

EXHIBIT REVIEW

“ONE ARTIST, THREE MUSEUMS, AND  
SIXTY-SIX YEARS OF LANCASTER HISTORY:  
THE WORLDS OF JACOB EICHHOLTZ.”

PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY

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*T*homas R. Ryan, curator. *The Worlds of Jacob Eichholtz: Portrait Painter of the Early Republic*, Lancaster County Historical Society, Apr. 10–Dec. 31, 2003, Heritage Center Museum of Lancaster County, Apr. 15–Dec. 31, 2003, Phillips Museum of Art at Franklin & Marshall College, Apr. 25–Dec. 20, 2003.

Thomas R. Ryan, editor. *The Worlds of Jacob Eichholtz: Portrait Painter of the Early Republic*. (Ex. cat. Lancaster, PA: Lancaster County Historical Society distributed by the Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003. Pp.178, 249 illus. cloth \$39.95, paper \$19.95.)

When writing for *Pennsylvania History* in 1959, Edgar P. Richardson asked with regard to Jacob Eichholtz, the Lancaster portraitist of the nineteenth century, “What is the story of his life? What were his works? Where does he fit in the story of American painting? We have as yet no answers.”<sup>1</sup> Forty-four years later, many of those questions have been answered, in large measure due to an innovative exhibition concept installed

simultaneously at three venues in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. *The Worlds of Jacob Eichholtz: Portrait Painter of the Early Republic* was on view at the Lancaster County Historical Society, the Heritage Center Museum of Lancaster County, and the Phillips Museum of Art at Franklin & Marshall College from April through December, 2003. Conceived and curated by Thomas Ryan, Executive Director of the Lancaster County Historical Society, each venue was installed with a different focus on the life and times of Jacob Eichholtz, creating not merely a monographic approach to the vast number of his portraits, but complementing the artist's production by creating a cultural and historical milieu in which to view Eichholtz's work. While the three exhibitions were obviously organized to work in conjunction with one another, each site functioned independently as three distinct themes emerged from the umbrella subject of the worlds of Jacob Eichholtz. Ryan was responsible for creating the unified look of the shows through a complementary palette of wall colors, brochure and didactic material, and a design scheme that utilizes Eichholtz's signature as well as portraits of the artist. This project, which includes an exhibition catalog published by the Lancaster County Historical Society and distributed by The Pennsylvania State University Press, was funded by the Richard C. von Hess Foundation.



FIGURE 1: The larger-than-life portrait of Jacob Eichholtz accompanied by his signature welcomes visitors to each of the exhibition's three venues. Photo by John Herr. Courtesy of the Lancaster County Historical Society.

Jacob Eichholtz was born in Lancaster in 1776. His parents, Leonard and Catharine, were innkeepers who owned the Bull's Head Tavern. It was in this relatively comfortable financial environment that Jacob learned the trade of a coppersmith. As this was not the creative outlet he desired, Eichholtz became a self-taught artist, quickly earning a living less as a smith and more as a portraitist by the early nineteenth century. Having received a set of brushes from Thomas Sully and limited instruction from Gilbert Stuart, Eichholtz achieved renown as a painter of significance in Lancaster as well as for the numerous commissions he obtained while in Philadelphia and the surrounding areas. While Eichholtz is part of the American portrait tradition that includes such dignitaries as Benjamin West, John Singleton Copley, Gilbert Stuart, and Thomas Sully, Eichholtz's style sometimes lacks the sophisticated elegance found in portraits by European-trained artists. Influenced by the *Discourses on Art* by Joshua Reynolds, Eichholtz continually worked to depict convincing postures, flesh tones, and subtle mannerisms.

With well over eight hundred works to his name, Eichholtz did not suffer from a lack of eager clients. In fact, while his lack of formal training may have prevented him from obtaining commissions from the wealthiest or most educated clientele, Eichholtz was able to capitalize on the desire of a growing middle class who, wanting to emulate the taste and appearances of their wealthier cousins, recognized the importance of having one's likeness painted. Indeed, the artist and historian William Dunlap praised what he called Eichholtz's "simple frank, unpretending manners" and encouraged the artist in 1834 when discussing Eichholtz's career as a portraitist in the *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*. "I fully believe," wrote Dunlap, "that the freedom and happiness of the citizens of this free country will one day produce painters as great, if not greater than any that have embellished the palaces of Europe."<sup>2</sup> Dunlap's confidence in the abilities and significance of American portrait painters is realized in *The Worlds of Jacob Eichholtz*. While the three venues hosting this current exhibition may be viewed separately or in any order, it is perhaps most rewarding to view the life and career of Eichholtz in the manner conceived by Thomas Ryan: *Jacob Eichholtz, From Artisan to Artist* at the Lancaster County Historical Society; *Jacob Eichholtz's Lancaster* at the Heritage Center Museum of Lancaster County; and *The Artistic World of Jacob Eichholtz* at the Phillips Museum of Art at Franklin & Marshall College.

As one might expect, the most historical emphasis of the three sites takes place in two rooms at the Lancaster County Historical Society. *Jacob Eichholtz*,



FIGURE 2: (From left) A case of copperware and tinware, portraits of the artist's parents, a family Bible, the gravestone of Johan Jacob Eichholtz (the artist's grandfather), and a reproduction of an eighteenth-century tavern help illustrate Jacob Eichholtz's roots and his early career. Photo by John Herr. Courtesy of the Lancaster County Historical Society.

*From Artisan to Artist* is chronologically and thematically the first of the three venues. The exhibition begins in a space with a large architectural window suggestive of a late eighteenth-century building, an early self-portrait by the artist, and introductory text set against a bold green background. The self-portrait becomes a subtle design link to all three venues; it creates a progression from one site to the next as the portraits reflect the maturation of the artist. The recurrent use of Eichholtz's signature as a visual leitmotif also unifies the design of all three shows. Eichholtz's life and career span from the American Revolution to the Industrial Revolution, and this exhibition focuses on creating an historical and cultural environment in which to understand the early career of this artisan turned artist, from his work as a copper-smith until circa 1816 as his portrait style began to mature. Beginning with his family's history, the visitor first encounters a recreated interior of the Bull's Head Tavern. Contents of the bar are replicated as in an 1817 inventory. The didactic panels are extremely well-produced. They are informative without being verbose, and the design is comfortable to read as well as visually

appealing. Other items from the Eichholtz family are included, such as the family Bible and the tombstone of Johan Jacob Eichholtz (the artist's grandfather). Items commonly produced by a tinsmith, notes on a typical day for the artist, as well as a pianoforte add to the cultural atmosphere evoked in this room. The artistry of Eichholtz, however, begins just past his painted tavern sign with a wall of eighteen profile portraits. Here the artist's early style is revealed. Often uneven stylistically, this grouping calls into question the matter of authenticity (addressed well in the catalog by Peter Seibert).

The profile portraits lead the visitor into the second room, a more formal and conservative installation of a dozen works including a fine portrait of *Charles Biddle* (1811) attributed to Eichholtz. Here one views the artist in the role he wished to assume, that of the professional portrait painter. Relationships to the styles of Sully and Stuart are readily apparent. Eichholtz emphasizes the delicateness of drapery, and of focused gazes, and the hands and face of his sitters are treated with careful attention, if sometimes suffering from slightly awkward proportions and uneven skin tones. *Jacob Eichholtz, From Artisan to Artist* establishes a starting point from which to understand Eichholtz's talent for straddling the realms of both craftsman and self-taught artist, which provides fascinating insight into the production of early nineteenth-century utilitarian and creative wares.

*Jacob Eichholtz's Lancaster* is a continuation of the exhibition at the Heritage Center Museum of Lancaster County. Located in downtown Lancaster, the exhibition, combining the efforts of Ryan and the museum's president Peter Seibert, occupies two floors. A rich blue color scheme replaces the green palette from the historical society, but the Eichholtz signature, a self-portrait from circa 1834, and didactic panel style signify a consistent curatorial presence. The focus here is cultural as the lives of family and sitters are emphasized, including period furniture such as an Empire pier table with marble top and personal effects from family members such as an autograph book, lapel pin, and glasses. Wall panels discuss political patronage and address Eichholtz's Philadelphia decades (1823–1832). The text of the numerous didactic panels makes occasional reference to Eichholtz's early career as a copersmith, and thus maintains a link to the previous venue. In addition to the thirty-nine portraits and one landscape, an approximation of the view from the artist's studio is recreated looking out at the spire of Trinity Lutheran Church. The use of this architectural setting and the additional personal effects create an interesting exhibition space in what might otherwise be viewed as an abundance of relatively unknown, albeit beautiful portraits.

Ryan has done a wonderful job in designing shows that move the visitor around in eye-pleasing physical environments. By combining art, culture, and history there is something for every interested visitor. Indeed, the anomalous landscape, *Conestoga Creek and Lancaster* (1833) is a lovely foil to the abundance of portraits as this exhibition proves itself to be far more than a roll call of Pennsylvania's social elite.

The third and final venue of this collective is *The Artistic World of Jacob Eichholtz* installed at the Phillips Museum of Art at Franklin & Marshall College under the direction of Carol Fail. While incorporating historical artifacts in a similar vein as the Lancaster County Historical Society and the Heritage Center, the works on display at the Phillips Museum of Art dovetail with the other two venues and, further, are meant to place Eichholtz's career within the circle of established portrait artists of the period. A chronology of important dates related specifically to Eichholtz and more generally to the early nineteenth century are included in the form of wall text upon entering the space, a design decision that proves to be beneficial. This exhibition includes a wonderful portrait by Benjamin West of *George Ross* (1755–56) as well as two stunning portraits by Thomas Sully: *Mary Anne Heide Norris* (1830) and *William Norris* (1830). By comparison, one can observe the deficits in Eichholtz's abilities and his desire to compete within this circle of European-trained portraitists.

At the rear of the gallery, however, is a collection of paintings by Eichholtz that are not portraits. In fact, one might argue that these are some of the most intriguing works of all. Eichholtz, like many portraitists and landscape painters of his day, longed to paint "nobler" subjects. Just as Thomas Cole wished for the opportunity to paint in a "higher style" so too did Eichholtz have similar ambitions. The historical, literary, and religious scenes end this exhibition and leave the viewer wanting more. In particular, there are five paintings worthy of their own subdivision that merit further study within the overall oeuvre of Eichholtz: *Mark Anthony Delivering his Oration over the Body of Caesar*, attributed to Eichholtz after Benjamin West (before 1839) and an attempt by the artist to paint in the Grand Manner style; *Dorothea* (1841) from Cervantes's *Don Quixote*; landscapes such as *Farmyard Scene* and *Cape Henlopen* (1832); and *Crucifixion after Peter Paul Rubens* (1831 or later). The relative lack of historical and religious paintings by the artist leaves questions as to why they were made, for whom, and how many exist.<sup>3</sup>

The subject of Jacob Eichholtz and his artistic style has received scholarly consideration previously.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite monographic attention, no published

study addresses the artist in as comprehensive a manner as the corresponding exhibition catalog edited by Ryan. Published by the Lancaster County Historical Society and distributed by The Pennsylvania State University Press, *The Worlds of Jacob Eichholtz: Portrait Painter of the Early Republic* contains five essays and a foreword by Philip Zimmerman. Thomas Ryan provides the first of two essays, beginning with “Defining Jacob Eichholtz.” This chapter addresses the growing desire by the middle class of the early nineteenth century “to mediate the distance between self and community.”<sup>5</sup> Ryan also traces Eichholtz’s movement within Lancaster city. As the artist navigates his way through Lancaster society, Ryan utilizes the various Eichholtz residences to demonstrate his increasing wealth and social status as he brought taste and culture to the rising middle class.

David Jaffee provides the next essay, “Accounting for Jacob Eichholtz,” which is an in-depth examination of Eichholtz’s early career and transition from artisan to artist. Further, Jaffee discusses the role of utilitarian goods in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century economy. He utilizes Eichholtz’s account ledgers and daybooks, taking note of consumer goods and purchases, to demonstrate how those objects served as the artistic segue for Eichholtz from decorator/ornamentor to portraitist. Continuing the theme of consumerism, Peter Seibert focuses on the early oil profile portraits and the increased number of sitters for Eichholtz by 1820. Here Seibert addresses the issues of attribution and reattribution as a segue from consumer culture to connoisseurship issues. This is an excellent essay, and Seibert adeptly handles the problem of Eichholtz attributions. The relative lack of signed work by the artist has led to increased activity in terms of the attribution and reattribution of his portraits. Indeed, on the wall of profiles and miniatures at the Lancaster County Historical Society the matter becomes evident immediately as stylistic variations are apparent but not addressed. It is here that Seibert’s well-informed research would complement the exhibition in the form of a didactic label or wall text.

Carol Failll provides a brief but incisive synopsis of Jacob Eichholtz’s mature career as an artist in “Sketching the Painter’s Pursuit.” Included is a discussion of Eichholtz’s artistic influences such as West, Sully, and Stuart. Failll concludes her essay with a breakdown of the types of work Eichholtz produced: portraits of society figures, children, self-portraits, landscapes, and historical scenes. Lastly, Thomas Ryan provides the final essay as a bookend to this informative catalog. In “Portraying the Early Republic,” Ryan presents an interesting point about the ability to reinvent oneself through one’s

depiction by a portraitist. Primarily, however, this chapter serves as an extended exhibition checklist and provides the reader with an abundance of pertinent and well-written prose. The captions provide intimate details about Eichholtz's personal and professional relationships with sitters, artists, and his family while creating a larger social context with informative research on the lives of Eichholtz's patrons.

The overall concept and design, the use of three venues simultaneously, and the exhibition catalog were major undertakings by Ryan, who conceived of this project from his doctoral work, with support from numerous colleagues, including James Alton, the project manager for the exhibitions and publication. Any single piece of this collaborative effort would provide valuable insight into the worlds of Jacob Eichholtz; however, when taken in its entirety, the exhibitions and corresponding catalog are comprehensive in scope. The emphasis is interdisciplinary; none of the facets alone takes a strict art historical, cultural, or connoisseurship position, nor should they. This balanced approach demonstrates Ryan's knowledge of his audience and provides the viewer with an abundance of interesting objects to ponder and admire, allowing the visitor to make connections between portraits and cultural objects as well as between venues. Indeed, when Edgar Richardson inquired in 1959 about Eichholtz's life and career the answers were few. *The Worlds of Jacob Eichholtz: Portrait Painter of the Early Republic* has been a remarkable effort by not only successfully uniting three different physical environments with visual and thematic continuity, but for providing depth and breadth about the artist, the historical backdrop in which he lived, and the artistic world in which he circulated. The small museum, historical society, and cultural venue should take note of this exhibition concept. Partnering in this manner has resulted in a rich display of art and culture while demonstrating how profitable such cooperative efforts can truly be.

## NOTES

1. Edgar P. Richardson wrote the introduction to the article by Earle Newton, "Jacob Eichholtz," *Pennsylvania History* 26 (April 1959): 103.
2. William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* volume 2 (New York: G.P. Scott & Co., 1834): 230.
3. Rebecca Beal notes that, listed under "Miscellaneous Paintings," are thirty-four paintings which are not portraits. While a number of the listed works are no longer extant, it is significant to note that Eichholtz was interested in painting landscapes, and historical and religious subjects. See, Rebecca

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- J. Beal, *Jacob Eichholtz 1776–1842* (Philadelphia: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1969): 259–68.
4. Prior to this catalog, the most comprehensive monographic publication on Eichholtz was Beal, *Jacob Eichholtz 1776–1842*. However, other notable studies include, chronologically: William Uhler Hensel, “Jacob Eichholtz, Painter,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 37 (January 1913): 48–75.; Mary Dives Impink, “Jacob Eichholtz- Portrait Painter,” *Historical Review of Berks County* 7 (April 1942): 66–69; Earl Newton, “Jacob Eichholtz,” *Pennsylvania History* 26 (April 1959): 103–18; and John Calvin Milley, “Jacob Eichholtz, 1776–1842, Pennsylvania Portraitist,” MA thesis, University of Delaware, 1960. See the current catalog for a more extensive bibliography.
  5. Thomas R. Ryan, “Defining Jacob Eichholtz,” in *The Words of Jacob Eichholtz: Portrait Painter of the Early Republic* (Lancaster: Lancaster County Historical Society, 2003): 8.

