

Leopold Paul Unger; A Nineteenth Century Southern Itinerant Portrait Artist

By Michael L. Marshall

Writing in a recent piece entitled, “When the Past Still Hangs in the Parlor,” Janine Yorimoto Bolt, an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation postdoctoral fellow at the American Philosophical Society Library & Museum, who has studied the political and social functions of portraiture in colonial Virginia, offered this observation: “What struck me most forcefully when I visited private homes was how family portraits continue to function as the original subjects intended. Colonial portraits had many purposes, but at least two of them were genealogical: to record likenesses for posterity and to remind descendants visually of their duty to the family. Portraits of colonial ancestors continue to hang over fireplace mantels, in the parlor, the hall, across from televisions, over couches, and in dining rooms.”¹ She added that “Successive generations have added their own portraits to the walls [so that] Colonial rococo portraits hang alongside nineteenth-century neoclassical portraits and contemporary photographs.” While many descendants no longer inhabit their ancestral homes, they nevertheless treasure the portraits that have come down to them through generations as constant reminders of their ancestors and the lives they led. As will be discussed shortly, a good

illustration of this involves three portraits of members of the Skinner family of Perquimans County, North Carolina, painted in the 1850s by an itinerant artist named Leopold Paul Unger, who was born in 1812 in Königsberg, East Prussia, now the Russian city of Kaliningrad. In 1836, Unger left Hamburg, Germany, where he was then living, and, following a circuitous route that took him to Brazil as a soldier of fortune, arrived in New York City two years later. He settled in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where he married and raised a family, but he traveled widely before his death in 1859 in search of commissions.

Unger must have liked something about the northern Albemarle region of North Carolina, because he made repeated trips to the area, where he painted a number of prominent families that resided there, including the Skinners. Many of these portraits remain today in the hands of descendants and continue to perform the purposes described by Bolt for which they were originally intended.

The three portraits alluded to earlier are those of Charles Worth Skinner, his son, Charles Worth Blount Skinner, and his wife, Martha Frances Gilliam (Fig. 1, Portrait of Charles Worth Skinner by L.P. Unger).



Figure 1

After passing through several generations of the Skinner and then the Moore families, they were inherited by Miss Elizabeth Vann Moore

(1912-2010), great-great granddaughter of Charles Worth Skinner (Fig. 2, Miss Elizabeth Vann Moore).



Figure 2

This wonderful lady was, throughout her life, dedicated to the accurate interpretation of and the preservation of the architectural and cultural

heritage of her beloved hometown. She lived in Edenton in the eighteenth-century Dixon-Bennett House, as it is called today, and there she hung her Skinner family portraits (Fig. 3, Dixon-Bennett House).



Figure 3

Miss Moore also had as a next-door neighbor, a precocious young boy who was enthralled with her stories of the town's history and those of her ancestors, of whom she was justly proud. To this youthful neighbor, Samuel Bobbitt Dixon, widely known today by his nickname "Sambo," she was simply known as "E". In fact, E, as she was called by family and close friends, was the first to identify the artist that painted her

portraits as Leopold Paul Unger, or “Mr. Unger,” as she always referred to him. It was also E who introduced the artist to her always curious young neighbor, telling him about the people in the portraits, where they lived, what they did, and where they were buried.

It is not surprising that this introduction to Unger and family portraits in general, instilled in Sambo Dixon the desire to own some of his own portraits by this traveling artist from Pennsylvania. One day, when he walked into an antiques store in Hertford, the seat of Perquimans County, there on the wall were two paintings that he was certain were by Unger’s hand; they looked like those hanging in E’s parlor, same red chair, and similar clothing, and so Sambo bought them on the spot. His assessment proved to be accurate as the man and woman depicted in the portraits turned out to be two other members of the same Skinner family: James Coston Skinner and his wife, Elmira Ward. These were the first two of what are currently nine portraits by Unger owned by Sambo. He found his third, that of Mrs. James P. Whedbee, nee Lavinia Leigh, at a country auction in Perquimans, where he noticed her sitting in a corner along with an early nineteenth century chest of drawers signed by Perquimans County cabinetmaker Joshua S. Whedbee (Fig. 4, Portrait of Mrs. James P. Whedbee by L.P. Unger).



Figure 4

He bought both the portrait and the chest, and they came with several letters that revealed the identity of the lady in the portrait (For information on the chest see *William Jones Cabinet Shop* under Decorative Arts-Furniture on this website).

Sambo's beloved E passed away in 2010, at the age of ninety-seven years, and knowing of his abiding interest in her family portraits, her family gave them to him, and they took their place along with the other Ungers in Beverly Hall, the Dixon ancestral home. By this time, Sambo had developed both an appreciation of and a keen eye for the artist's work. As a result, he was able to locate and purchase three additional Unger portraits. The first was that of an unidentified lady bought at an Ahlers & Ogletree auction in Atlanta, Georgia. The final two were found at a Freeman's auction in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They turned out to be portraits of Judge Claudius Walke Murdaugh, of Portsmouth, Virginia, and his wife, Eugenia Dickson, holding their son, James W. Murdaugh (Fig. 5, Portrait of Claudius Walke Murdaugh by L.P. Unger).

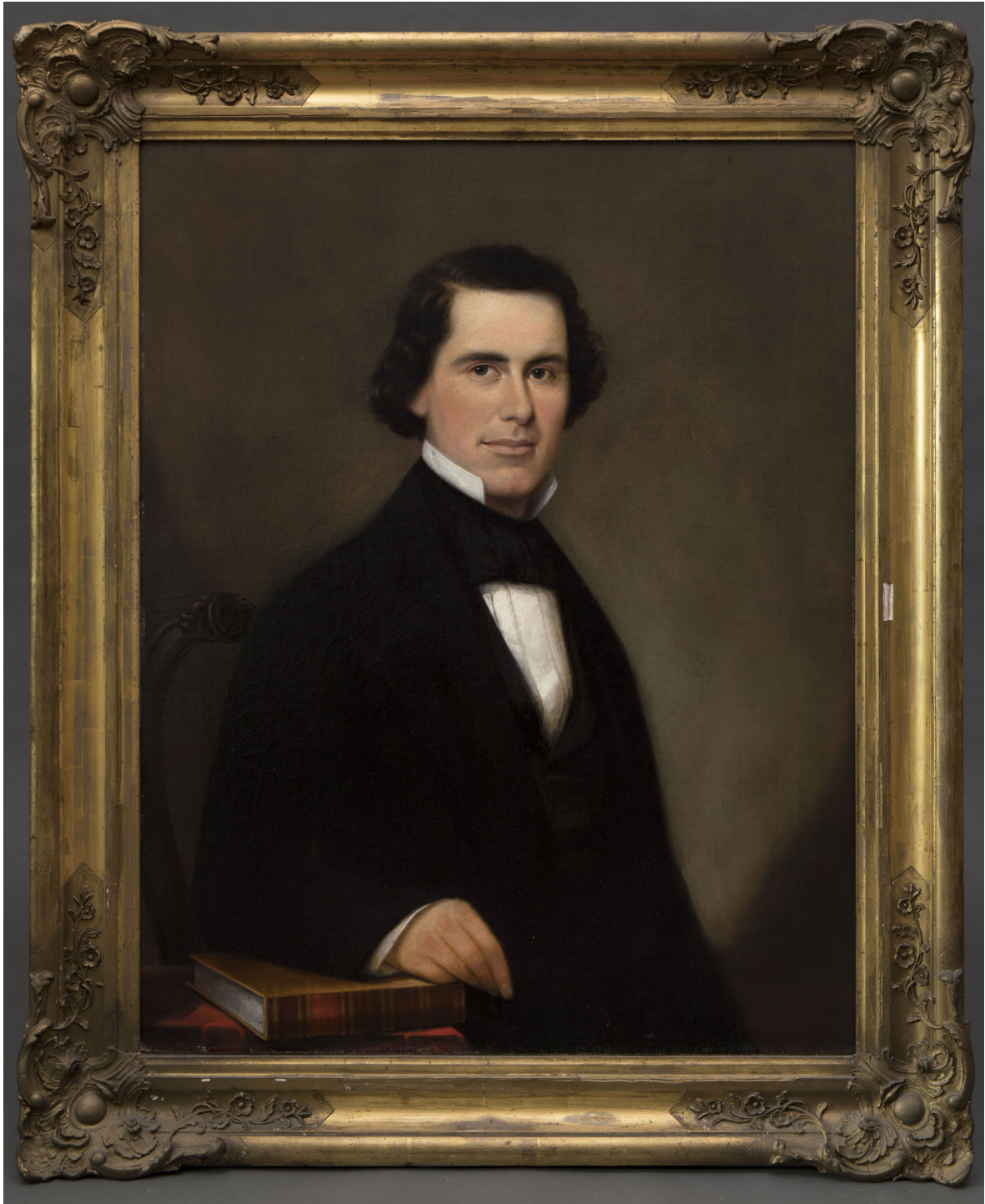


Figure 5

After growing up in Edenton, Sambo attended Virginia Episcopal School, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Wake Forest School of Law. After Law School, Sambo met his future wife, Annie Gray Thorpe, of Rocky Mount. Following their marriage in 1991, they were surprised to discover that Gray also had a family connection to Beverly Hall, as it was built in 1810 by two of her ancestors, John and Joseph Blount (Fig. 6, Beverly Hall).



Figure 6

Gray has also discovered that she has family connections to many of the Unger Portraits. While it may be an act of fate that both were descendants of prior Beverly Hall residents, it is clear Sambo and Gray have a love of history and of their beautiful home whose walls are today decorated with generations of family portraits, including their own painted by contemporary artists (Fig. 7, Unger Portraits in Beverly Hall).



Figure 7

Sambo, always eager to learn more about Unger, helped stage two events focused on the artist and his work. The first was held in 2004 at

Albemarle Plantation in Hertford and was called “Portraits and Parlors: The Unique History of Perquimans County.” The second took place in 2015 at the Shepard-Pruden Library in Edenton. In October 2018, Sambo encountered me at an event in the historic 1767 Chowan County Courthouse, and, after mentioning his Unger paintings, he hinted that it would be nice to have a book about the artist. This eventually led me to undertake the project of writing such a book. A draft manuscript has been completed, and some seventy Unger portraits—he painted both oils on canvas and miniatures—have been identified for inclusion in the book. Unsurprisingly, Unger painted several portraits in Pennsylvania, his home state, but he also painted more widely, in New York, Maryland, Virginia, Louisiana and, of course, in North Carolina. Fittingly, support for this project is being provided by the non-profit, educational Elizabeth Vann Moore Foundation of Edenton. It is hoped that E would approve. The tentative publication date is Spring 2020.

End Notes:

[1] Janine Yorimoto Bolt, “When the Past Still Hangs in the Parlor,” Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture,” Uncommon Sense—The Blog, available online at <https://blog.oieahc.wm.edu/when-the-past-still-hangs-in-the-parlor/>.

Figures 1, 4, and 5 are courtesy of the Museum of Early Southern
Decorative Arts.