



Gilbert Pantler

Little Known Folk Portraitist

BY ARTHUR KERN



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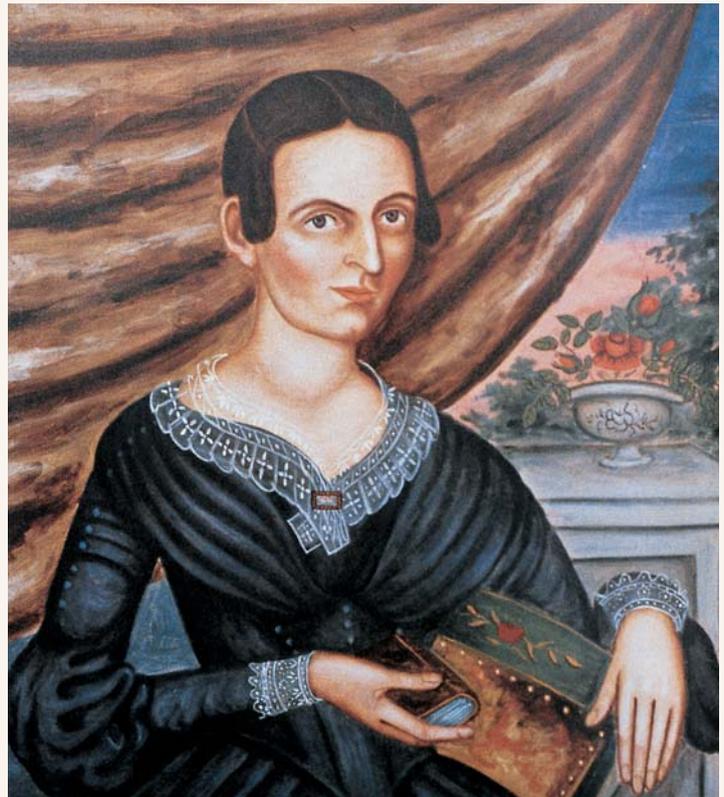
Fig. 1: I. Gillbert (active 1830s–1850s), attributed, *Gentleman in a Napoleonic Pose with Brown Glove*, ca. 1830
Oil on canvas mounted on panel, 38½ x 34½ inches. Private collection

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Fig. 2: I. Gillbert (active 1830s–1850s), attributed, *Lady with White Handkerchief*, ca. 1830
Oil on canvas mounted on panel, 38½ x 34½ inches. Private collection

I first became acquainted with the work of the early American folk portrait painter I. Gillbert about thirty-five years ago on a visit to the home of noted collector, researcher, and writer Nina Fletcher Little. She bought two portraits by the artist (Figs. 1 and 2) in about 1954 from the Old Print Shop in Manhattan, from Harry Newman, who had been told by their owner that the subjects were from Cazenovia, New York. At the time, the artist's name was unknown. However, when the paintings were included in the October 1986 Sotheby's auction catalogue for the collection of Don and Faye Walters, Don being the former curator of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum, they carried his attribution to "I. Gilbert."¹ My desire to learn more stimulated me to research this painter and his work.

I found the earliest references to the artist in a catalogue for the 1833 exhibition of paintings at the Boston Athenaeum, which lists *A Portrait of a Gentleman* by a J. Gilbert.² In a 1934 article Frederic Fairchild Sherman wrote on unrecorded early American painters, he lists



“Gilbert, I.—An inferior portrait painter of this name who presumably worked in the first third of the nineteenth century in New England. I examined... a small half-length seated likeness of a young lady... which was inscribed in Roman lettering, ‘I. Gilbert Pt.’”³ Clara Endicott Sears in *Some American Primitives* (1941) writes about “An itinerant painter by the name of J. Gilbert, who came from New Bedford (Massachusetts), and did a great deal of painting around there.”⁴ Unfortunately, though Sears’ book often lacked thorough research, decades later, scholars Jean Lipman and then Groce and Wallace repeated the erroneous naming of New Bedford as Gillbert’s place of activity, providing no supporting evidence.⁵ George

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CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT:**

Fig. 3: I. Gillbert (active 1830s–1850s)
Lady in Lace Cap, 1836
Oil on canvas, 23½ x 17¼ inches
Inscribed on back:
56/ 1836/ i. gillbert/ PANTER [sic]
Division of Home and Community
Life, National Museum of American
History, Smithsonian Institution
Van Alstyne Collection

Fig. 4: I. Gillbert (active 1830s–1850s)
Portrait of an Elderly Woman, ca. 1830
Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches
Signed: *I. Gillbert*
Collection of American Museum of
Folk Art, New York; gift of Mr. and
Mrs. William Wiltshire III. 1978.1.3

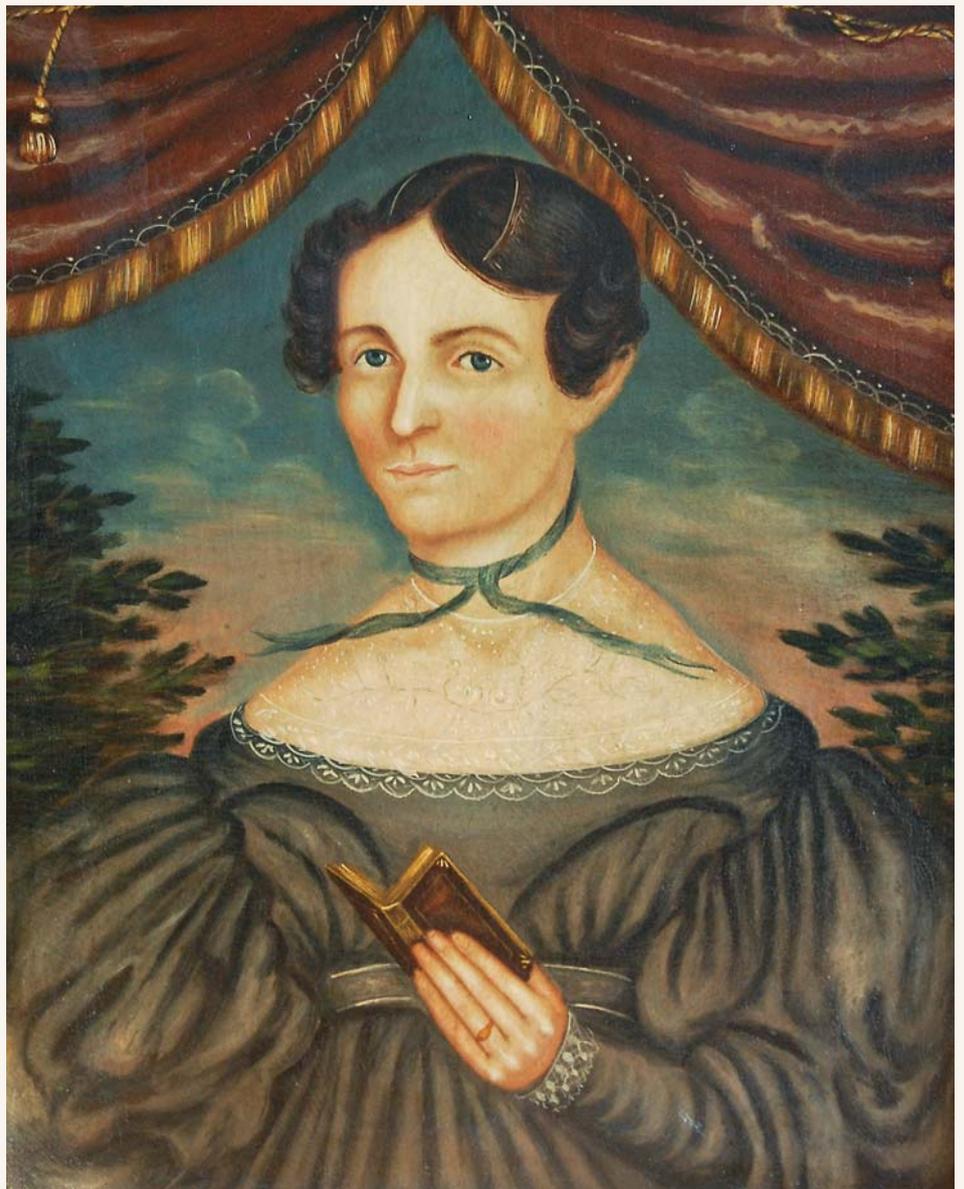
Fig. 5: I. Gillbert (active 1830s–1850s)
Woman in Green Painted Chair, ca. 1830
Oil on canvas, 31¼ x 28¼ inches
Signed: *I. Gillbert, Pt*
Present location unknown
Photograph courtesy of Sotheby’s

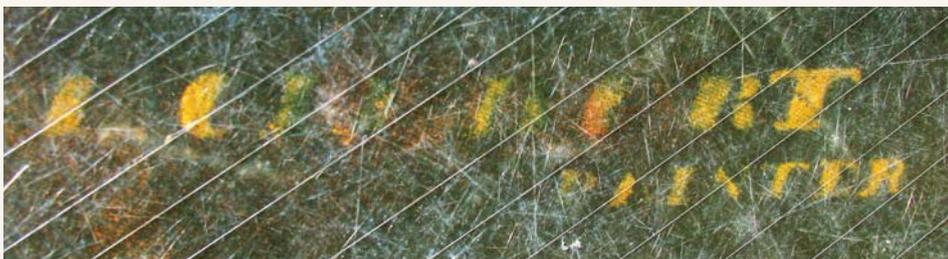
Fig. 6: I. Gillbert (active 1830s–1850s)
Man Holding a Book, ca. 1830
Oil on canvas, 31¼ x 28¼ inches
Signed: *I. Gillbert by stencil*
Present location unknown
Photograph courtesy of Sotheby’s

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Fig. 7: I. Gillbert (active 1830s–1850s)
Portrait of Catherine Nichols, ca. 1830
Oil on canvas, 30½ x 25 inches
Signed on back: *i.gillBert. PANTer [sic]*
Private collection

Fig. 7a: Inscription on reverse of
Catherine Nichols’ portrait (fig. 7).





H. Meyer's *Folk Artists Biographical Index* (1987) also lists New Bedford, Massachusetts, as the town where both an I. Gilbert and a J. Gilbert flourished, evidently repeating the information in earlier references.⁶ Despite these published references to an I. and a J. Gilbert, a review of books on early American folk portrait painters failed to disclose specifics about a so named artist.

My search for works by the same artist was more successful. Research turned up a total of eighteen portraits attributable to the artist, six of which are signed. In published

sources the artist's last name has been variously spelled with either one "l" or two, and the first initial of his given name has often been reported as "J" rather than "I." However, all of the known signed paintings contain the signature "I. Gilbert."

Despite the repeated statements that Gilbert was active in Massachusetts, there is no evidence to support this. Where their place of residence is known, all his subjects appear to have lived in a relatively small area of New York, encompassing the towns of Gilbertsville, Leonardsville, Cazenovia,

Peterboro, Paris, and Camden.

The portrait *Lady in Lace Cap* (Fig. 3) is in the Smithsonian, where according to the museum's *Inventary of American Paintings*, it is inscribed "56/1836/i. gillbert. PANter" [*sic*] on the reverse. The "56" possibly represents the number of the painting, while the "1836" probably indicates the date it was painted. This information was of great significance in establishing the time of the artist's activity, since none of the other portraits carry a date of execution. A stylistically similar work is *Portrait of an Elderly Woman* (Fig. 4) in the American Folk Art Museum. Its reverse contains the inscription "I. Gillbert Pt." In a 1987 letter from local historian Norma Bury of Morrisville, New York, about five miles from Cazenovia, she states that the portrait was found either in Gilbertsville, about thirty miles from Cazenovia, or in Leonardsville, midway between the two.⁷

In *Woman in Green Painted Chair* (Fig. 5), known through a photograph in a 1985 Sotheby's auction catalogue, the subject is seated on a well-defined painted chair and has most of the stylistic features of the subjects in figures 3 and 4. According to the catalogue it is inscribed on the reverse in graphite, "I. Gillbert, Pt." The accompanying portrait, *Man Holding a Book* (Fig. 6), is signed in the same way and shares the same features.

The subject of the portrait in Figure 7 is identified as Catherine Nichols by an attached label that records her name. The identity of the artist is established by the inscription "i. gillBert, PANter" [*sic*] on the reverse (Fig. 7a). In addition to Gillbert's usual stylistic

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Fig. 8: I. Gillbert (active 1830s–1850s) *Gentleman Posed Before a Drape with Yellow Fringe*, ca. 1830
Oil on canvas, 31¼ x 27⅞ inches
Signed on back: I. GILLBERT/ PAINTER
Collection of Michael and Suzanne Payne

Fig. 8a: Inscription on reverse of figure 9.

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Fig. 9: Gillbert (active 1830s–1850s), attributed, *Portrait of Mr. Rathbun*, ca. 1830
Oil on wood panel, 13⅜ x 10⅞ inches
Collection of the Milwaukee Museum of Art





Fig. 10: Gillbert (active 1830s–1850s), attributed, *Lady Holding a Rose*, ca. 1830
Oil on canvas, 27¼ x 21¼ inches
Private collection
Photograph courtesy Joan Brownstein

characteristics, the artist placed trees on each side of the subject. The 1850 census for the town of Paris, New York, which is about thirty-five miles from Cazenovia and twenty-five miles from Leonardsville, lists a Catherine Nichols, thirty-six years of age, the wife of Roy Nichols. Supporting the likelihood that she was the sitter is the fact that the census also shows two “Gilbert” families, one a near neighbor, living in the same town.⁸

The final known signed work, *Gentleman Posed Before a Drape with Yellow Fringe* (Fig. 8, 8a) shows the yellow fringed drape seen in a number of Gillbert’s unsigned portraits. The dramatically curling chair arm is not shown in any of the other signed paintings, but is also present in many of the unsigned works.

Attribution to Gillbert of the unsigned portraits is made on the basis of stylistic similarity to the signed works. The portrait of a man identified as a Mr. Rathbun (Fig. 9) by a previous owner is strikingly similar to the portrait seen in figure 8, differing only in that it is much smaller in size. Both show the same prominent yellow fringed drapery (also in figs. 1–3, 7), black background, detailed clothing, an object held in the left hand, and similar treatment of physical features—including the poorly delineated hands with long fingers. The International Genealogical Index records an Alden Rathbun, born in Camden, New York, October 24, 1808, to Joel Rathbun and Philomelia Alden, who married Rosanna Dunbar in Camden on September 14, 1831, and died June 10, 1888. In addition, Alden appears in the 1840 census as thirty to forty years of age, and in the 1850 census as a fifty-year-old well-to-do farmer living in Camden, about thirty miles from Cazenovia. This genealogical material supports the hypothesis that Alden Rathbun was the subject of the portrait.

Lady Holding a Rose (Fig 10), now in a private collection, was first known to me from its photograph in a 1982 Sotheby’s auction catalogue. Instead of the usual book, the subject holds a rose similar to that held by figure 2. Her facial features, sunset background, and depiction of tree leaves all relate to the signed portrait of Catherine Nichols (fig. 7); see figure 5 as well. The distinctive scrolled ear of her chair relates to signed (fig. 8) and attributed works. *Boy Standing on Figured Carpet* (Fig 11), in the collection of Michael and Suzanne Payne, is among the largest of Gillbert’s portraits. Two portraits, *Man with Hand Extended* and *Woman with Gold Beads* are pictured in *Nineteenth-Century Folk Painting: Our Spirited National Heritage*.⁹ They show most of the characteristics of Gillbert’s portraits, including the framing of the subject by trees. Two other portraits, *Woman Holding a Snuff Box*, and *Young Boy* are known only from their listing in the same publication.¹⁰ Unfortunately there are no accompanying photographs.

Finally, a pair of portraits with an attribution to Asaahel Lynde Powers, pictured as lot 73 in the Skinner’s auction catalogue for October

Checklist of Portraits Attributable to I. Gillbert

All are oil on canvas unless otherwise indicated.

1–11. Article figures 1 through 11.

12. *Young Lady*, reportedly signed in Roman lettering, “I. Gilbert Pt.” 18½ x 16½ inches. Present location unknown. Mentioned by Frederic Fairchild Sherman in *Unrecorded Early American Painters, Art in America and Elsewhere*, 22 (October 1934).

13 and 14. *Man with Hand Extended* and *Woman with Gold Beads*, each 28½ x 22¾ inches, unsigned, oil on wood panel. Known from photographs in *Nineteenth Century Folk Painting: Our Spirited National Heritage*, no. 43 and 44. Present location unknown.

15. *Woman Holding a Snuff Box*, 29¾ x 24 inches, unsigned. Known from its listing in *Nineteenth Century Folk Painting: Our Spirited National Heritage*, p. 174. Present location unknown.

16. *Young Boy*, 30 x 24 inches, unsigned. Known from listing in *Nineteenth-Century Folk Painting: Our Spirited National Heritage*, p. 174. Present location unknown.

17 and 18. *Gentleman in Blue Coat with Gild Buttons and Yellow Vest* and *Lady in Fancy Chair and Red Drape*, each 35½ x 29¼ inches, unsigned. Known from photographs in Skinner auction catalogue of October 30, 1987, lot 173. Present location unknown.

30, 1987, may instead be attributed to Gillbert. Though each contains a pillar to the left of their subject, unlike other known examples of Gillbert's work, the attribution to Gillbert is based on similarity to his signed paintings: specifically the positioning of the head and body, drapes, and treatment of hands, face, arm, clothing, and chair.

One final question that needs answering: "What was the artist's given name?" A search for possible answers led to the 1850 census of Paris, New York; as previously noted, Paris is not far from Cazenovia. In it is listed an Ira Gilbert. Though the surname is spelled with one "l," this could have been a mistake on the part of the recorder. At the time he was forty-four years of age and unmarried. The census records his occupation as "pedler" [*sic*]; it is certainly possible that the work of an itinerant peddler could have included the painting of portraits. Nothing further could be learned of the artist's identity. It is hoped that, with the passage of time, further research will uncover more information and additional paintings attributable to Gillbert, leading to further knowledge of this elusive artist's life and work. [IAFA](#)

Arthur Kern has spent the last twenty-seven years researching, writing, and lecturing on little-known early American folk artists.

1. The spelling of the artist's name has been referred to both in primary and more recent sources as having both one and two "l"s. The signed portraits are with two "l"s. This is further discussed later in this article.
2. *Catalogue of the Seventh Exhibition Boston Athenaeum Archives Paintings in the Athenaeum Gallery*, no. 59 (Boston: Press of John H. Eastburn, 1833).
3. Frederic Fairchild Sherman, ed., *Unrecorded Early American Painters, Art in America and Elsewhere*, 22 (October 1934): 146.
4. Clara Endicott Sears, *Some American Primitives: A Study of New England Faces and Folk Portraits* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), 286.
5. Jean Lipman in *American Primitive Painting*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), 152, repeats the Sears reference; George C. Groce and David H. Wallace in *The New York Historical Society's Dictionary of Artists in America, 1564–1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 259, cite the Boston Athenaeum Sherman and Sears references.
6. George H. Meyer, *Folk Artists Biographical Index* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1987).
7. Norma Bury obtained her information from older residents of the area.
8. In this census the spelling of "Gilbert" is with only one "l." Period misspellings are not unusual.



9. Peter H. Tillou, *Nineteenth-Century Folk Painting: Our Spirited National Heritage*, (Storrs, Conn.: The William Benton Museum of Art, 1973), 174.
10. Tillou, *Nineteenth-Century Folk Painting*, plates 43, 44.

Fig. 11: I. Gillbert (active 1830s–1850s), attributed, *Boy Standing on Patterned Carpet*, ca. 1830
Oil on canvas, 45 x 26 inches
Collection of Michael and Suzanne Payne