipherable German script. Some years later, most probably at the time of Haidt’s death in 1780, the manuscript was summarized and rewritten in careful chirography. This would presumably have been done by the local pastor who according to Moravian custom prepared an account of the life of each departed member. At the end of the transcript, the copyist added a few lines of comment on the last days of Haidt’s life.

Haidt wrote chiefly of his religious experiences—in fact the little work may be considered as an apology for his position. In it he tells of his discovery of the Moravian Brethren and how he came to be associated with them. But in spite of his religious bias he reveals his love of painting. His account begins:

I was born at Danzig October 4, 1700 and on the twelfth of the same month baptized. In 1702 my father was summoned to Berlin by the king of Prussia to be court goldsmith. There I was reared and in my most tender youth I felt my heart drawn to religion, in part by the public sermons and in part by the morning devotions which my mother, who was a devout woman, conducted each day.

I was the youngest son, my brother was six years older and we received the same education. My teacher was very fond of me and wished to lead me to the study of theology but my father wanted me to be a goldsmith in order that I might be of assistance to him in his old age. My teacher said to him, “Herr Haidt, if you do not let Valentine study to be a preacher you will have to answer to God for it.” But my father preferred me to become a goldsmith and withdrew me from school and set me to work at drawing. I made such progress in this and was so much praised that it was fodder to my ambition.

¹ This title was commonly used by the Moravians in referring to Count Zinzendorf after his death.
Indeed, so great was my progress that the first year, when I was but ten years of age, I received the prize for painting at the Academy in Berlin.

As Haidt won the prize for three years in succession he was made one of a group of a hundred boys who were assisted by the state. But in his fourteenth year the king died and the stipend ceased.

Then my hope of becoming a great painter was lost. This I report in order that the Brethren and Sisters may know how I might have become a painter since I had laid a thorough foundation in drawing. I asked my father now that as his own work as a goldsmith also had ceased and it would not now become necessary for me to plan on helping him at that, to let me become a painter. But as I was already able to earn my own bread by goldsmithing he advised me to continue and made me a journeyman.

For a number of months I helped my step-brother who was a goldsmith in Berlin. Here I was tempted by another apprentice to follow in his evil ways but I resisted him and shortly afterward left for Dresden, then two years later to Augsburg and in 1718 to Venice where I had a cousin who was a medallist. He liked me very much and assured me if I would remain with him and become a Catholic that I would become very prosperous, but I could not deny the Lutheran faith and so did not remain.

From Venice, Haidt journeyed to Rome where he felt especially the loving care of the Lord for he remained in good health “in this land where all were strangers and Catholics.” Nothing is mentioned as to what he did at these various cities except for the comment in regard to his cousin, the medallist, at Venice. The assumption naturally is that he was practicing his trade as a goldsmith but the brief comment on Haidt in Appleton’s *Cyclopædia of American Biography* states that he was studying painting. There is no authority for this in Haidt’s essay. But whether he was working as a goldsmith or studying the old masters one sees where his heart lay when he writes that while at Rome “he felt he had denied himself the benefits of the Lord’s Supper

for too long a time and so returned to Augsburg.” However great may have been the charms of his work or travel, religion was a more important factor in his life.

Shortly after this he left Germany again, this time for Geneva then on to Lyons, to Paris, and in 1724 to London. While in London he married Catharina Kompigni (sic) of Huguenot parentage, who became the mother of their five children. Once in London he decided to cease his wanderings as “here all was according to my wish.” However continued settlement was interrupted because of his religious interests.

“About this time,” he writes, “the most important event in my life occurred.” By this he means his introduction to the Unitas Fratrum or the Moravian group in London. This was the turning point in his career because through his associations with the Moravians he was led to unite with them and to take an active part in their missionary enterprises, a part which ultimately brought him to America. Here he spent the remainder of his life.

Not a word in all this of his “profession,” whether he confined himself to goldsmithing or whether he painted an occasional picture. He traveled about in Holland and Germany “witnessing for Jesus” although he was not yet a recognized clergyman. Some time after 1743 he was sent back to London, “where I was bitterly schooled but the Savior helped me through.” A little later he was in Holland and here it was that he first met Count Zinzendorf.

Then at Herrnhaag “upon the request of the late Disciple I painted several pieces in the new congregational meeting place.” If the Count ordered these he must have known of Haidt’s ability as a painter. This would imply that Haidt had not been as neglectful of his art as his absorption in commenting upon his religious life would indicate. Moreover considering what is known of Zinzendorf one is inclined to believe that his interest in Haidt was prompted as much by his ability to paint as it was to “testify.” There were many who could bear witness to the gospel but not many artists were attracted into the company of the Moravian Brotherhood with its restrained way of life, which emphasized “quietism,” sobriety and industry rather than the more exuberant living which is the more natural point of view of those who would paint the glories and richness of the world.

*The records spell the wife’s maiden name Compigny, but Haidt’s spelling of French proper names would appear to have been largely phonetic.*
Zinzendorf's background differed from that of the average member of the group. He came from a different social stratum and in spite of his devout character had a broader, more cosmopolitan point of view, a greater sense of the value of historical perspective. He is frequently seen as interested in the arts and it may well be that he encouraged Haidt because he foresaw the value of an artist who could preserve a visual record of the Brethren in addition to the written accounts which were so carefully kept.4

Among the company which the Count selected to accompany him on his first journey to Pennsylvania in 1741 there had been an artist. This was Johann Jakob Mueller who also served as the Count's secretary. Had he been chosen because he could take down in long-hand the oral sermons of the day, his artistic talents being purely accidental? Or, because in addition to his secretarial qualifications he could also decorate a chapel?5

Whatever the truth in regard to Mueller, it was Zinzendorf's early meeting with Haidt that resulted in the painting for the new church at Herrnhaag. And shortly afterward through this association Haidt found himself on his way to America.6

He arrived in Bethlehem on the twenty-second of April, 1754, in the company of Bishops Spangenberg and Nitschmann. In the following August he was ordained a deacon, the first step in the Moravian clerical orders. Haidt mentions his evangelistic journeys to New England and Maryland but most of the time he seems to have lived in Bethlehem. If one may judge from the amount of painting he did before his "increasing weakness" put an end to his activity, he must have spent most of his time at the easel.

He concludes his account of his life with the words:

That I have painted I do not need to describe for nearly all the congregations know of some example of

4 The "Bethlehem Diary" was scrupulously kept from June 6/17, 1742 until the end of the eighteenth century and thereafter, with increasingly less detail, on to the present time. Other settlements kept equally careful day-by-day accounts of their activities.

6 According to J. M. Levering, A History of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (Bethlehem, 1903), a painting by Mueller was installed in the first chapel in 1742. The subsequent history of this painting is unknown.

6 In this connection there is a reference to painting in Haidt's writing: "I received a call from the Disciple to go to London. I arrived there in 1752. In London I painted and finally I received a call to Pennsylvania."
my work which the Dear Savior has caused to be a blessing to a number of hearts.

Haidt was no artist working for fame or income but strictly and contentedly for the church with which he was associated. He painted to adorn the various chapels with scenes from the life of the Savior which would attract men unto Him or incidents from the Old Testament which would serve as sermons as well as surface decoration. Most of these subject paintings are in very bad condition and many are lost. But Haidt's chief importance lies not in his religious compositions but in his preservation of the likenesses of the earliest leaders of the Moravian faith, especially those in Bethlehem. It was here that he lived and did his chief work, here he died and is buried, and here the portraits for the most part have remained—portraits that grace the memory of the early members of the church and the community in which they lived—a fitting memorial to the founders and to Haidt as well.

Thirty-two of the portraits now hang in the Moravian Archives, two⁷ have wandered to the neighboring town of Easton where they are housed by the Northampton County Historical Society, four others are in the Moravian Historical Museum at Nazareth.⁸ All the portraits possess a certain family resemblance. This is largely due to the conventions which Haidt employed in depicting the features. The perpendicular nose meets the straight brows at a right angle, with only a slight curve of transition. But in spite of the similarity in the construction of the faces Haidt manages to give his sitters distinction and personality. Each man and woman is a definite individual with his own temperament, virtues or short-comings. Yet all belong indisputably to one source.

The poses, too, are similar. There is one formula for the men, a slightly different one for the women. The faces are nearly frontal turned only slightly toward the left of the canvas. Practically every man has a hand thrust into his cloak or waistcoat, revealing a portion of the wrist and the light-colored frill of the sleeve. Many are smiling, not with the set smile of the profes-

⁷ These are the portraits of John and Johannetta Ettwein of Easton which were given by the Bethlehem church to a descendant of the Ettwein family—later they were left to the historical society.

⁸ At Nazareth are portraits of John Jacob Schmick and his wife, Johanna Inger-heid, who as missionaries to the Indians were stationed near Nazareth; the other two portraits have not been identified.
sional ecclesiastic, but like men with happy dispositions they smile as though they were genuinely amused. One of the most intriguing is that of Ferdinand Dettmers, Warden of the Nazareth Congregation, whose smile is as sardonic as the one which Houdon gave to his statue of Voltaire.

The women's faces are more sober, no coquettes here but serious-minded women not given to trivialities. Each extends an idealized hand across the lower portion of the canvas. Here again Haidt's conventionalizations are evident, the hands are similar because they are academic studies rather than that the artist employed a single perfect model as Van Dyck is said to have done.

Some of the portraits present little problems of their own. One of these is that of Christian Renatus von Zinzendorf who was never in America and another that of Anna Nitschmann who was not in Bethlehem during Haidt's time but had returned to Europe before he arrived. Both of these persons, however, were closely associated with the Count—one as his son, the other as his second wife. It is easily conceivable that the Count may have had the portraits painted before Haidt left Germany. It is equally understandable why they should have come to Bethlehem to join the other portraits in the church collection. Especially would this be true of Anna Nitschmann not only for her relation to the Count and to the other members of the prominent Nitschmann family, but because she was a remarkable woman in her own right. The high regard in which she was held would make it logical to include her portrait, even if it had to be sent from Europe.

On the other hand, it is just as reasonable to suppose that Haidt painted the portraits in Bethlehem from memory—and imagination. This would be quite in accord with his procedure, especially in the light of his use of conventional forms. Strangely enough, however, it is in these two portraits that the otherwise uniform treatment of the hands is abandoned.

Unlike the other men, Christian Zinzendorf shows both hands. They are drawn according to Haidt's established system so far as shapeliness and proportions are concerned, but at least they are not idle. The hands are raised in animated, if somewhat affected, gesture. In the portrait of Anna Nitschmann only one hand is visible but instead of the usual formal pose a new, slightly awkward position is attempted. The uplifted hand holds a bit of paper upon which are the German words: "Sein Blut Er vergossen fur
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mich würmelein." Anna was a poet and this may well be a line from one of her own hymns.

In color, the paintings are restricted to a reddish-brown tonality—the costumes, dark, nearly black, the backgrounds a shade lighter. The flesh tones too tend toward the reds, ranging from the palest orange to deep mahogany. Accessories, such as the frill of a sleeve or the Moravian cap of the women, are white only by contrast. There is practically no blue except for the slightest hint in the bows of the married women.

The same color scheme persists throughout the religious paintings, but the total effect is much warmer as the reds are less sombre tending toward the scarlets, though still subdued.

Of the religious subjects painted for the church in Bethlehem, five examples only are now in the Archives. The most important series—twelve scenes from the life of Christ which were originally painted for the first chapel—disappeared long ago. The only explanation given is a brief comment contained in a history of the "old chapel" to the effect that "after it [the chapel] had been abandoned, these paintings were, most unhappily, sold to strangers."⁹

There is also a mention of a painting which Haidt prepared for the Christmas celebration of 1755, but this also has disappeared. Among the five remaining, one is described by the writer on Haidt in Appleton's Cyclopaedia: "... among the latter [the religious paintings] the most remarkable is a reduced copy of a large painting which he produced in Germany, representing the first converts of the various nations to which the Moravians brought the gospel, coming to the throne of Christ's glory." The Bethlehem replica measures only about forty by fifty inches and is a very free version of the original in Herrnhut in which the figures are life-size. It must have been painted from memory or from the preliminary drawings. A comparison reveals many differences especially in the postures of individual figures.

The largest and most imposing of the others is a "Pentecost." In style it is more sophisticated and ambitious than the others and reminds one of the followers of Raphael. It is also more

“finished” in drawing and technique but possesses many of Haidt’s distinguishable traits, especially the treatment of the profile eye.

The three smaller paintings measure about twenty-five by thirty inches each. These are less conscious in style than the “Pentecost” and have more of that naive quality which one associates with a primitive painter. There is little background as the relatively large scale of the figures practically fills the space. One is a dramatic version of “Abraham and Isaac,” another represents Rebecca receiving a bracelet from the servant of Abraham, and the third is a half-length devotional painting of Christ showing his wounds.

All the faces exhibit the same peculiarities found in the portraits—the straight nose at right angles to the very horizontal line of the brow. When a face is seen in three-quarters view a deep shadow at the side of the nose gives a strong three-dimensional effect. The profiles are very much alike—the result of a formula rather than the use of models.

The Moravian Museum at Nazareth contains fourteen other religious subjects by Haidt. These present certain differences from the Bethlehem pictures but all possess Haidt’s unmistakable peculiarities of draftmanship and all are executed in the same reddish color scheme. The chief difference lies in the use of many small figures in more elaborate and detailed compositions. They are therefore closer in type to the Herrnhut “Christ’s Glory.” The one of the “Trial of Jesus” or “Christ before Herod” (?) is a European court scene, the characters in eighteenth century costumes with the exception of the Christ who wears the traditional robe.

Most of these were painted for the chapel in Nazareth Hall and were transferred to the “new church” after its erection in 1841. In 1860 they were “deposited” with the Historical Society by the “Trustees of the Congregation of the United Brethren at Nazareth.”

The religious paintings are in very poor condition in contrast to the portraits which are fairly well preserved. One is grateful it is not the other way about and that it is the religious subjects which have vanished and not the portraits. For even though Haidt may have considered his religious paintings as justified in the eyes of God as he sought to justify them before the Brethren, to us his greatest contribution to art and to posterity lies in these likenesses of the founders of the Moravian Community. They are the sincere, unaffected work of a man who looked with friendliness and sympathy at his fellow associates, uninfluenced by what he had learned at an academy or felt was the ideal of great painting. Perhaps he performed a greater service than he knew.