1 The Seventeenth-Century New England Mercantile Image: Social Content and Style in the Freake Portraits

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Painting in colonial New England began in the 1660s, some thirty to forty years after the earliest settlements were established there. In the English tradition, portraiture was virtually the exclusive theme. The subjects were merchants, ministers, and civil officials, along with their wives and children. Boston was the center of activity for the region, and evidence now suggests that the town possessed, at one time or another, several men capable of taking likenesses after about 1664. They have been called "limners," but the term does not mean untrained "primitives." Rather, they were trained artists, working in an established tradition. Patronage of their talents evolved slowly at first; for portrait painting to exist as a profession there had to be sufficient wealth and patronage to employ the practitioner regularly at his craft. In New England—indeed, in any North American colony—that situation did not exist until the second quarter of the eighteenth century. Although the middle class had patronized artists in England, the early colonists had no money for such a luxury. Economic contingencies, not a distaste for art, prevented the rise of painting in the New World during the first decades of settlement.

The early likenesses were executed by someone who had probably come to the Bay Colony fully prepared to make his living in some way other than painting portraits, even if he had been trained in that art in England. In Massachusetts he would have turned to painting of a utilitarian nature—signs, furniture, houses, and so forth. When the need arose, he would put his former training to use, but by and large the opportunity to do so was infrequent. The early portraitists were familiar with the style of the art of their homeland. They were, in

Figure 1.1 The Freake Limner, *John Freake*, c. 1674. Oil on canvas, 42⅛ × 36¼ inches. Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Mass., Sarah C. Garver Fund.

fact, gifted artists, aesthetically sensitive to such formal aspects of art as line, color, design, and pattern. By no means were the early New England portraits the work of amateurish hacks.

We now have a list of about forty portraits believed to have been executed in or around Boston before 1700.[1] Of these, many would agree that the two masterpieces are the *John Freake* and the *Elizabeth Freake and Baby Mary* of about 1674 (figs. 1.1, 1.2). These portraits offer an excellent case study for the type of image that emerged amid a community that was fast becoming dominated by the mercantile spirit.[2]

Figure 1.2 The Freake Limner, *Elizabeth Freake and Baby Mary*, c. 1674. Oil on canvas, 42⅛ × 36¼ inches. Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Mass., gift of Mr. and Mrs. Albert W. Rice.

John Freake (1635–75) was born in England but by 1658 had immigrated to Boston, where he became a merchant, lawyer, and a man of property and means. He owned two houses as well as a brewhouse, a mill, some land at Fort Hill, and a partial interest in at least six ships. An inventory of his estate valued his property at well over two thousand pounds, a large sum by the standards of the day.[3] In 1661 he married Elizabeth Clarke (1642–1713), daughter of Thomas Clarke, also a merchant of Boston, and the Freakes were very much a part of the mercantile establishment when they had their portraits painted.

The Freake portraits may have been painted as early as 1671, at which time no child was present in the picture of Mrs. Freake.[4] The infant was added and several changes made in the figure of the mother in 1674; little Mary was born on May 6 of that year, and an inscription in the lower left reads "Aetatis Suae 6 moth," in reference to the child's age.

These are family portraits—that is, familial icons—and this provided ample utilitarian and societal value for their existence. They were intended to celebrate marital domesticity and family lineage as well as social position. Family life was sacred, and colonial American portraits, particularly in pendant portraits of man and wife, of parents with children, or of children alone, were hymns to that divinely blessed institution.[5] The sensual yet spiritual relationship of man and wife is evident in Anne Bradstreet's poem "To My Dear and Loving Husband," written in 1678, only a few years after the Freake portraits were painted:

> If ever two were one, then surely we.
> If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;
> If ever wife was happy in a man,
> Compare with me the woman if you can.
> I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold,
> Of all the riches that the east doth hold.

The Freake portraits were odes to powerful values that found approval in scripture, in Calvin's writings, and in Protestant sermons of England and New England.

The Freake and related portraits also express another idea that had Calvinist support—the doctrine of prosperity, or God's blessing, for diligence at one's calling, which was manifested in material rewards. Such portraits raise a number of issues about affluence, pride, and the continual upward pressure on the limits between moderation and ostentation.

Freake had prospered as a merchant, attorney, and shipowner, and he may be seen as an archetypal counterfoil to the old-guard establishment of the ministers and the Massachusetts General Court, which still schemed, in the 1670s, to petrify life according to the will of the colony's founding fathers. For example, when the commissioners of King Charles II were in Boston in 1666, Freake petitioned that their authority be accepted, thereby indicating his preference for crown rule in place of the oligarchy that the ministers and religious zealots were anxious to maintain. Furthermore, this up-and-coming young merchant was at times in partnership with the wealthy, vain, and hedonistic Samuel Shrimpton. A rebel against the authority of the old-guard theocrats, Shrimpton asserted his right to strive for personal fortune in opposition to those who maintained that a collective spiritual well-being should be the colony's highest priority. Men such

as Freake and Shrimpton, although pious in their own way, represented th headstrong will of the mercantile sector to break the hold of the theocrat power base in order to redirect the course of increasing prosperity. They side with other ascending merchants to form a social elite within the colony. Th early mercantile elite, by 1670, was contributing to the collapse of the old Pur tan regime. Thus Freake's portrait is thoroughly secular and should not be see as expressing the spiritualistic Puritanism of the founding fathers.

John Freake's portrait is a three-quarter-length, largely frontal view, with th head turned slightly to our right. The subject, who looks at us directly, is a hanc some young man with pleasant features; he wears a neatly trimmed little mu tache, but his chin is clean-shaven. There is a suggestion of a smile, and th countenance expresses self-confidence and self-consciousness in about equ measure.

No feature should be overlooked or considered inconsequential in studyin the iconography of a portrait. Freake's hair, for example, tells us certain thing about the man. First of all, it is his own—not a wig—and second, it is shoulde length; it contains a social statement that was compatible with this merchant brand of religion. Freake chose not to wear the great lovelocks of Cavalier soci ety, which William Perkins had criticized as a symbol of frivolous extravagan and a "foreign trick," and which William Prynne had called "a vile abuse . . . a incitation to lust . . . and Sodomy."[6] Freake's fellow townsman John Hull, the sil versmith, condemned the wearing of long hair as a sin on a level with gambling drinking, and idleness, while William Woods was fined by the General Court i 1676 for "wearing his haire long as a womens haire."[7]

But if Freake wished to avoid association with lovelock society, neither did h want to be shown as a Roundhead, which would have connoted a commitmen to Puritanism. Short hair had been the emblem of the Puritan in anti-Purita plays at the court of Charles I, and courtiers had joked that one should neve trust a man if one could see his ears. Moreover, short-cropped hair was impose on men of the lower class as a badge of their inferior social standing. For ex ample, in 1675 the Massachusetts General Court told John Gatchell, convicte of building on public land, that his fine would be reduced by half if he woul "cut off the long hair off his head into a civil frame"[8]—that is, cut it to the lengt proper for a man of his low station.

What all of this means in connection with the portrait of John Freake is that by the length and style of his hair, the subject did not want to imply that he wa of the rakish Cavalier set with its low morals; nor did he want to make a declara tion, through a Roundhead cut, of a strong commitment to Puritanism; and he certainly did not want to be associated with the lower class, identified in part by short-cropped hair and associated with idleness and poverty, both of which were

men. Instead, he is shown with the medium-long, shoulder-length hair of a gentleman—which within his community meant that he held an honored position at the peak of the social and economic pyramid.

John Freake's attire bears further testimony to his prosperity and therefore, in a mercantile community, to his rank among men. His costume is one of comeliness, which Calvin condoned, and not austerity, which Calvin dismissed as unnecessary; Freake and his kind, after all, lived by the code of Calvinist virtues. His coat is a rich brown, not the black so often associated with zealous Puritans; it has full, ample sleeves, it flairs gracefully from the waist, and it is cut from a fine velvet fabric. The stylishness and neatness of its tailoring suggest sartorial refinement expressed in a moderate fashion design; it is neither extravagant nor mean, and so places its wearer, appropriately, somewhere between Cavalier society and the indolent, indignant poor. The coat has a decorative row of silver buttons, of which at least twenty can be seen down the front, while more adorn the pocket flaps. The buttonholes are nicely embroidered with silver thread. This is very similar to the coat and buttons in the English portrait of Sir John Clerk, Baronet (1675) by John Scougall, suggesting that Freake was imitating the fashions of the English peerage, when those fashions were of a moderate design.[9]

John Freake, the prosperous gentleman-merchant, wears other items that bear witness to a moderate love of finery. His white shirt, made of fine muslin, has fashionable puffed sleeves with crenelated cuffs. In his right hand he holds a pair of long-cuffed gloves, another designation of gentleman status. On the little finger of his left hand he wears a large ring, which appears to be made of gold. The same hand fondles an ornate silver brooch of superb design—the work of a very gifted silversmith—which reveals Freake's enjoyment of decorative baubles made of precious metals; it was probably an imported piece. The final ornamentation for the sake of "comeliness" is the beautiful lace collar; fine lace of that quality had to be imported from the Continent, and it appears to be of "Spanish" design but of Venetian workmanship.[10] The collar Freake wears is the antithesis of the simple white, squared collar associated with Puritan garb, and it again testifies to his separation from any stringent dress code set up by that sect. This exquisite detail would make it difficult to deny the subject's pride in personal appearance and his joy in the materialistic pleasures brought him by his God-blessed, Calvin-condoned prosperity.

In the companion portrait of Mrs. Freake and her infant daughter, Mary, those same characteristics bring several socio- and religio-economic problems into even clearer focus. Close inspection places in question a number of previously held assumptions about life in seventeenth-century New England.

Elizabeth Freake is a pleasant-looking young woman but plain of feature. A

few strands of her blond hair are visible on her forehead, but the rest of her ha is "bound up" beneath a white lace hood. A slight smile suggests a good natur contentment, even self-satisfaction. About her neck hangs a triple strand pearls, and her other jewelry includes a four-strand garnet bracelet on her le wrist and a gold ring on the thumb of the left hand. She wears a dress of hea moire or taffeta, which is a warm silver gray. It reveals a bright red-orange velv underskirt richly adorned with gold guipure. Red-orange laces are seen at th bodice and large red and black bows decorate the sleeve, from which emerg the white puffed sleeve of a blouse with a crenelated lace ruffle. About h shoulders is a narrow white collar, to which is appended a broad band of ve handsome lace.

Considering the several beautiful and fine fabrics, the numerous instanc of colorful or intricate decorative details, and the three pieces of jewelr Mrs. Freake's costume could hardly be called austere, or even reserved. It is ev dent from this portrait that fine fabric, fashion, and color were enjoyed amor prosperous Protestant folk, and Elizabeth Freake's attire refutes any notion th all seventeenth-century New England women wore reserved and unadorne black, white, and gray dresses out of dedication to austere Puritan principles.

Where did the fabrics worn by Mrs. Freake come from? Their fineness su gests that they were imported, for taffeta, brocade, and lace were high-qualit specialty goods that were seldom attempted by colonial weavers by 1675.[11] N only the English fabrics but fancy stuffs from the Continent and the far reach of the Anglo-American trading system were imported, and in such quantities to indicate considerable demand for them. Mrs. Freake's taffeta may well ha come from France; the lace, from Spain, Venice, or the Netherlands; the br cade, from England; the pearls, from the Orient; and the garnets of the bracel from India. New England merchants of the 1670s had ready access to worldwi markets, either directly or through trade with intermediaries, and both they a their wives were willing to forgo the fancy stuffs that could brighten and refi their lifestyles. In spite of ministerial admonitions about too much worldline the merchants were not becoming ungodly, as long as they did not become o tentatious by their own—not the ministers'—standards.

The pleasures of prosperity were too powerful for either the pulpit or t bench to withstand. As the merchants and their wives pressed the limits of wh was tolerated as being within moderation, the ministers and the magistrat felt compelled to restrain them. The sermons and laws aimed at stultifying t hedonistic urges that came with mercantile affluence reveal that the pressu was very real. But it should be remembered that such sermons and laws we directed only at placing limits upon, and seldom at outlawing totally, the enjo ment of material things. The disputation was always over where the line b

tween moderation and ostentation was to be drawn, and much of Protestantism's success among an upwardly mobile, prospering middle class was due to its flexibility in setting that line. In essence, the clergyman-magistrate group and the affluent merchants were not in disagreement, for most merchants were themselves offended by ostentation, which they saw as economically imprudent as well as morally sinful—and the ministers and magistrates certainly condoned the prosperity that came from the pursuit of one's Christian calling.

The Puritan old guard had difficulty convincing many of the people that their indulgences were destroying God's little plantation in New England and that they would ultimately be carried off to hell because of them. The merchants and their wives knew their Calvinist theology. In Calvin's writings they read passages in which the Reformer said prosperity was God's reward for diligence at one's secular calling, while other sections declared that "comeliness" in attire was perfectly acceptable. The ineffectiveness of laws designed to restrict indulgences is demonstrated by a few lines from Governor John Winthrop's *History of New England,* in which he noted that although the General Court had ordered the church elders to urge their flocks to be less ostentatiousness in attire, little could be done, "for divers of the elders' wives, etc., were in some measure partners in this disorder."[12]

In 1679, only a few years after the Freake portraits were painted, the General Court again tried to legislate, on moral grounds, against excessive pride in apparel, declaring it to be a great evil for which God would visit transgressors with "loathsome diseases." That law, too, had little effect among the merchant families.

Then, as now, it was difficult to legislate moral issues and enforce laws effectively. But even civil, economic laws were flouted when they stood between the affluent upper middle class and its acquisition of the material goods it craved. Laws were enacted in England (and supposedly enforced in the English colonies as well) to protect the home industries in cloth and lace making. As early as 1622, Parliament passed a law prohibiting the importation of Continental laces,[13] but as King Charles I was the worst offender of all, most of his subjects felt no compunction about breaking the law. Laces were smuggled into England in loaves of bread, in Turkish turbans, and in coffins that were later dug up to retrieve the contraband.[14] The prohibited laces and fabrics were similarly smuggled into New England in prodigious amounts.

When John, Elizabeth, and even little Mary Freake are shown wearing a goodly amount of imported lace, it means that they were determined to create a lifestyle according to their own terms; the Parliament in England could not prevent them from obtaining the material stuffs they desired, any more than their own clergy could dictate to them the fashion of their attire. This further indi-

cates that it was the merchant class with its indomitable spirit, rather than clergy, that would ultimately establish the character of colonial life in New gland. The secularism of the merchant class, not the spiritualism of the mi ters, formed the foundation for most colonial portraiture in the region. stereotype of the seventeenth-century Puritan holds true only of old men ministers. Already present in the Freake portraits are the socio-economic fo dations of the materialism and affluence underlying John Singleton Copley's Charles Willson Peale's portraits of the mercantile class of a hundred years la

From the perspective of the merchant class, piety and prosperity were c pletely compatible, and the two were united through the doctrine of prospe which proclaimed the validity of one's secular calling, diligence at which God warded in a material way. The merchants saw themselves as living accordin the Christian virtues that Calvin had defined and that were particularly suite the middle class. If New England had not been founded as a haven for Pur zealots, a confrontation between merchants and clergymen probably would have arisen; the two worked in harmony, for example, in contemporary Holla In North American colonies, where Anglicanism prevailed, the confronta was not as intense. But as the seventeenth century progressed in New Engla an adversary relationship developed that was in reality an internal struggle control of the course of life. The rancor of the ministers and magistrates creasingly suggests a petrification of mores as the old guard tried to retain faith and morals of the founders of their colony. Many a lament was heard f the pulpit, well into the eighteenth century, that the religious zeal and piety had inflamed the souls of the founding generation had been lost. Colonial m chants dutifully listened to such wailing and gnashing of teeth on Sunday m ing; but when they had their portraits painted, they wanted the artists to incl symbols of the material goods and social position that their honest hard w had earned. Indeed, the prosperity shown in their portraits was a visible exp sion of their piety.

The furniture in Mrs. Freake's portrait also set a precedent for much l colonial portraiture. The table, chair, and curtain, in their own subtle way, m a complementary reference to prosperity and materialism. Hereafter, we frequently find the unobtrusive inclusion of a portion of a table or chair o some other well-crafted object as a quiet indication of the subject's affluence, cial position, and good taste. Such a motif, in the Elizabeth Freake portra the forerunner of the beautiful table in Copley's colonial masterpiece, *Mr. Mrs. Isaac Winslow* (1774). These symbols of prosperity and materialism a very important part of the iconography of the colonial American port whether they be a silver inkstand, a porcelain bowl with fruit, a pewter teapo an exquisitely wrought card table. The chair in which Mrs. Freake sits is of

finest, most costly type then found in colonial New England homes and is sometimes referred to as a Cromwellian chair. The colorful upholstery is of woven wool, in imitation of exotic fabrics from the Middle East; Turkey work, as it was called, was produced in England and exported to the colonies, where the chair itself was probably made. The inventory taken after John Freake's death indicates that fourteen such chairs were in the Freake household.[15] Such furniture surely dispels the myth that seventeenth-century New England interiors were purposefully drab.

Objects such as the chair in Mrs. Freake's portrait are indeed emblems of the success, relative affluence, and social position of the upper-middle-class New England mercantile aristocracy. Together with the laces, taffetas, and velvets, the silver buttons and the brooch, the pearls and garnets, and the hair styles, they report to the viewer the things the Freakes wanted to be known about themselves. The faces, rendered in an uncomplicated, straightforward naturalism, preserve the likenesses of the sitters, and the hair, attire, and household objects expand upon the stories of their lives. In the style of the portraits we find similarly interesting expressions of their taste, nationalistic feelings, and affiliation with middle-class cultural traditions.

Notes

This essay was first published, in slightly different form, as a section of chapter 4 of *Colonial American Portraiture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

1. The pioneering work on seventeenth-century New England portraits is Louisa Dresser, *Seventeenth-Century Painting in New England* (Worcester, Mass., 1935); since then she has published "Portraits in Boston, 1630–1720," *Journal of the Archives of American Art* 6 (July–October 1966): 1–34; and "The Background of Colonial Portraiture: Some Pages from a European Notebook," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 76 (April 1966): 19–58. See also Lillian B. Miller, "The Puritan Portrait: Its Function in Old and New England," in *Seventeenth-Century New England* (Boston, 1984), 63:153–84.

2. On these portraits, see Dresser, *Seventeenth-Century Painting*, 81–83, and Jonathan Fairbanks et al., *New England Begins: The Seventeenth Century*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1982), 3:460–62. See also Susan Strickler, "Recent Findings on the Freake Portraits," *Worcester Art Museum Journal* 5 (1981–82): 49–55.

3. Suffolk County Probate Records, Court of Probate, Boston, 5:294.

4. For a reconstruction of the original image of Mrs. Freake and an analysis of X-ray studies of the picture, see Dresser, *Seventeenth-Century Painting*, 165–67, and Fairbanks et al., *New England Begins*, 3:460–61 and fig. 61.

5. See P. W. Thomas, "Two Cultures? Court and Country Under Charles I," in *The Origins of the English Civil War*, ed. Conrad Russell (New York, 1973), 189. See also

Levin L. Schucking, *The Puritan Family: A Social Study from the Literary Sources* (New York, 1970), and Gerald Moran and Maris Vinovskis, "The Puritan Family and Religion: A Critical Reappraisal," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 39 (January 1982): 29–63. For a discussion nearly contemporary with the Freake portraits, see A. Marsh, *The Ten Pleasures of Marriage* (London, 1682), reprinted with an introduction by John Harvey (London, 1972), with illustrations of the twenty original plates; the plate opposite p. 188 shows a seated woman with a child on her lap, very similar in composition to the image of Mrs. Freake and her daughter. See also Carl Degler, *Out of Our Past* (New York, 1970), 13.

6. For Perkins's quote, see *A Godly and Learned Exposition of Christ's Sermon in the Mount* (Cambridge, 1608), 170; for Prynne's quote, see William Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix. The Players Scourge, or, Actors Tragedie* . . . (London, 1633), index, n.p., under "Haire."

7. John Hull, *The Diaries of John Hull*, in *American Antiquarian Society Transactions and Collections* 3 (Worcester, 1857): 211. For the William Woods case, see Robert St. George, "'Set Thine House in Order': The Domestication of the Yeomanry in Seventeenth-Century New England," in Fairbanks et al., *New England Begins*, 2:180.

8. Quoted in Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, *Puritan Oligarchy* (New York, 1959), 174.

9. The portrait of Sir John Clerk is at Penicuick House and is reproduced in Ellis Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain, 1530 to 1790*, 5th ed. (New Haven, 1994)), pl. 102.

10. Frances Morris, *Notes on Laces of the American Colonists* (New York, 1926), 7.

11. Bernard Bailyn, *New England Merchants* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 74.

12. Quoted in Degler, *Out of Our Past*, 10.

13. Hudson Moore, *The Lace Book* (New York, 1904), 23.

14. Esther Oldham, "Sheer Beauty: Early Lace Fans," *Antiques* 82 (August 1962): 163.

15. Suffolk County Probate Records, Court of Probate, Boston, 5:294. See also the Turkey-work couch of about 1698 now at the Essex Institute, Salem, Mass., illustrated in Jonathan Fairbanks and Elizabeth Bates, *American Furniture, 1620 to the Present* (New York, 1981), 40. For an English couple of about the same date, see Fairbanks et al., *New England Begins*, 3:442 and 535, and pl. 31.