

THE PAINTING PREACHER: JOHN VALENTINE HAIDT

BY JOHN F. MORMAN

A STRANGELY neglected figure in the history of American art is John Valentine Haidt. Until recently the only printed notice of this colonial artist was a brief note in *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, and a biographical sketch in *PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY*.¹ His works lay hidden in the halls of Bethlehem, Lititz, and Nazareth. It seemed as though they would never find their way to the front in church history or the art world.

The works of Haidt first edged into present-day notice by virtue of the fact that his portraits included most of the early leaders of Bethlehem. History, if not art, has always been important in the eyes of the Moravian Church. Money was spent for the renovation of a good number of Haidt's paintings, not because of their artistic value, but because they represented church fathers. He was so little regarded as a painter that, in the late nineteenth century, it was possible for an unappreciative pastor to discard a number of large oils that seemed to him to be cluttering up the chapel basement. Today their value is fast being recognized by church authorities, and they are being preserved in fitting fashion.

Haidt deserves recognition not merely because he portrayed great men—August Spangenberg, Petrus Boehler, and Christian Zinzendorf—but because he himself was as great in the field of colonial art as these men were in the church.

John Valentine Haidt was born October 4, 1700, at Danzig, Germany, into a family whose lineage included a number of artists. The intense religious training received in his home and his inherited skill in drawing, soon turned the boy into the way he was ultimately to go in the Moravian Church—as a painting preacher. He received stipends from the King of Prussia that enabled him to study at the Berlin Academy. For three years he won first prize.

¹ "John Valentine Haidt: A Little Known Eighteenth Century Painter," by Garth A. Howland, *Pennsylvania History*, VIII (1941), pp. 304-313.

His travels to Dresden, Augsburg, Prague, Venice, Rome, Sienna, Florence, and Paris enabled him to study the style of the great masters, which style predominated in his work to his last day. In England, however, he gained a reputation as a religious man. Associations soon led him into the meeting house of the Brethren. Almost instantly he felt a kinship not only with the Brethren themselves but also with the faith they advocated. He determined to devote his life to their cause.

He arrived, May 28, 1740, at Marienborn and thence went to Herrnhaag, where he painted a number of pieces for the meeting house at the request of Zinzendorf. Count Zinzendorf, being a man of culture, saw more value in the artist Haidt than the simple Brethren did. For some time thereafter, John traveled from city to city, on the Continent and in England, in the dual role of preacher and painter.

In 1754 he was called to Bethlehem, Pa. Here most of his time was devoted to painting. Early diaries reveal that the Saviour's birth, passion, death, and resurrection were his favorite subjects. Pictures of these, as they came from his brush, went into the local congregations. He was prolific. About seventy paintings are known to be his, of which over forty are portraits.

His exact position among the artists of America is to be assessed by one more able than this writer. But the purpose of this article is to present a challenge to the qualified to turn aside from the reworking of the known painters and glance at the work of a till-recently unknown artist, whose work has received notice by Virgil Barker in his recent book, *American Painting*. Read the comment and then study the works of a great American.

In order to gain some insight into his style, three of Haidt's portraits will here be considered, Father Nitschmann, Anna Rosina Anders, and Anna Charity Nitschmann. These paintings are in the Archives of the Moravian Church at Bethlehem, Pa. In choosing to examine only his portraits rather than of any of his religious compositions, we limit ourselves to a consideration of Haidt's coloring, draftsmanship, and style.

David Nitschmann, Senior (Father Nitschmann), a wheelwright and joiner by trade, was originally from Moravia, where he had suffered persecution for his faith. He was sixty-four years old when he came to Pennsylvania, but it was not too late for him

to become there the master builder. He was the first of the Brethren to become a naturalized citizen of Pennsylvania. J. M. Levering, in *Bethlehem, Pennsylvania*, says of him, "His character combined a rare blending of force and amiability with sterling honesty and childlike piety, and as the patriarch of Bethlehem until his death in 1758 he was held in peculiar reverence and affection."



THE MASTER BUILDER

DAVID NITSCHMANN

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The spirit of the man has been captured by the painter. Here is an individual, not a set pattern. The brow is that of a man who takes every job seriously. At the same time David appears more composed than the other men Haidt painted, all of whom seem to be under a great strain. There is no forced smile in this picture, yet there is a smile. The hands are arranged in the classic

pose, but they are the hands of a man who has used them hard. Nitschmann was a carpenter. Haidt does not paint jeweled cuff links on the costume, as he does with that of every other man who sat to him.

In draftsmanship the work is excellent, though it must be admitted the chair could have been more convincingly drawn. A number of Valentine's best characteristics are evident. The eyes, here as always in his painting, have been carefully worked. They look. In every eye of every portrait there is a single white dot that in a stroke does everything to make the eye look real. A deep shadow is seen along the side of the nose. The three-dimensional effect produced is powerful. The face is highlighted and the background darkened with perfect good taste. In some others of his works, the highlight is too bold and the face appears flat.

The light comes from the upper right of the sitter, as it does in all his other paintings. The coloring is predominantly brown. Red is used in the skin tones. The whites are done with short strokes, producing the effect of a skin texture that is rough. The use of red undertones is seen in the face but not in the hands.

Usually the painter hides the hands of his men in their tunics, Napoleon fashion. David's hands, however, he must have found interesting, for in this picture both hands are shown. It is to be noticed that where the hand would normally go into the tunic, the coat is unbuttoned. This would indicate that hand-in-the-tunic was a natural pose taken by the men of this period. By some unusual back lighting, Haidt outlines the Bishop's head, and, incidentally, strengthens the feeling of depth. The canvas is in excellent condition. It was shown at the Art Institute of Chicago, April 21 to June 19, 1949.

Anna Rosina Anders came to America in 1748. She served as eldress (spiritual overseer) of the single women at Bethlehem. According to information on the back of the canvas, she was 32 at the time of the painting. Here is a single woman, typical of the Moravians and typical of Haidt's portrayal. She is painted in Gothic style. The lines of emphasis are vertical. The nose illustrates Haidt's tendency to elongate the face. Firmness of character is indicated by the carefully tied bow. No loose ends hang from the chin. The arched eyebrows are forced. The eyes are clear and sharp. We are penetrated by their glance.



MORAVIAN GOTHIC

ANNA ROSINA ANDERS

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Austerity is the word best descriptive of the pose. There is, however, for all this portrait's severity, a warmth and attractiveness about it. The face has rosy cheeks, pink undershadows. For a Moravian sister, the lips are unusually full. They are drawn into that smirk which characterizes all Haidt's work.

It is her left hand that is shown. The paintings of all his other women have the right hand exposed. The single white dot is on the eye, but is now seen also at the end of the nose. In black and white reproductions, these three spots of white stand out very clearly. The skin texture is, in contrast to that of David Nitschmann's, smooth. The tones are brushed into one another.

The whites are rich. They are not chalky nor devoid of warmth and reality. Though the areas of white are large, they never detract from the face. Artists have called the chin ribbon "cherry

red," but, historically, it should be pink. The background is dark brown. So is the dress, which makes it difficult to distinguish.

Anna Charity Nitschmann was Father Nitschmann's daughter. When she visited America, she was twenty-five years old. Yet, even at that early age, she was made an eldress. In 1743 she returned to Europe and ultimately became Zinzendorf's second wife. She died in 1760.



ANNA CHARITY NITSCHMANN

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There has been some question of the authenticity of this painting. It was returned by the Chicago Institute of Art in 1949 and the portrait of Anna Rosina Anders was exhibited in its stead. A redactor had added paint to Anna Charity's portrait, which was sufficient grounds for its rejection. The only original oil that can be seen is the white on the left bottom of the sleeve, a portion of the skirt near that section, the piece of paper held by the right hand, and parts of the ribbon. The strokes of the redactor are clumsy and can easily be traced.

The size is slightly smaller than that of Haidt's other paintings. The canvas frame appears either to have been cut down from the original or added to the canvas at some later date, for the wooden pegs found in all other frames are missing in this. The whole has been stretched over a new canvas, and, unfortunately, the date of the painting is not recorded. This age marking would be helpful, for there is difficulty in reconciling the facts that Anna returned to Europe in 1743 and that Haidt did not come to America until 1754. It does not seem probable that he would have brought this oil with him from Germany. It is more likely that he painted it from memory, from a sketch, or from an already existing portrait.

By the pose of the figure, the lighting, a few traces of original pigment, the original canvas, the writing on the paper (in Haidt's hand, identified by comparing it with the writing in Haidt's acknowledged paintings), the outline of the body, and the folds of the yoke, one can easily recognize the painting to be that of John Haidt.

Anna Nitschmann seems less severe than her fellow sisters. Perhaps that is because the shadows of the face have been eliminated. Shadows do create strong faces. A German print taken from an oil painting showing Anna Nitschmann as she must have looked after her return to Germany, gives her a very different appearance from that in this painting.

The paper she holds in her hand, translated from the German, reads, "He shed his blood for me, little worm."