The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/21/arts/design/black-personal-names-american-folk-art-museum.html

CRITIC'S PICK

Now, Black Figures Have a Name, a Frame and a Show

A vital American Folk Art Museum show reckons with centuries of erasure by uncovering historical records of the unnamed Black people depicted in artwork.

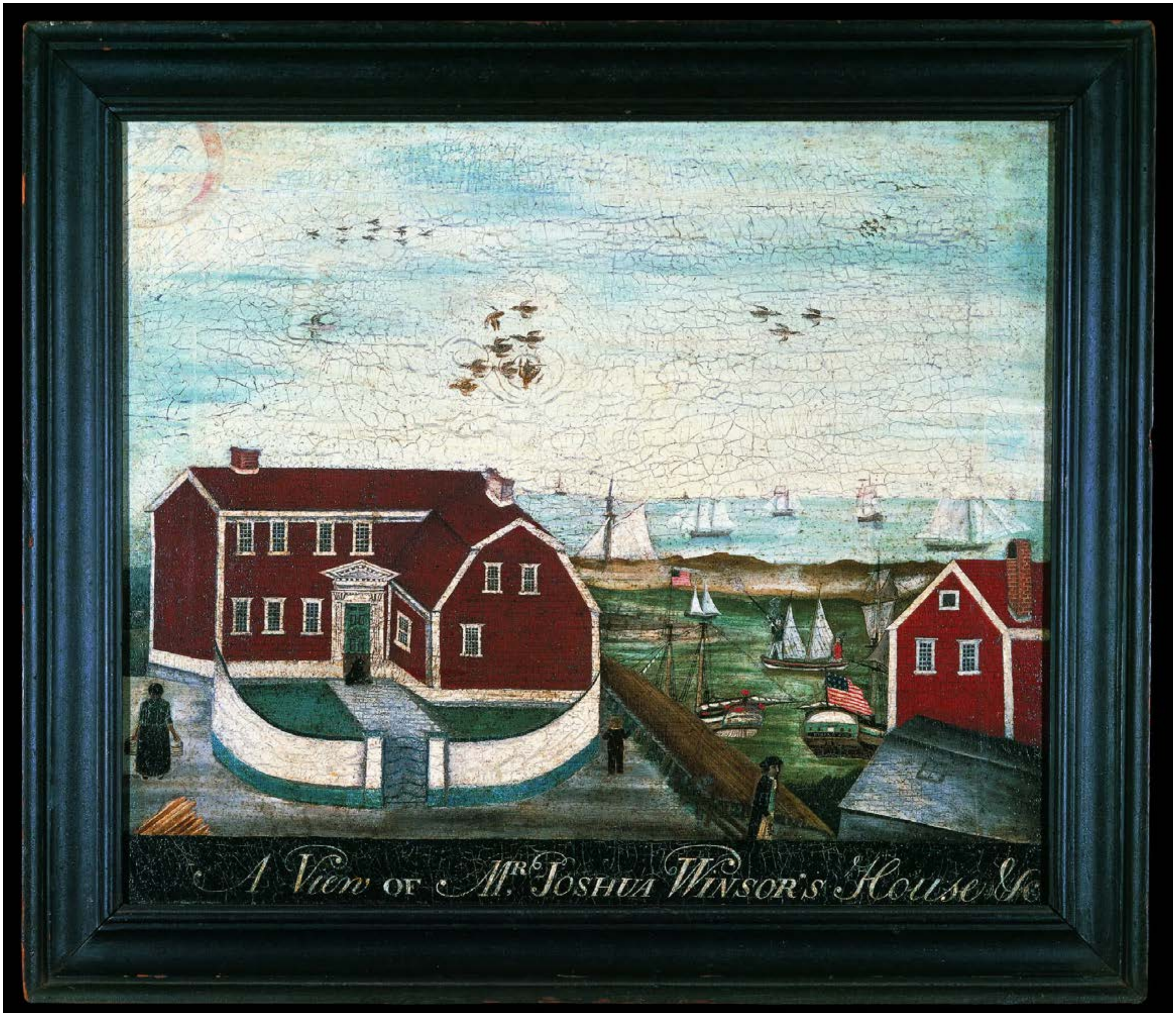
By Karen Rosenberg

Dec. 21, 2023

Even as New York's museums deliver a season of exhibitions in which the Black figure is emphatically, profoundly present, these institutions are reckoning with legacies of absence, invisibility and anonymity.

Along with the bold, triumphant portraiture of Henry Taylor at the Whitney and Barkley L. Hendricks at the Frick, we have the more reticent figuration of the Guggenheim's group show "Going Dark: The Contemporary Figure at the Edge of Visibility," in which absent bodies may be pointed critiques or forms of resistance. And at the Met, new research and conservation efforts are drawing attention to central, yet long-neglected, Black subjects in historical paintings — from the woman named Laure who modeled for the servant figure in Manet's "Olympia" to Bélizaire, an enslaved young man of African descent whose image was only recently uncovered by conservators working on a 19th-century American group portrait.

Similar revelations abound in "Unnamed Figures: Black Presence and Absence in the Early American North," a vitally important, deeply moving show currently at the American Folk Art Museum. Assembling paintings, drawings, photographs, embroideries, sculptures, ceramics and a wealth of archival material from the 17th through the 19th centuries, the exhibition surrounds representations of Black individuals (as well as other works in which the Black figure is implicit) with essential, eye-opening context.

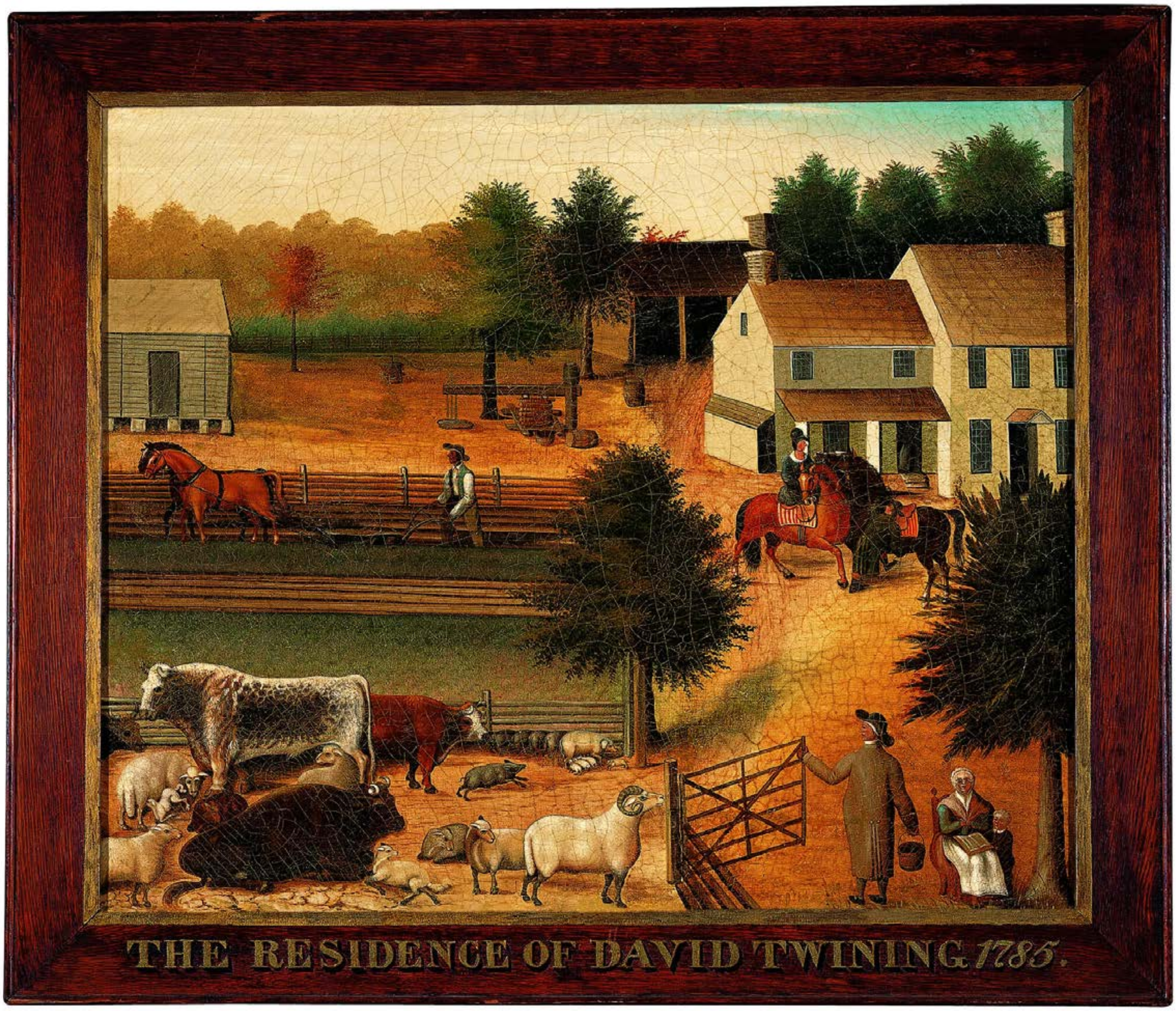

A View of Mr Joshua Winsor's House &c

Rufus Hathaway, “A View of Mr. Joshua Winsor’s House &c.,” Duxbury, Mass., c. 1793–1795. Curators posit the Black woman in the lower left corner of the picture approaching the Winsor house may be the one free person of color documented as part of the Winsor household American Folk Art Museum

The art objects were drawn from museums, libraries and historical societies throughout the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic; the lives of the subjects depicted in them have all been painstakingly researched by the show’s organizers Emelie Gevalt of the American Folk Art Museum; RL Watson, an assistant professor at Lake Forest College; and Sadé Ayorinde, a predoctoral fellow at the Smithsonian Museum, as well as other scholars who contributed to the impassioned book that accompanies the exhibition.

They have combed through letters, journals and all manner of public records to identify unnamed figures and sketch out their biographies as comprehensively as possible. And where no source could be found, they have taken a cue from the influential writer and professor Saidiya Hartman’s concept of “critical fabulation” — allowing themselves to imagine narratives, told from the perspective of the Black subject, that can fill in the gaps in the archive.

In choosing to focus largely on the North, as the curators explain in a wall text, they are looking beyond the more extensively documented Black history of the 19th-century South to “reassert Black presence, agency, and creativity in unexpected places.” The show will travel to Historic Deerfield, the Massachusetts museum, in May, but larger institutions of American art around the country ought to consider joining the tour; this is an exhibition with a lot to say about how we interpret art and material culture, and its ideas, suggestions and invitations are by no means limited by geography.

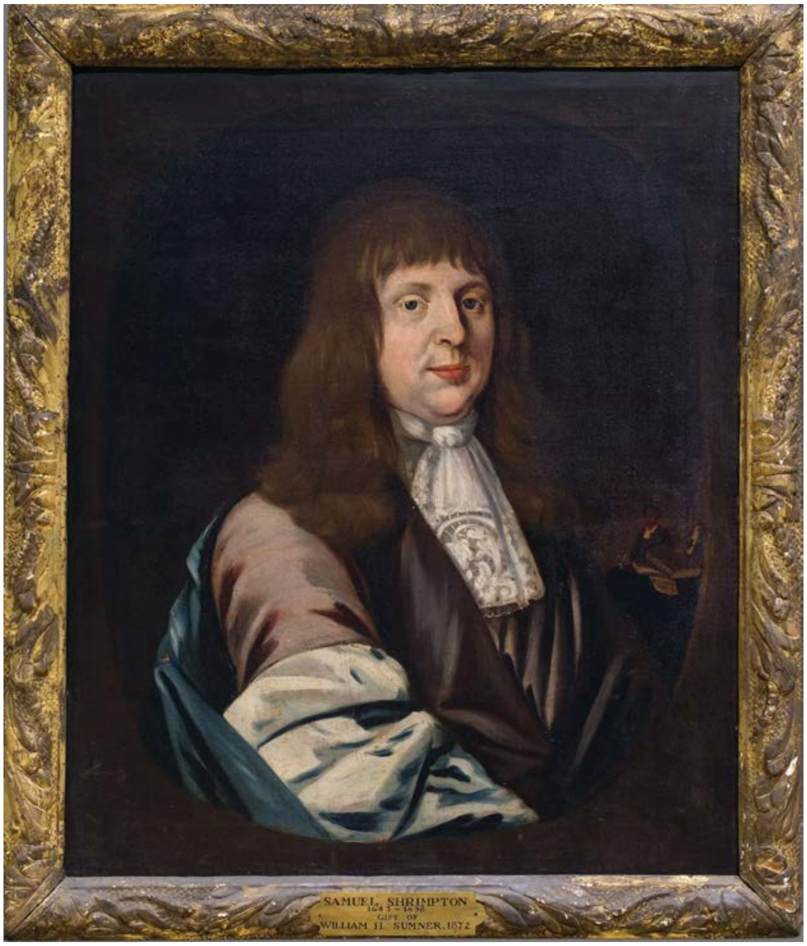

THE RESIDENCE OF DAVID TWINING 1785.

Edward Hicks, “The Residence of David Twining, 1785,” Newtown, Penn., 1846. A solitary figure operating a horse-drawn plow has been tentatively identified as Caesar (a free Black man who worked on the farm where the painter Edward Hicks grew up). American Folk Art Museum

Although portraiture is at the heart of the show, it opens with landscapes — works commissioned, in many cases, to show off the property of a wealthy landowner. Small Black figures are depicted in the examples here as extensions of that property, whether they were enslaved or free. In “A View of Mr. Joshua Winsor’s House & c.” (1793-95), painted by Rufus Hathaway for the Duxbury, Mass., merchant and shipbuilder named in the title, a Black woman in the lower left corner of the picture stands with her back to the viewer as she approaches the hulking Winsor house on the waterfront. The curators, sifting through census records, posit that she may be the one free person of color documented as part of the Winsor household around the time the painting was made.

Her name, unfortunately, remains unknown. In another landscape, this one by the famous Pennsylvanian folk artist and Quaker minister Edward Hicks (best known for the visions of interspecies harmony in his “Peaceable Kingdom” series of paintings), a solitary figure operating a horse-drawn plow has been tentatively identified as Caesar (a free Black man who worked on the farm where Hicks grew up.) As the curators note, he occupies a fenced-in area — walled off from the white figures and animals that populate the rest of the scene.

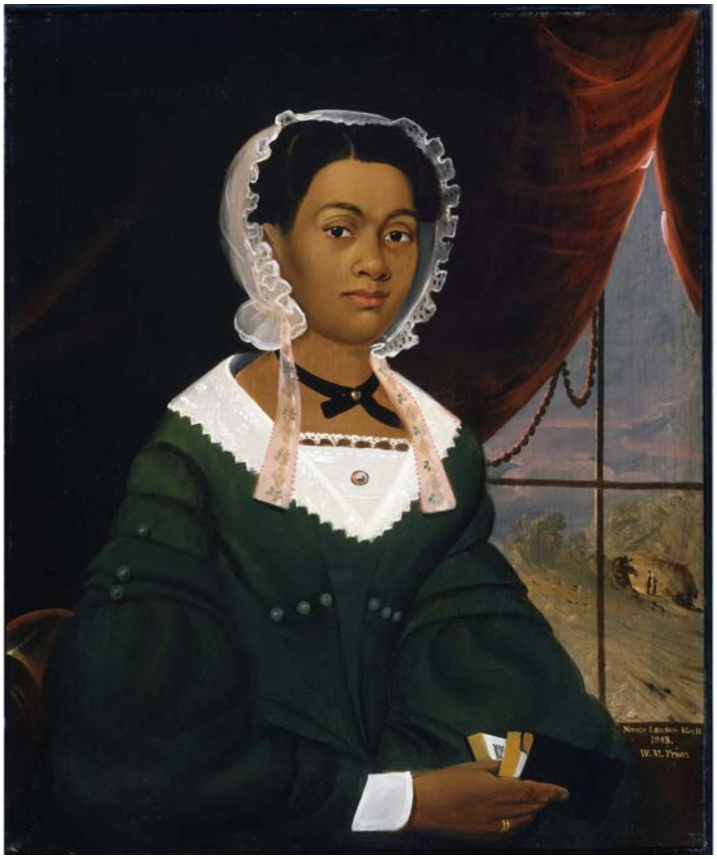
Among the show's many examples of portraiture are works in which Black figures are shown alongside their white enslavers. These are painful images, with deliberate and crude visual hierarchies; in a pre-Revolutionary portrait of the Boston merchant Samuel Shrimpton, for instance, a young Black man has been miniaturized and relegated to the distant right background.



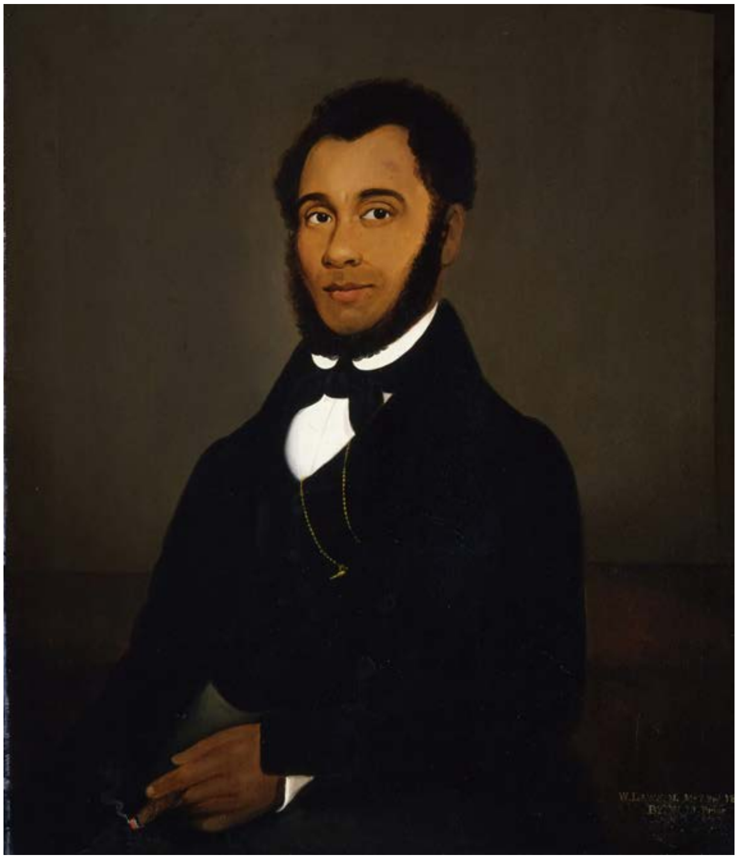
Artist unknown, "Samuel Shrimpton," c. 1675. Curators tried to identify a young Black man seen in the background at right, shown behind a writing desk. Massachusetts Historical Society

The curators do what they can to bring him to the foreground, zooming in on his area of the painting in an enlarged reproduction and combing the archives for clues to his identity. Poring over Shrimpton family papers and Boston court documents, they offer several possible names for this individual (he might have been Dick, or Robin) and point out a detail that tells us something about his daily life: he is shown behind a writing desk, implying access to literacy (which was sometimes given to enslaved New Englanders so that they could maintain household business records).

"Unnamed Figures" also makes room for some rare portraits of named and celebrated Black subjects, such as the Revolutionary War veteran and Stockbridge, Mass., landowner Agrippa Hull (shown in a formal oil painting thought to have been made from a daguerreotype after his death) and the relatively affluent husband-and-wife Bostonians William and Nancy Lawson, who in 1843 sat for a stunning and richly symbolic set of portraits by the well-known artist William Matthew Prior. (Nancy Lawson is shown with her thumb between the pages of a book, a nod to education which would also have been interpreted as a desire for equality.)



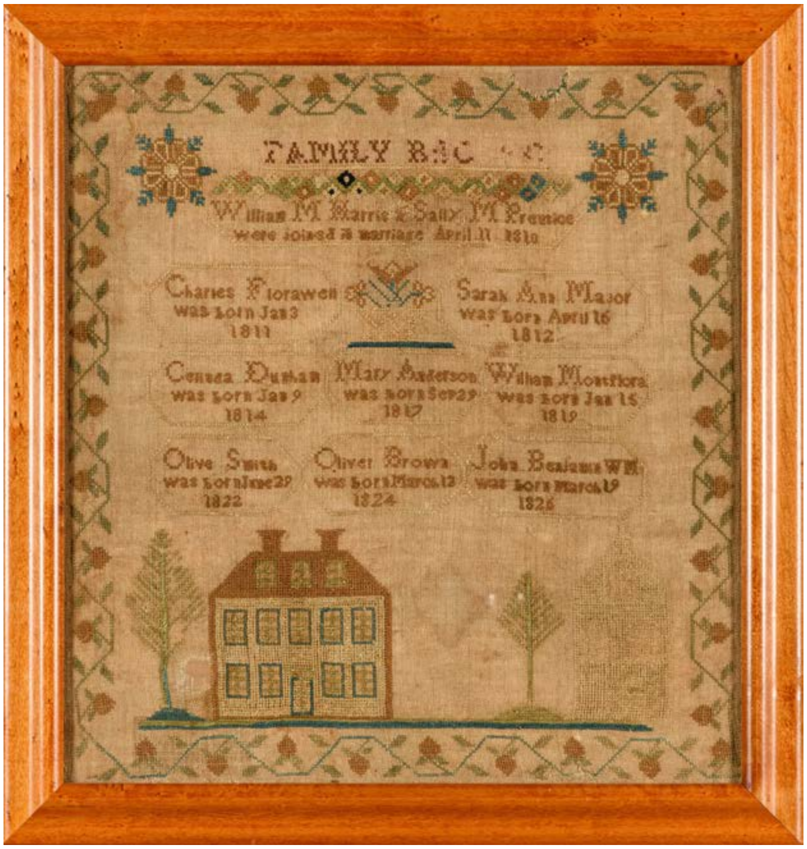
William Matthew Prior, “Nancy Lawson,” Boston, 1843. Shelburne Museum, Vermont



William Matthew Prior, “William Lawson,” Boston, 1843. Shelburne Museum, Vermont

And an uplifting section of the exhibition, dedicated to works by Black makers, includes a stirring portrait of the Baltimore minister, abolitionist, educator and author Abner Coker — painted by the artist Joshua Johnson, who, along with Coker, was a founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. With its sense of shared purpose and mutual recognition, this work is extremely powerful.

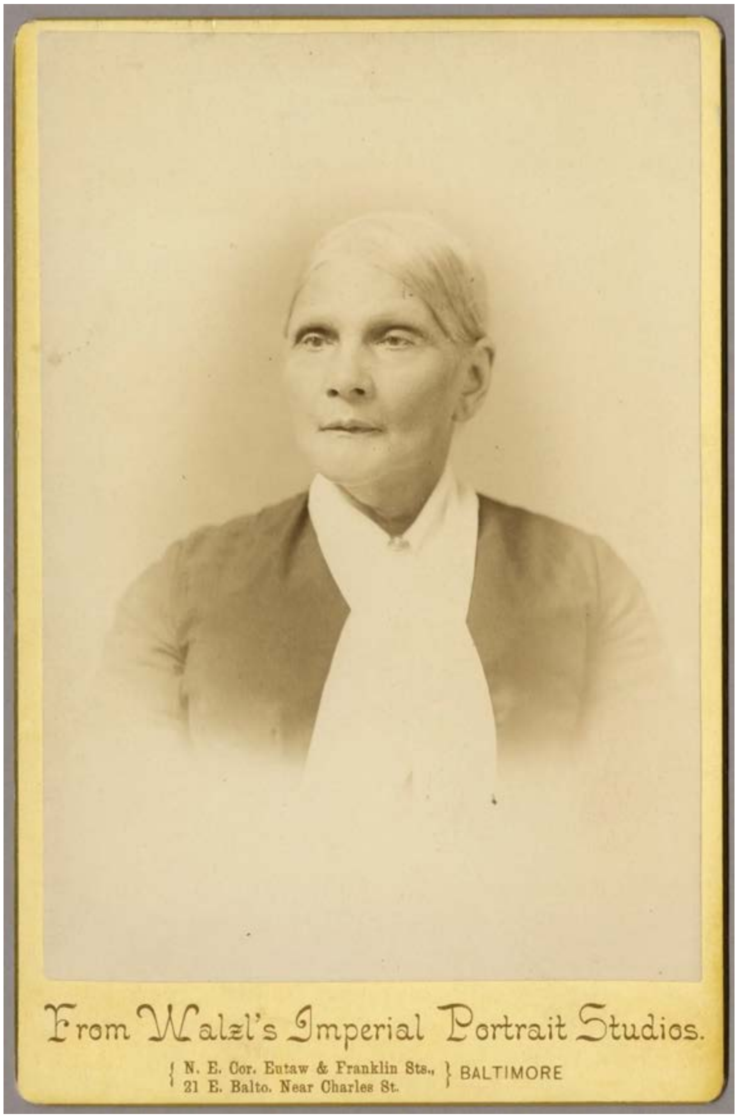
So are the examples of needlework in which Black women assert their presence, signing their names in thread (like the writer Ann Plato) or, in the case of the Connecticut woman Sarah Ann Major Harris, recording her entire family history. Harris’s embroidery is particularly meaningful in light of her efforts, in 1832, to obtain an education; the school she had tried to attend was attacked by a white mob and forced to close, and a law was passed banning Connecticut schools from accepting Black children from out of town.


FAMILY RAC
William M Harris & Sally M Prentice
were joined in marriage April 11 1810
Charles Florawell
was born Jan 3
1811
Sarah Ann Major
was born April 16
1812
Cenesa Dunham
was born Jan 9
1814
Mary Anderson
was born Sep 29
1817
William Montflora
was born Jan 15
1819
Olive Smith
was born June 29
1822
Oliver Brown
was born March 12
1824
John Benjamin WM
was born March 19
1826

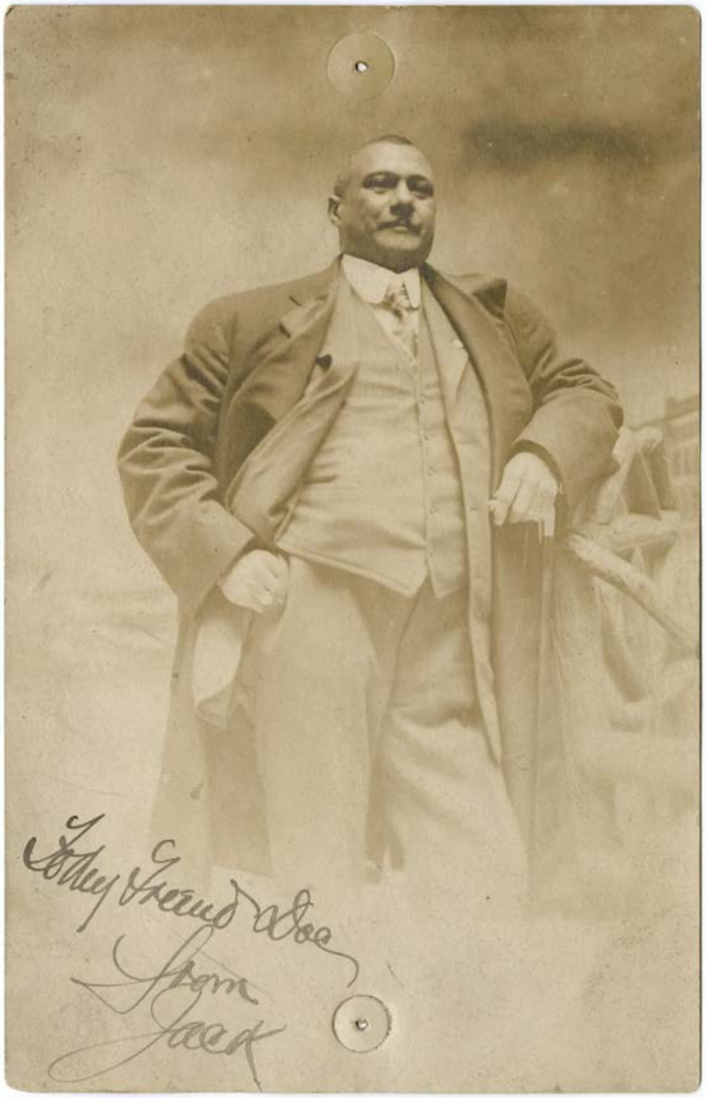
Sarah Ann Major Harris, Sampler, Norwich area, Conn., c. 1826–1828. Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library, Delaware

“Unnamed Figures” has many individual stories to tell, but one of the most compelling is, like Harris’s genealogical sampler, the story of a family — that of the Halls, who were enslaved at a Maryland plantation and, over several generations, became prominent members of Baltimore’s free Black community.

The exhibition follows them from early-19th-century landscape paintings, in which they are shown as tiny nursemaids, stable hands and agricultural laborers on a vast estate, to meticulously styled photographic portraits from the late 19th through the mid-20th centuries. Sidney Hall Davage, granddaughter of the enslaved nursemaid Sib Hall, appears in the oldest of the photographs as a formidable matriarch; her high-achieving grandchildren, also pictured in the collection, included Baltimore’s first Black city councilman, Harry Sythe Cummings, and its first Black kindergarten teacher, Ida R. Cummings.


From Walzl's Imperial Portrait Studios.
N. E. Cor. Eutaw & Franklin Sts.,
21 E. Balto. Near Charles St.
BALTIMORE

Richard Walzl, “Sidney Hall Davage,” Baltimore, c. 1891–1893, photographic print on cabinet card. Maryland Center for History and Culture


To my Grand Son
From
Jack

Photographer Unknown; “Harry Sythe Cummings,” probably Baltimore, late 19th to early 20th century. Photographic print on postcard paper. Maryland Center for History and Culture

There is so much we still don’t know about the Halls and their descendants (including, as the curators wonder, how the family members might have felt about owning a landscape painting of the plantation, given to them by their enslavers, which is among the artworks on view). But their names and legacies are now attached to images in which they have long been present, a crucial step toward ensuring that they are not just pictured but truly seen.

Unnamed Figures: Black Presence and Absence in the Early American North

Through March 24, 2024, at the American Folk Art Museum, 2 Lincoln Square, Manhattan; (212) 595-9533, folkartmuseum.org

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Ghosts Finally Given Substance