

A charming group of unpublished Da Lee portraits has made it possible to identify the individual styles of the family members and to broaden our appreciation of their accomplishments

By Joan R. Brownstein and Elle Shushan



alling himself a “side portrait painter,” Justus Da Lee set out around 1830 to earn a living for his young family by taking profile portraits of his western New York neighbors. Da Lee’s small graphic masterworks, sparsely rendered in bold black and white with intense primary color accents (see Fig. 2) have been collectors’ icons for a century. The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum at Colonial Williamsburg, the New York State Historical Association’s Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, and the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore all have examples.

As the study of American naïve artists developed, it became apparent that there were actually several hands at work on many of the portraits previously attributed solely to Justus Da Lee. His wife, brother, eldest son, and possibly two of his daughters were included in various aspects of Da Lee’s enterprise. The first three of these family members worked both together and separately with Da Lee, their four styles so close that it has long been thought

impossible to distinguish individual hands.

The extensive genealogical research of Martha Da Lee Haidek, a direct descendant, the discovery of a substantial cache of unpublished portraits of immediate members of the family of artist Richard W. M. Da Lee, and a previously unrecorded signed Justus Da Lee likeness make specific attributions possible for the first time. We offer these unpublished portraits in evidence of the distinguishing styles of some of the artists in the Da Lee family.



Fig. 1. Justus Da Lee (1793–1878): Unknown lady, c. 1838. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 3 by 2 3/8 inches. Private collection.

Fig. 2. Justus Da Lee: Mehitable Deming (1800–1867), wife of John Kinnicutt Da Lee (1799–1876), c. 1840. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 3 1/4 by 2 1/2 inches. Mehitable Deming married Justus Da Lee’s brother John in 1823. Collection of Coco and Arie L. Kopelman.

Fig. 3. Justus Da Lee: Charles Agustus, 1840. Inscribed “Charles Agustus aged 4 years 4 months, 1840 Feb Albany” on the back. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 4 1/2 by 2 1/4 inches. Frank and Barbara Pollack American Antiques and Art.



Justus DaLee (1793–1878)

The family patriarch, creator of the unique style, and certainly the most accomplished of the artists was Justus Da Lee. His earliest known portraits, dating from about 1830, show sitters posed in full profile, half-length, and seated against unembellished backgrounds. Additionally, Da Lee often delineated women positioned with a frontal body orientation and the head set in profile (see Fig. 4). The unusual choice of combining front and side views of the body creates the interest and drama that is unique to his work. Within this visually commanding pose, the artist used symmetry and

transitional phase showing the combination of the frontal body with the head still in profile in the new spandrel format. The black spandrel may have appealed to the artist because it created interesting negative visual space around the figure. There is also a faint bleed of blue from the spandrel onto the white ground, which may be an accident of condition or the result of the artist's intention.

With this change Justus Da Lee's style acquired greater elegance, as his earlier rigidity of line and pose surrendered to something bolder and more supple. Both costume and pose were used effectively to create a dynamic interaction with the spandrelled background.

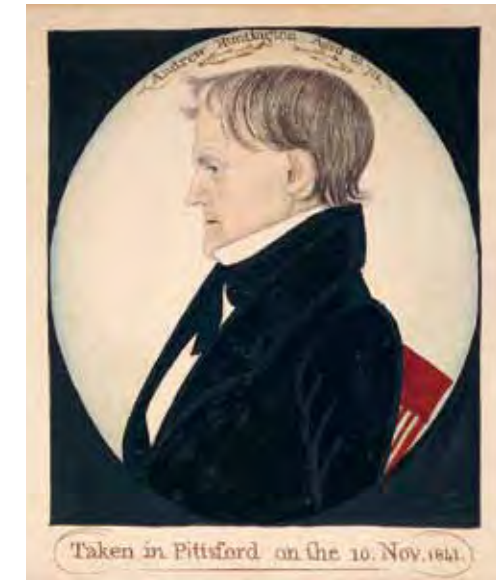
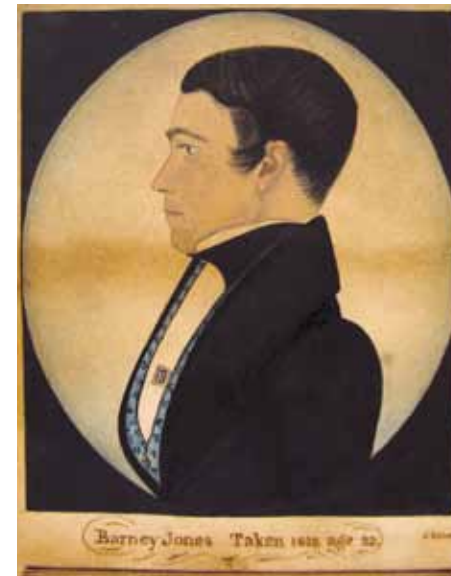
Justus Da Lee's portraits, as in the rare signed and dated example of Barney Jones (Fig. 5), were first drawn in pencil, which was also used to shade the face within its firm but fluid outline, its curves playing off those of the spandrel. A pale ground color was then added and the features were accentuated in darker markings on the brows, upper brush-like lashes, pupil, iris, nostril, and the lip division. Hair, unless very thin, was painted with a base color then individual strands were further defined in black. Inner ears were painted with red wash, the ridge of bone connecting the ear to the cheek distinctly

marked in black (see Fig. 6). The figures gaze straight ahead.

After 1837 only Justus's full-length portraits of young children were painted without the distinctive black spandrel (see Fig. 3). Seated portraits of children were done with the spandrel as it was better suited to the pose (see Fig. 7), and one rare example used a penciled oval over a blue wash instead (Fig. 8). All of these portraits of children are compelling for their charm and beauty, while those of adults are uncommon in their starkly modern approach.

repetition to define the highly stylized costume details, as in the bonnet and collar ruffles, lace patterns, and costume folds. On dresses and coats the details were accomplished by means of a substance that glazed the surface, varying its reflectivity and giving it texture. The total effect is decorative and abstract.

In 1837 Justus Da Lee began adding spandrels to his portraits that redefined their formal issues by, as he wrote to his brother Richard, "containing a circle in a square."¹ The example in Figure 1 represents a



Facing page:

Fig. 4. Justus Da Lee: Unknown couple, c. 1830. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 2 3/4 by 2 1/8 inches each. Private collection.

This page, clockwise from top left:

Fig. 5. Justus Da Lee: Barney Jones, 1839. Signed "J DaLee" at lower right and inscribed "Barney Jones Taken 1839 age 23" at bottom. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 2 3/4 by 2 3/8 inches. Collection of Ched and Sandy Cluthe.

Fig. 6. Justus Da Lee: Dr. Andrew Huntington (1761–1845) of Pittsford, New York, 1841. Inscribed "Andrew Huntington Aged 80 yrs" at top and "Taken in Pittsford on the 10 Nov. 1841" at bottom. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 3 by 2 3/8 inches. Private collection.

Fig. 7. Justus Da Lee: Baby boy, c. 1840. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 2 3/4 by 2 3/8 inches. Private collection.

Fig. 8. Justus Da Lee: Young girl, c. 1840. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 2 3/4 by 3 1/8 inches. Collection of Dr. Robert and Katharine Booth.

Richard Waterman Moffitt Da Lee (1809–1868)

Richard Da Lee appears to have been a reluctant confederate in Justus's portrait business. Sixteen years separated the brothers, and while remarkably talented, the itinerant life chosen by his elder brother may have held obligation rather than appeal for Richard.

Richard's small portraits were always profile views executed both with and without spandrels. Those with spandrels are of seated figures portrayed half-length. Those without employed a longer body style cropped at mid-thigh for older sitters while children are shown at full length. This latter type includes three examples of his immediate family, two of which were done after Richard is said to have stopped painting professionally:² an unfinished portrait of his wife Hannah Maria Minton (Fig. 11); a portrait of his son Van Buren (Fig. 9); and a portrait of his daughter Ann Eliza (Fig. 12). Each is inscribed on the back and identifies the sitter. These works were kept together by descendants and have never been shown publicly.

Richard's portraits, like those of Justus and Justus's son Amon, were drawn in pencil with a wash of pale facial color. They are distinguished stylistically by employing concave and convex lines that exaggerate the profile. He emphasizes facial details in places with darkened markings, especially noticeable in the definition of the eye, which is completely outlined. Brows are well defined and faces have modest to moderate shading. The profile line itself is less emphatic than in Justus's work but more prominent than in Amon's. His figures look straight ahead with focused eyes, giving his portraits a quiet and compelling intensity (see Fig. 10).

Richard was unique in occasionally allowing his figures to extend into the spandrel area. Sometimes only a skirt overlays the spandrel, sometimes a hand with a book, or a chair arm and back (see Fig. 13). The effect is visually disconcerting, as if the artist is deliberately violating our expectations about where a portrait is meant to begin and end.

Finally, unlike either Justus or Amon, Richard sometimes showed figures in three-quarter length, as in his portraits of Hannah Maria and Ann Eliza. Their bodies have simple outlines that give dramatic focus to the faces. With Ann Eliza the red dress, understated in form, rises up to a narrow collar closed with a pin directly below the face of a sensitive young woman carefully and lovingly observed (Fig. 12).

The portrait of Hannah Maria is even more remarkable (Fig. 11). Its composition may be unique. Her skirt billows out around her. Our eyes are drawn up from it to focus on her face, where the pale blush of her skin is a perfect compositional choice. The image is filled with her quiet beauty although it is unfinished. Her hand has been drawn but not yet painted and the folds of her dress are drawn in unglazed pencil, which shines like silver when tilted to catch the light. This is Richard Da Lee's unfinished masterpiece.

Fig. 9. Richard Da Lee (1809–1868): Van Buren Da Lee (1837–1905), son of Richard Da Lee and Hannah Maria Minton Da Lee, c. 1841. Inscribed "Van Buren Da Lee Aged 4 years Son of R W M Da Lee" on the back in ink. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 3 3/8 by 2 1/2 inches. The painting was cut down at an unknown date; another version is in the collection of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. *Private collection.*



Fig. 10. Richard Da Lee: Unknown gentleman, c. 1840. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 2 3/8 by 2 3/8 inches. *Private collection.*



Clockwise from top:

Fig. 11. Richard Da Lee: Hannah Maria Minton Da Lee (1813–1890), wife of the artist, c. 1855. Inscribed "Hannah Maria Minton Da Lee Born May 29th 1813 Died December 28th 1890 Wife of R W M Da Lee" on the back in ink. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 3 3/8 by 2 3/8 inches. *Private collection.*

Fig. 12. Richard Da Lee: Ann Eliza Da Lee (1833–1868), daughter of Richard and Hannah Maria Minton Da Lee, c. 1850. Inscribed "Ann Eliza Da Lee" on the back in ink. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 4 1/2 by 3 3/8 inches. *Private collection.*

Fig. 13. Richard Da Lee: Unknown lady, c. 1845. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 3 by 2 3/8 inches. *Private collection.*

Amon Gilbert Justus Da Lee (1820–1879)

The eldest surviving son of Justus and Mary Fowler Da Lee, Amon was particularly close to his father, joining him on his itinerant travels while still a teenager. He first worked at finishing the clothes on Justus's portraits, but was soon painting in tandem with both his father and his uncle.³

Amon's portraits show half-length seated figures, many within painted spandrels. His facial profiles were done with short pencil strokes that produced broken outlines, and, particularly with mature sitters, broad areas of shadow on the face. Eyes and brows were slightly emphasized with a dark pencil, but this characteristic is less marked and used more sparingly than in the work of Justus and Richard (see Fig. 14).

Portraits of the Reverend Joel Byington (1788–1859) and his wife, Delia Storrs Byington (1790–1848), are the only known signed examples of Amon's work but they help us identify his other portraits, such as the one of Abram and Asenath Bryan in Figure 15.⁴ All his paintings have three distinguishing characteristics: a faded but pronounced blue wash that covers much of the background sides; the fabric of the bonnets appears blue where there is hair beneath them; the heads appear to all be tilted at a slight downward angle and the eyes are unfocused.

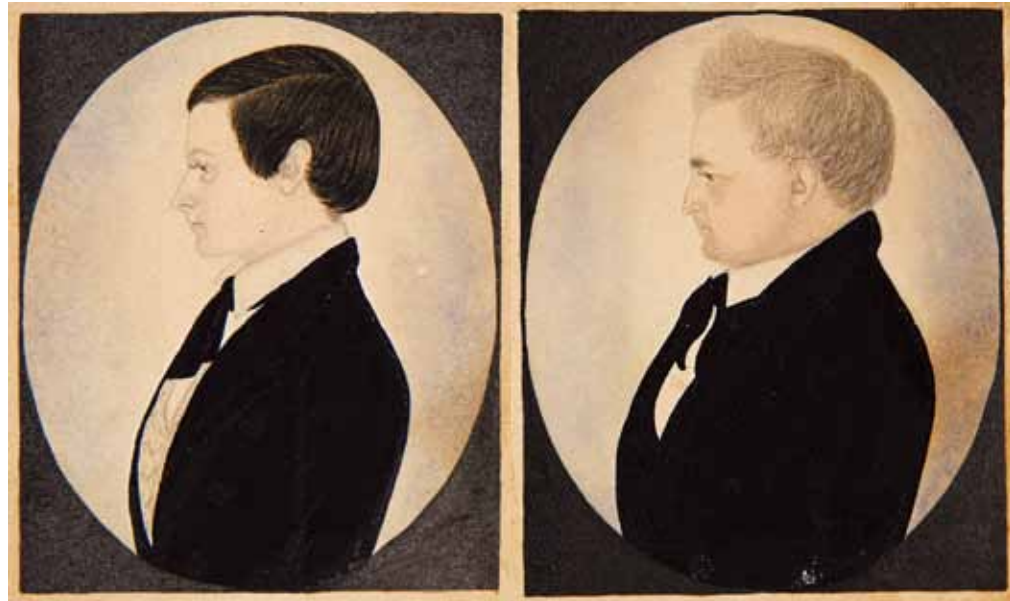


Fig. 14. Amon Da Lee (1820–1879): Judge Leman Gibbs (1788–1858) and his son Manson F. Gibbs (b. c. 1826), c. 1840. Inscribed “Manson Gibbs” and “Judge Gibbs” in pencil on the back. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 2 ¼ by 2 ¾ and 2 ½ by 2 ¾ inches. *Private collection.*

Fig. 15. Amon Da Lee: Abram Covert Bryan (1806–1895) and Asenath Conlogue Bryan (1806–1882), c. 1835. Inscribed “Mr and Mrs A Bryan” on the back in pencil and “Abram Bryan and Asenath Bryan Ovid” on a paper attached to the back. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 2 ¾ by 2 ½ inches each. *Cluthe collection.*

Mary A. Fowler Da Lee (1820–1879)

Justus complained to Richard in May of 1843, “Mary says if she goes, she is not going to stop on the way to draw portraits.”⁵ No signed examples of Mary's work have as yet been found, but we do know that she traveled with her husband and painted portraits of her own. There is a related group of ten portraits, less developed than those by Justus, Richard, or Amon, which may be firmly ascribed to the other members of the Da Lee family, in all probability Mary.

These portraits have fully outlined oversized eyes and chins that are set back from the line of the upper face. The male bodies appear to lean back into an absent chair (Fig. 16) while the women have long necks set into elongated torsos (Fig. 17).

By 1848 Justus's brief artistic career would be over and he would be in Buffalo running a grocery.⁶ Amon

joined the Gold Rush,⁷ and Richard moved his family to Harvard, Illinois, to join his brother John in a stable, prosperous life of farming. Justus, who had once written “this portrait business is calculated to kill us all,”⁸ would find himself “perfectly blind and poor,”⁹ ending his days with his daughter Harriet in Eden, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin.

Remarkably, the Da Lee family painted professionally for less than two decades. Their diligence was astonishing, their output prodigious. Justus noted that on a fourteen-week stay in Geneva, New York, he took ninety-three portraits.¹⁰ The small, spare, and markedly modern profiles remain powerful documents of frontier life.

It would be impossible to sufficiently thank Martha Da Lee Haidek, great-granddaughter of Richard Da Lee. Her collection of family papers and the genealogy of her family she has constructed have been invaluable.



Fig. 16. Possibly Mary Da Lee (1820–1879): Cornelius Lathrop (1831–1855), son of Landis Lathrop and Delia Platt. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 3 by 2 ¾ inches. This and the likeness in Fig. 17 are from a sheet of eleven family portraits that accompany a family record signed “Justus DaLee.” *Courtesy of Ahira Hall Memorial Library, Brocton, New York; photograph by Paul Douglas Studio.*



Fig. 17. Possibly Mary Da Lee: Amelia B. Lathrop (1826–1844), daughter of Landis Lathrop and Delia Platt, c. 1841. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 3 by 2 ¾ inches. *Courtesy of Ahira Hall Memorial Library, Brocton, New York; photograph by Paul Douglas Studio.*

¹ Justus Da Lee to Richard Da Lee, December 17, 1837, Troy, New York. This and all other letters quoted in this article are in the collection of the American Folk Art Museum in New York, gift of Mary Benisek and Don Walters in honor of Gerald C. Wertkin. Copies of these letters are courtesy of Mary Benisek, Don Walters, and Da Lee descendant Sheryl Shears. ² The 1850 United States Census records Richard as a pumpmaker. ³ Richard Da Lee to Hannah Maria Da Lee, Meadville, Pennsylvania, November 30, 1841. ⁴ The Byington portraits are illustrated in Suzanne Rudnick Payne and Michael R. Payne, “To Please the Eye: Justus Da Lee and His Family,” *Folk Art*, vol. 29, no. 4 (Winter 2004/2005), p. 50. We would like to acknowledge this excellent work on the Da Lee family. ⁵ Justus to Richard Da Lee, Pittsford, New York, May 8, 1843. ⁶ Payne and Payne, “To Please the Eye: Justus Da Lee and His Family,” p. 52. ⁷ *The United States Biographical Dictionary* (Chicago and Kansas City, 1879), Kansas volume, p. 622. ⁸ Justus Da Lee to Richard and Hannah Maria Da Lee, Pittsford, December 7, 1845. ⁹ Application of Justus Da Lee for service as a musician in the company of artillery commanded by Captain Solomon Warner in the War with Great Britain of 1812, Bounty Land Files, April 16, 1856, Aurora, Illinois. Copy courtesy of Martha Da Lee Haidek. ¹⁰ Justus Da Lee to Richard and Hannah Maria Da Lee, Pittsford, March 22, 1845.

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