

# Nina Fletcher Little: Bridging the Worlds of Antiques and Folk Art.

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## Nina Fletcher Little: Bridging the Worlds of Antiques and Folk Art

By Ruth Wolfe

The activities of Bertram K. and Nina Fletcher Little, and of the other antiquarians and folk art enthusiasts with whom they were associated during their sixty years of collecting, may be viewed as part of a much larger movement toward the discovery of an authentic American tradition in literature, music, architecture, and the visual arts. In the period between the world wars, the search for cultural identity had accelerated among American intellectuals, who were keenly aware that many of their fellow citizens still possessed a neo-colonial mentality, admiring everything European (and especially English) and disdaining the creative accomplishments of their own people. For those whose memories do not reach back to the first half of this century, it is difficult to comprehend the widespread lack of esteem for American art. James Thomas Flexner described the situation in universities and museums in the 1930s, when he began writing about American art and artists:

Almost all American museums regarded...all but a very few of [our] painters as so vastly inferior to European art that it was only considered necessary to represent America by a small covey of

dilapidated canvases languishing yellowly in a dark hallway....  
Disdain for the American tradition in art was the correct  
sophisticated attitude.... The university art departments were even  
more scornful of the art of our nation than the museums.<sup>[1]</sup>

This was confirmed by Edgar P. Richardson's observation that when the College Art Association published a suggested bibliography for an ideal art library in 1929, it included a mere forty titles relating to American art.<sup>[2]</sup>

If universities and museums disdained the works of academically trained American painters and sculptors, they totally ignored the vast array of vernacular productions that have come to be known as American folk art. In the absence of scholarly attention, folk art has been a field dominated by collectors of great variety whose personalities and interests shaped the way the material was thought about, presented, and exhibited.<sup>[3]</sup> Jean Lipman, herself a major collector and the author of the first important book on American folk painting, devoted the October 1945 issue of her magazine *Art in America* to "Research in American Art," calling for increased scholarship in all areas, but especially in folk art: "The serious study of folk art is still in its initial phase. Within the next decade wider research, exhibition and publication will undoubtedly reconstruct many of our unknown primitive masters and clarify the sources, the characteristics and the basic style of folk art."<sup>[4]</sup> Nina Fletcher Little, working in the best traditions of the scholarly antiquarian, answered the call; of all the early collectors, none would contribute more to the serious study of folk art.

Nina Fletcher and Bertram K. Little (known to their friends as Nina -- rhymes with Carolina -- and Bert) began collecting antiques soon after they were married in 1925. What began as a practical approach to home furnishing developed into a pastime they shared for the rest of their lives. For Nina Little, collecting also became an engrossing intellectual pursuit. She admitted that she loved "being the old detective,"<sup>[5]</sup> and she systematically researched the objects she and her husband acquired. She did extensive fieldwork, using the tools of the genealogist and local historian to comb family trees, probate records, account books, diaries, period newspapers, and other primary sources for clues to the identities and working practices of early New England artists, craftsmen, and their customers. In all of these activities, Bert Little was an enthusiastic and supportive participant, editing her manuscripts and often helping her

with research. In the early thirties, Nina Little began writing regularly on such antiquarian topics as ceramics and restoring old houses. In 1938 she was recruited by editor Homer Eaton Keyes, who had been cultivating writers and setting high standards of scholarship for *The Magazine Antiques* since he founded it in 1922. Thus began a long association that resulted in her writing more articles for *Antiques* than any other single author.

Nina Fletcher Little won national recognition as a serious student of American art in April 1947, when her monograph on the eighteenth-century limner Winthrop Chandler was published as a special issue of *Art in America*. At the same time she curated a Chandler exhibition at the Worcester Art Museum -- the first ever devoted to a New England folk painter. In 1951 the scholarly establishment recognized Nina Little's expertise by inviting her to the College Art Association's annual meeting to speak on early American decorative wall painting. This was also the subject of her first book, published in 1952 in conjunction with exhibitions at Old Sturbridge Village and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. "I know of no one more tireless, no one who has contributed more through her field work and research than Nina Fletcher Little," wrote Marshall Davidson in the foreword to the book. "Here she provides a body of fresh information, gathered with uncommon skill and energy, that will be of lasting service to others in their search for a broader understanding of American civilization and of American art."<sup>[6]</sup> She continued to publish until the mid-eighties, and her lifetime output of some 150 articles, books, and exhibition catalogs immeasurably expanded understanding of the cultural context in which the folk art of New England was created.

When they first began collecting, the Littles pursued typical antiquarian interests -- blue-and-white Staffordshire, lighting devices, clocks -- and participated enthusiastically in the collectors' clubs that sprang up in Boston in the 1930s, groups like the Rushlight Club and the China Students' Club. In 1937, needing more space for their growing family and collections, the Littles acquired Cogswell's Grant, an early eighteenth-century house on a tidewater farm in Essex, Massachusetts, for use as a summer retreat. The Littles' antiques and folk art eventually filled both their year-round home in Brookline, Massachusetts, and Cogswell's Grant, where they concentrated on furnishings and decorative objects of the same period as the house, looking especially for antiques from Essex County, and always for things in a style they considered suitable for

informal, country living. The Littles died a few months apart in 1993, and in accordance with their wishes, the collection at the Brookline house was sold at auction and Cogswell's Grant and its contents became the property of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA). The picturesque house, which will be opened to the public in 1998, is a tangible link to a now legendary era of American folk art collecting, the only site where a major, pioneering collection of folk art can be seen in the setting for which it was assembled.

In her collecting autobiography, amusingly titled *Little by Little* (referring both to the collection and the way in which it grew), Nina Little remembered the thirties "as a stimulating decade when money was often scarce and buying frequently curtailed, but opportunities for discovery were unlimited and made 'antiquing' a continuously exciting experience...." [7] She also recalled that "from 1935 on, I made annual pilgrimages to shows in New York and other places, and in addition to catching up on all the current antiques gossip, I was able to make many gratifying additions to our household furnishings." In New York Mrs. Little frequented antiquarians Harry Shaw Newman of the Old Print Shop and Charles W. Lyon, as well as Harry Stone, who had the only uptown gallery specializing in primitive paintings. The Littles had collected a few maritime paintings, which appealed to them because Bert's Salem, Massachusetts, ancestors had engaged in various branches of overseas trade. Once Cogswell's Grant was restored and furnished, they began to seek out other types of American pictures. Those that interested them were, according to Mrs. Little, "still offbeat in conventional antiquarian circles and were variously referred to as *primitive, naive, unschooled, or folk*." The Littles had seen the gallery of American primitive portraits that was opened in 1940 as part of the Fruitlands Museums on the Harvard, Massachusetts, estate of Clara Endicott Sears: "There, for the first time in New England, a permanent museum collection displayed to the public a large group of controversial pictures that had recently been brought out of hiding in local attics and barns." On Fifth Avenue in New York, the Littles discovered the Folk Arts Center, founded in 1928 in conjunction with the League of Nations' International Commission on Folk Arts. Under the direction of Elizabeth Burchenal, an expert on folk dance, and her sister Ruth, the Center's approach was similar to today's material culture studies and emphasized the interrelationship of folk arts, crafts, music, dancing, and folklore. Board members included art world figures like

sculptor and collector Elie Nadelman and dealer Edith Gregor Halpert, as well as anthropologist Franz Boas. In 1941 the Littles began attending the Center's "institutes" (lecture programs) and lent textiles and paintings to several annual exhibitions. When the Burchenal sisters died in the fifties the Center closed, but Mrs. Little remembered it "as an exciting introduction to the folk arts field, an area of Americana in which we were still neophytes."

In 1948, when they attended the first of the New York State Historical Association's Seminars on American Culture in Cooperstown, New York, the Littles began in earnest a fruitful "crossover" to the folk art field. Nina Little wrote that at Cooperstown "the whole background of folk culture -- its arts, crafts, music, oral history, and folklore -- first came to life for me, awakening my interest in a hitherto unexplored territory of collecting and research." The year 1954 found Mrs. Little becoming directly involved with American folk art as a consultant to Colonial Williamsburg, where a new museum was being built by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., to house the folk art collection formed by his late wife in the 1930s with the help of dealer Edith Halpert and Holger Cahill, the brilliant art critic who organized the first important exhibitions of American folk art. Mrs. Little's reputation for scholarship made her the obvious choice to prepare a catalog of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection (AARFAC), which had never been thoroughly documented. During two years of travel, research, and correspondence (she wrote 675 letters), Nina Little made good use of her carefully honed research techniques, uncovering much new information and attributing many previously "anonymous" works in the Rockefeller collection. She was also able, through quiet diplomacy, to arrange the return of some of the finest pieces from Mrs. Rockefeller's original collection to the new museum. These included the Hicks *Peaceable Kingdom* acclaimed by the French artist Leger as the greatest painting he had seen in America;<sup>[8]</sup> *The Twining Farm*, Hicks' great scene of his Quaker boyhood; and *Baby in a Red Chair*, which has proved the most popular single painting in the collection. When Mrs. Rockefeller had given her collection to Colonial Williamsburg (her husband's pet project), her advisor Edith Halpert had strenuously and logically objected that an essentially New England and Pennsylvania collection did not belong in the South. Halpert successfully lobbied for some of the best examples to remain in New York as gifts to the Museum of Modern Art, of which Mrs. Rockefeller was a founder. Several years later, in a change of collecting

policy, the Modern sold the Rockefeller pieces to the Metropolitan Museum. In her correspondence, Nina Little reveals that she networked with all the aplomb of an "old boy," securing an entree with David Rockefeller through her fellow New York State Historical Association trustee Stephen Clark. In a private interview with David, she persuaded Mrs. Rockefeller's son that the Williamsburg collection would not be complete without the works at the Metropolitan and he quickly arranged the purchase.<sup>[9]</sup>

Working with AARFAC brought Little face to face with the "problem of folk art," which seems to perplex everyone who approaches the subject. Part of the problem is the name itself. An exhibition in 1924 at the Whitney Studio Club simply called it "early American art." Holger Cahill had used "primitives" to describe the paintings he selected for his 1930 Newark Museum exhibition, switching to "folk" for a 1931 sculpture show at Newark and for "American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750 - 1900," the 1932 Museum of Modern Art exhibition that canonized the term. Artist Alexander Brook claimed that he persuaded Edith Halpert and Holger Cahill to switch from "primitive" to "folk art" after he told them about a lecture by the collector Dr. Albert Barnes, who insisted that "primitive" art could be created only by primitive peoples.<sup>[10]</sup>

In 1950 Alice Winchester of *The Magazine Antiques*, who was keenly interested in folk art, published a "symposium in print" entitled "What Is American Folk Art?" Thirteen experts proposed a variety of definitions and terms, among them *non-academic, popular, pioneer, artisan, amateur, genre, naive*, and the all-encompassing *Americana*. Nina Fletcher Little wrote that "the study and classification of non-academic American painting has now progressed beyond the point where one heading can satisfactorily be used to cover the whole subject. And I like the generic term 'folk art' rather less than some of the others because to me the word 'folk' connotes a European class which had no counterpart in rural America."<sup>[11]</sup> In her own writing she seldom used the term "folk art," preferring "provincial" for early painters like Ammi Phillips and Winthrop Chandler, and "country arts" for the many objects in her diverse collection.

Little was forced to grapple with a definition of folk art in the introduction to the AARFAC catalog; according to her son Jack, this occasioned a double crisis. The first came when her text was sent to the Rockefeller office in

New York for final approval; to her dismay the public relations department "spiced it up." Little then rewrote the Rockefeller rewrite until she arrived at something both could live with.<sup>[12]</sup> Her original manuscript is still in her files; in it she attempted to draw distinctions between academic art and folk art as they developed in Europe, and to show how folk art was transformed by the American experience. This text lacks some of the clarity of her other writing, reflecting her difficulty with the subject. What is important is that the published version, which is not signed, does not reflect either her characteristically understated style or her thinking about folk art. At the end, a brief paragraph mentions Edith Gregor Halpert and Holgar [sic] Cahill, "both of whom assisted [Mrs. Rockefeller] in assembling this Collection."<sup>[13]</sup> This provoked the second crisis: Another Rockefeller son, Nelson, who was a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art, felt that the Modern, Cahill, and Halpert had not been given sufficient credit in the catalog. At his insistence, each catalog had inserted a four-page addendum that included a bibliography of Cahill's and Halpert's publications on folk art. For the meticulous Nina Fletcher Little, the implication that her book had been carelessly prepared was galling. Her distress over the entire affair was only partially offset by the near-universal acclaim that greeted the catalog, especially from John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who declared it "beyond praise...exquisite in every detail."<sup>[14]</sup>

The Rockefeller project brought Nina Fletcher Little into contact with virtually everyone of the postwar period who was interested in American folk art. Bert Little had assumed a more public role in 1947 when he became the director of SPNEA, a post he held until his retirement in 1970. Together the Littles became sought-after lecturers at such gatherings as the Williamsburg Forums, the Antiques Collectors' Weekends at Old Sturbridge Village, and the Cooperstown Seminars on American Culture. As the Littles became better known, so did their collection. Photographs of individual objects were often included in Nina's publications, and the Littles were always generous with loans to exhibitions. In 1969 AARFAC asked to exhibit their collection. Perhaps as a reaction to the self-promotion of other prominent collectors, the Littles insisted that the exhibition should not be a projection of their personalities, but that it have a theme of its own: "Land and Seascape as Observed by the Folk Artist."

By 1976 the Littles were besieged with requests for loans to the many exhibitions held to celebrate the Bicentennial, none more influential than "The Flowering of American Folk Art," organized by Jean Lipman and Alice

Winchester for the Whitney Museum of American Art and presented in 1974, two years before the Bicentennial (and exactly fifty years after the first exhibition of American folk art at the Whitney Studio Club). The Littles loaned nineteen paintings, carvings, and textiles to "The Flowering," which traveled to Richmond and San Francisco and inspired a spate of bicentennial surveys of folk art all over the country, many in areas where indigenous folk art had not previously been investigated.

In 1980 Jean Lipman updated her 1950 book *Primitive Painters in America, 1750 - 1950*, with another exhibition at the Whitney, "American Folk Painters of Three Centuries." Reflecting the advances in scholarship from the early days when virtually all folk artists were anonymous, the accompanying book consisted of biographical essays on thirty-five artists whose life stories had been reconstructed. There were five essays by Nina Fletcher Little and five by Jean Lipman, a reminder that the work of discovering American folk artists' identities and biographies was largely the achievement of these two women.<sup>[15]</sup> In the years following the Bicentennial, a new generation of researchers found in Mrs. Little an unfailing source of information and encouragement. Increasingly they consulted her, and there was no greater affirmation of their work than to gain her approval of their attributions and other research.

Just three years after "The Flowering" exhibition had popularized American folk art as never before, a great debate erupted among the longtime devotees of folk art and a new generation of folklorists and students of material culture. The scene was the 1977 Winterthur conference, where folklorists attacked the aesthetic approach of the early collectors. The very notion of art was called into question, as well as the validity of making evaluations of "good" and "bad" art based on arbitrary aesthetic standards -- especially standards set by one group or culture sitting in judgment on another.<sup>[16]</sup> (The same objections had already been raised in connection with exhibition and study of the primitive arts of non-Western peoples, whose discovery and appreciation has paralleled that of American folk art.)

Since the 1970s academic circles have experienced much of the kind of revisionism expressed at the Winterthur conference -- yet another symptom of the disillusion and anti-establishment tenor of the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam era. Some of the folklorists' criticism was justified. The fact that American folk art had been consistently ignored by

academic art historians deprived it of rigorous critical analysis. For fifty years it remained the province of collectors and dealers, who had little time or inclination for serious research and study. The folklorists quite correctly challenged everyone working in the field to be more careful about preserving what they called the "context" of folk objects. What they chose to overlook was the fact that had it not been for the early collectors very little eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American folk material would have survived for enjoyment or study.

The scholarly antiquarian Nina Fletcher Little was unique among the pioneering folk art collectors -- for her the folklorists' concept of context had always been paramount. "Although artistic appeal is always a prominent factor," she wrote, "documentary background is an important element to me, as my personal interest in folk painting combines both the historical and the aesthetic approach."<sup>[17]</sup> The urge to preserve, so clearly expressed in the Littles' involvement with SPNEA, was at the heart of their collecting philosophy: "I've always tried to preserve every little bit of family history or tradition that could be counted on as accurate," she said, "because I feel it isn't just owning the pieces to put in one's rooms, but one has a responsibility to preserve properly the early history and the historical and family connections of the pieces one has...."<sup>[18]</sup> Of all the early folk art collectors, Nina Fletcher Little was by far the most meticulous in documenting her collection, both with a personal cataloging system and her regularly published articles, written in a spare, elegant style that is the epitome of New England understatement.

Nina Fletcher Little's special contribution was to bridge the worlds of American antiques and folk art, bringing the antiquarian's passion for the past to the study of folk art. She combined a keen appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of an object with a determination to discover everything possible about the historical and social context in which it was created -- who made it, when and where, how it was used and by whom. For her there was no contest between object and context: she honored both.

## NOTES

1 James Thomas Flexner, "Foreword to the New Edition," *America's Old Masters* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), unpaginated.

2 Edgar P. Richardson, "Research in American Painting," *Art in America* (October 1945): 177.

3 In her forthcoming book on folk art collecting in America (to be published by Henry Holt in 1998), Elizabeth Stillinger will document the collectors and trends that have contributed to this complex chapter in American art history. I wish to thank Ms. Stillinger, who in the best tradition of Little collegiality has generously shared information and ideas.

4 Jean Lipman, "The Study of Folk Art," *Art in America* (October 1945): 254.

5 Nina Fletcher and Bertram K. Little, interview with Richard C. Nylander, September 17, 1976, Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA).

6 Nina Fletcher Little, *American Decorative Wall Painting, 1700 - 1850* (Sturbridge, Mass.: Old Sturbridge Village/Studio Publications, 1952), xi - xii. This book and an updated edition published in 1972 represent only a portion of Little's voluminous on-site documentation of wall paintings, many of which have now been destroyed or removed to museums and private collections. Her research notebooks and photographs are among her papers (hereinafter referred to as the NFL Papers), now at SPNEA.

7 The quotations in this and the following two paragraphs are from Nina Fletcher Little, *Little by Little* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984), pp. 67, 13, 112, 117, 85.

8 Diane Tepfer, *Edith Halpert and the Downtown Gallery Downtown: 1926 - 1940; a study in American art patronage* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1989), pp. 164 - 165, 182 - 183.

9 Among the NFL Papers are three letterboxes with materials on the AARFAC project, including correspondence with Mitchell Wilder and Stephen Clark about the Metropolitan Museum purchase and notes on her meeting with David Rockefeller.

10 Tepfer, op. cit., p. 186.

11 "What Is American Folk Art? A Symposium," *The Magazine Antiques* (May 1950): 360.

12 John B. Little, M.D., interview with the author, May 25, 1995.

13 Nina Fletcher Little, *The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection* (Williamsburg, Va.: Colonial Williamsburg, 1957), p. xvi. It is not clear who added the mention of Halpert and Cahill and was responsible for misspelling his name.

14 John D. Rockefeller, Jr., to Kenneth Chorley, copy of an undated letter, NFL Papers, SPNEA.

15 Jean Lipman and Tom Armstrong, eds., *American Folk Painters of Three Centuries* (New York: Hudson Hills, 1980). The biographies by Nina Fletcher Little are of John Brewster, Jr., Winthrop Chandler, Rufus Hathaway, Asahel Powers, and J.O.J. Frost.

16 Some of the papers presented at the 1977 Winterthur Conference were included in Ian M.G. Quimby and Scott T. Swank, eds., *Perspectives on American Folk Art* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980).

17 *Little by Little*, p. 117.

18 Nina Fletcher and Bertram K. Little, interview with Richard C. Nylander, September 17, 1976, SPNEA.

## About the Author

Ruth Wolfe has been an independent curator, writer, editor and lecturer in the field of American antiques and folk art. She holds a B.A in history from Smith College. A former executive editor of *Art in America*, she has written for *Art News*, *Art in America*, *Art & Antiques*, *Architectural Digest*, *Portfolio*, *Ms.*, and *New England Antiques Journal*. She worked with Jean Lipman on the exhibitions *The Flowering of American Folk Art* and *American Folk Painters of Three Centuries*. She served as a consultant for *Three Centuries of Connecticut Folk Art* at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, and as the consulting curator for *A Passion for the Past: The Collection of Bertram K. and Nina Fletcher Little at Cogswell's*

*Grant* at the Museum of American Folk Art. She is a biographer for the Shaker painter Hannah Cohoon.

### ***Resource Library* editor's note**

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