DOCTOR ALEXANDER ANDERSON, THE PIRATES’ FRIEND

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For many years, for seventy years in fact, a portrait of Dr. Alexander Anderson, attributed rather half-heartedly to John Wesley Jarvis, has been a part of the Museum’s collection of American paintings. In the past few months this painting has been examined in the Museum’s Technical Laboratory and cleaned. The cleaning has revealed the brilliant sketch portrait which up to this time had been hidden underneath a lot of “modern” repaint put on the canvas in 1891. This sketch, though it is unfinished, is a prime example of the work of John Wesley Jarvis, one of the best of the early New York portrait-painters.

Recently also several documents relating to the painting have been turned up in the Museum’s archives. These definitely pin down the attribution of the work to Jarvis and give the date of the painting—1815—a time when Jarvis was perhaps at the height of his powers and reputation. With the painting restored to its original condition and new documentary evidence in hand concerning it, it seems worth while to tell the story of what happened to it and how it came to the Museum and also to recount the curious and interesting history of Dr. Anderson—a once revered figure in the history of American art, known in the 1880’s as the Father of American Wood Engraving. His career throws light on certain aspects of the history of the arts that have not lately been given much currency.

In speaking of this picture in his recently published book, John Wesley Jarvis, American Painter 1780-1840, Professor Dickson with remarkable perceivingness suggested that underneath the deadening blur of old repaint there was a lively sketch, and his description expresses its quality. Dickson says “A jovial mood pervades the picture of Alexander Anderson, who is shown in this canvas with his arms resting on a portfolio as though he had paused, half in fun, to be sketched quickly by Jarvis. It is the spontaneously informal picture of a friend of the artist.”

Considered merely as an unfinished sketch it has a certain rarity and a technical interest that is lacking in Jarvis’s numerous finished works. Here we see the artist’s talents displayed in their best aspect, swift and vigorous, untrammeled by that high parlor gloss which can and often does transform a good sketch into an artistic bonbon. In this portrait Jarvis is performing at the peak of his skill unaided by the slick sweet badgering of Henry Inman, his studio assistant. In this portrait all his good qualities are summed up: his instant seizure of the likeness of his subject, his ability to transfer to canvas the mysterious aura of a personality, the physical stance, the animal vitality, and

The portrait before cleaning

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the character of a man. And here, unconcealed, is also a major flaw, one which prevented Jarvis from attaining top rank as a portraitist. He was, one feels, like many portrait-painters, more interested in faces than in anything else, and he seldom achieved that wholeness of design which can elevate a good portrait into that rarer and more desirable thing—a great picture. He was always weak at composition, and though in this sketch the pose is easy and
The wood engravings illustrated here are by Anderson. This one and the caricature of Huggins, page 224, are from drawings by Jarvis.

natural and the face is a masterpiece of paint and penetration, some fractional error in the placing of the figure gives this work an awkward air—a fault which mars many of Jarvis's more ambitious works.

Today we value an unfinished sketch much more than our grandfathers did—we like the fresh calligraphic dash and freedom of it, whereas grandpa had a horror of pictures that did not have a high finish. Possibly the sketch was first "touched up" by one of Anderson's pupils, for instance, William Morgan, who after an apprenticeship as an engraver became a painter. Possibly it was "improved" by some member of Anderson's family—several of his children had marked artistic abilities. Maybe it was tickled up by Anderson himself, who had some skill as a miniature painter. In any case some unsure hand worked on it long after it left Jarvis's studio, probably in an attempt to make it a presentable parlor piece. One attestation of the power of Jarvis's sketch is that the charm and character of Anderson always shone through the generous helping of gravy-like re-paint and varnish ladled on by later hands.

Judging from the sketch as it now stands Anderson must have been an unusually attractive man—simple, wholesome, and good-humored. Washington Irving, who knew Anderson as a young man, said of him, "He was handsome, artless, and full of good humor, and as gentle as a woman." Lossing, who knew Anderson well, says: "He was of less than medium height, compactly built, with mild and beautiful dark gray eyes, and a face ever beaming with indices of kindly feeling and serenity of spirit; . . . his voice was soft and low. He was genial in thought and conversation and had a quick perception of genuine humor. To him this world was a delightful place to live in, because it was a reflex of his own sweet spirit."

The picture of Anderson might have been all too easily and untraceably lost had it not been for a number of unusual circumstances and events which stirred the American art world in the '80's, bringing Anderson and his portrait to the fore.

The grandiloquent title Father of American Wood Engraving—first suggested for Anderson in 1834 by Dunlap and Mason and revived and publicly bestowed upon him by his proud successors some ten years after his death—is no longer impressive. Like so many of the pomposities of the late nineteenth century it has lost quite a lot of its punch, since wood engravers no longer occupy the imposing commercial place in the art world that they enjoyed at the end of the century. But his claim to it stands fairly clear. He was the first important American wood engraver, the first to work in the style of Thomas Bewick, the English engraver who, in the late eighteenth century, popularized the art of wood engraving as a means of illustrating books. Anderson's work enlarged the scope of American book illustration and incidentally enabled publishers to put out pirated editions of English books like the History of Quadrupeds, "embellished with upwards of 340 engravings."

As the demand for illustrated books, pictorial
magazines, and newspapers grew and as mechanical improvements speeded up printing processes during the first half of the nineteenth century, wood engraving became of tremendous commercial importance. By 1880 the wood engravers stood as one of the most potent and busy groups of artists because of the dependence of the big publishers on them for illustrative material—engravings from original designs as well as engraved copies of photographs, paintings, etc. Their works appeared everywhere in the popular magazines—Harpers, Leslie's, Ballou's Drawing Room Companion, Scribners, The Century. There were hundreds of wood engravers at work in New York; they were riding high. The Society of American Wood Engravers was flourishing. They were jealous of their prestige and power as the middle men of all the arts, and, being well satisfied with themselves, they had become self-consciously interested in the history of their glorious craft. Through various means these artists and their work were given wide publicity. A symposium of wood engravers was held in 1879. Prize competitions for amateur work were organized by the magazines to the great disgust of the older professionals. Articles about the art and its practitioners appeared in the magazines they illustrated. Of course the greatest attraction was a running fight, carried on in public, which split the ranks of the engravers: the "old school," who thought of wood engraving as an independent and original art, against the "new school," who thought of it as a means and reduced it to an automatic mechanical craft for copying. It was considered such a good means of earning a living that Cooper Union organized special classes for female engravers—nice, clean, steady work, and small pay.

If these busy artists, craftsmen, and students paid any attention at all to the curious invention of Mr. S. H. Horgan, a fellow New Yorker, who succeeded in 1880 in producing the first successful photographic halftone, it was probably only to sneer at its crudity, but this little mechanical trick shortly reduced the importance of the commercial wood engravers to an almost absolute zero. With the development of Horgan's process the usefulness of wood engraving to publishers and printers sank from its high importance to the status of an esoteric branch of the fine arts, and the memory of commercial wood engraving was kept alive only by such single-minded craftsmen as Timothy Cole, a man of the "new school" with a fanatical addiction to making engraved copies of paintings by the old masters.

But things looked good to the wood engravers in 1880 and in that year their attention was directed to Alexander Anderson. Though he had received some notice at the time of his death in 1870, and the engraver Benjamin Lossing had delivered a memorial address, published by the New York Historical Society in 1872, Anderson's name and fame did not have wide currency until the publication of Linton's History of Wood Engraving in America, published serially in the American Art Review in 1880. Though Linton (a British immigrant engraver) was never greatly impressed with Anderson's technical ability as an engraver he was compelled to begin his history with a chapter on Anderson, since he knew nothing of the earlier American woodcuts. This chapter was naturally based largely on Lossing's Memorial and drew renewed attention to that work. In a footnote Lossing says, "Mrs. Lewis, Dr. Anderson's youngest daughter, has a fine portrait of her father painted at his middle age by his friend John Wesley Jarvis."

All the foregoing facts, one feels sure, contributed to the decision of Mr. Robert Hoe to seek out the Anderson descendants and buy the portrait from them. Mr. Hoe, a member of the family and firm which invented and manufactured the high-speed rotary presses that had
revolutionized the manufacture of books, magazines, and newspapers, was intensely interested in all the technical and artistic processes related to printing. He was also a collector of rare books and the greatest expert in the country on the history of printing. In view of all this it seems almost inevitable that he should be interested in securing the Anderson portrait and that he should then give it to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, of which he was a founder and Trustee.

Mr. Hoe offered his gift in a letter dated October 23, 1881, in which he says: "I have his portrait, a life size of the bust only, which if the Trustees desire to accept it, I will present to the Art Museum. It is the only portrait ever painted of him. As a work of art it is fair—not valuable especially as such—but it is a good historical memorial which should be kept in some public gallery in New York. I have purchased it from one of his descendants, whose certificate relating to it I have." This "certificate" has also turned up in our archives; it says: "This portrait of Dr. Anderson was painted in 1815 by John Wesley Jarvis, the eccentric artist. Dr. Anderson was forty years of age at the time of the sitting. They were intimate friends and the picture has remained in the possession of the family until the present time. It has never been copied. E.C. Lewis, M.D., Grandson of Dr. Anderson."

From the time the portrait came to the Museum until now Mr. Hoe's estimate of it as a work of art was felt to be correct—it was a "good historical memorial." Though the portrait was, by family tradition, always called a Jarvis, no one held it to be a very good one. The truth of the matter was that the portrait had been so jimmed up with repaint, yellow varnish, and dirt that no one could tell who had painted it. As a work of art it met with and deserved only a lukewarm reception.

In 1891 the condition of the picture seemed so unsatisfactory that an attempt was made to clean it, and the restorer wrote of it, "I have cleaned the portrait of Mr. Anderson the first wood engraver of America. This picture is unquestionably by John Wesley Jarvis to whom it is attributed, although its condition was such as to warrant the suspicion that it was not painted by this artist. It is not one of his most felicitous efforts. . . . I had not gone far when I found it had been largely painted over by some one who did not hesitate to completely spoil a poor picture, will do my best to get something out of it." Whereupon, with this somewhat insulting dismissal of the picture the restorer proceeded to "do his best" by covering the sketch with still more repaint and varnish. These finishing touches reduced the artistic value of the portrait to a fifth-rate work, and with the slackening interest in the history of wood engravers at the end of the nineteenth century the picture was consigned to the storerooms, a "good historical memorial" gone wrong.

You may search the records if you wish, but it will be hard to find two American artists whose characters and lives stand more sharply in contrast than John Wesley Jarvis and Alexander Anderson. Anderson may have been New York's first wood engraver, and as such he holds a firm if not foremost position in American art history. But Jarvis wins the more colorful title as New York's first real bohemian. If he had lived in England he would have been one of the most famous of the Regency rakes. He was a wit, a raconteur who could keep any gathering in an uproar of laughter, a spendthrift, an eccentric, and a flamboyant dandy (in New Orleans he is said to have worn colossal magnolia blossoms for a boutonniere and carried a pet baby alligator struggling amid silken frills in his shirt front). He was famous as a trencher-
man and tosspot. He enjoyed life immensely, and his comic monologues, parodies, imitations of cats, and witty thrusts, won from his hundreds of admiring friends the title "the greatest story-teller that ever lived." His best stories were made into skits for the stage. All in all he set a standard for bohemian living that has seldom been equaled; in his time he was unique.

Jarvis moved with ease in those social circles where the masculine members of New York’s upper crust of Tory aristocracy and the leaders of financial and mercantile circles broke ranks, so to speak, and mingled with the artists, actors, literary men, and other raffish characters who gathered in the restaurants, taverns, theaters, and barbershops. Though Jarvis was known to every prominent man in town he was debarr ed from polite female society by rumors of his irregular home life and hard drinking, but when he traveled to Baltimore or New Orleans for a winter of portrait-painting he left such rumors behind him and became the undisputed social lion of the hour. In the decades 1810-1830 Jarvis was one of the most popular and successful portrait-painters in the country. He could, when there were pressing bills to be met, turn out six finished portraits in a week. This was of course accomplished with the aid of Henry Inman, who finished the draperies, backgrounds, and accessories.

Anderson, on the other hand, though he loved life no less than Jarvis, had a quiet, retiring, and modest nature. He was studious, serious-minded, and intensely domestic. He loved the home circle, his violin, and the old Scotch ballads his father had taught him. He was well schooled by the standards of the time; he read Latin easily and knew some Greek. He won his medical diploma from Columbia College in 1796 and practiced medicine in New York for several years. For a time he was resident physician at Bellevue Hospital.

Though he was, so to speak, a born engraver, Anderson dutifully buckled down at the age of fourteen to the distasteful business of studying medicine to please his father. But it is to be noted that he earned his way and paid for his courses and his clothing by selling his engravings. He gave up the practice of medicine after the terrible yellow fever epidemic of 1798 in which he lost his first wife, his son, his father, mother, brother, and many friends and relatives. Stunned by this multiplied tragedy, he set about making a new life for himself as an engraver. His career stretches, incredibly enough, over a period of eighty-one years, from 1787, when as a boy of twelve he produced his first crude little cuts for the newspapers, to 1868 when, at the age of ninety-three, he was still at work. He died, aged ninety-five, at the home of his daughter Jane in Jersey City in 1870.

Anderson’s crumbling scrapbooks, preserved in the New York Public Library, contain, it is said, about eight thousand proofs from the woodblocks he engraved, a monumental testimony to his tireless industry. As one of the chief illustrators of books for the New York publishers, especially moral works for the young issued by the American Tract Society, as an illustrator of the Bible, Shakespeare, spelling books, books on natural history, travel, and cooking, Anderson opened a pictorial window on the world for countless students and readers—for many of them his little engravings may have been their first contact with the arts. But he not only engraved illustrations for books and tracts, he also engraved designs for stamps, paper currency, soap wrappers, labels for nostrum bottles, newspaper mastheads, business papers, advertising cards, religious prints for
the Latin American trade, wrappers for playing cards, diagrams, views, maps—anything pictorial, in fact, that the life of the community called for. Anderson was certainly a busy man and anyone so busy at the work he loved must surely have been a happy man. Jarvis caught something of this good-humored tranquillity when he did the sketch of Anderson in 1815.

For a while the careers of Jarvis and Anderson ran parallel in time, and they worked together jointly on several little projects—Jarvis making drawings for Anderson to engrave. In spite of the wide difference in character these two artists were always good friends. They were among the first, the pioneer settlers in that most interesting portion of bohemia which lies in Manhattan, and in the early years of the nineteenth century they were among its most notable inhabitants. If Jarvis and Anderson had not met before—and it is probable that all the artists in New York knew each other in those days—they were brought together as collaborators on a most curious and comical job done for John R. Desborough Huggins. Huggins was an Englishman who styled himself “Desborous I, Empereur des Barbières and Monarch of the Comb, the Autocrat of Fashion.” He was Manhattan’s most fashionable barber in 1808. He ran a hairdressing establishment and cosmetic shop known as the Academy of Fashion in Broadway opposite the City Hotel. Here the belles of New York and their beaux, the fops and macaronis who strutted on the Battery, came to find ready-made curls, razors, Spanish skin, milk of roses, Venetian sponge, pastes, pomatum, and washes. At his shop—attracted by the eccentric character of the proprietor no less than by his tonsorial skill—the Knickerbocker wits and scalawags foregathered to be shaved, pomaded, curled, or cut, and to hear the latest quips of Huggins. The barber played his reputation as a humorist for all it was worth and advertised in the newspapers with comic squibs written in doggerel, illustrated with small pictures. Some of these are believed to have been drawn by Jarvis and engraved by Anderson. When Huggins’ witticisms were collected in a little book, *Hugginiana; or, Huggins’ Fantasy*, in 1808 Jarvis and Anderson executed the frontispiece, a caricature of Huggins.

As a sample of Huggins humor we may say that in one advertisement of his establishment he refers to it as a “razorvoir of Taste.” In another place he says of himself, “Nothing can be more preposterous than the custom of the barbers about town to dress the hair in the same style for a numerous variety of persons. For his part, he has a different manner for every description of customers. He has the legal twig, the medical friz, the parsonic curl, the philosophic twist, the buckish scratch, et cetera of other modes of dressing adapted to belles, beaux, batchelors, amateurs, connoisseurs and to persons of every description.” Huggins’ book was a failure and as far as we know there was no further collaboration in illustrating books by the two artists Jarvis and Anderson.

If American wood engraving must have a “father” the blameless character, lively intelligence, and handsome person of Dr. Alexander Anderson make him a most praiseworthy and acceptable ancestor. Though British engravers and publishers thought of him as a pirate, their charge direct adds a dash of spice to the blant complex of his personality. Perhaps his successors who commercialized and bastardized the art of wood engraving in the 1880’s and 90’s realized the sterling character of this man who loved plain wood engraving for itself and tried to honor themselves in honoring him. Certainly no man better, or one more deserving of honor, could have been found than Dr. Alexander Anderson.