

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine

Rufus Porter's Curious World

by Bob Frishman

At age 92, while visiting his son in West Haven, Connecticut, a still vigorous Rufus Porter died suddenly on August 13, 1884. The *New Haven Evening Register* reported, "The funeral of Rufus Porter, the aged inventor, who died yesterday at the hospital, took place this afternoon from the hospital chapel. The pastor of the Methodist church of West Haven officiated, and the remains were interred in the West Haven cemetery. There were very few present at the service."

135 years later, Rufus Porter finally had a kind of memorial service he deserved. On December 12, 2019, in the entrance foyer of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Brunswick, Maine, museum leaders and curators welcomed a large crowd of visitors to the opening of the new 80-plus-object exhibition, *Rufus Porter's Curious World: Art and Invention in America, 1815-1860*. No pastor presided, but the nearly forgotten Yankee polymath, born during the presidency of George Washington, was praised and eulogized for his life's achievements.

True, Porter's memory has been revived previously. In the September 6, 1884, weekly issue of *Scientific American*, a lengthy obituary appeared in the magazine that he had founded in 1845. Some consider this to be his most lasting legacy, as the periodical remains the longest continuously published magazine in the U.S.

Jean Lipman (1909-1998), respected art historian, critic, and journalist, published two heavily researched books about Porter: *Rufus Porter: Yankee Pioneer* (Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1968); and *Rufus Porter Rediscovered: Artist, Inventor, Journalist, 1792-1884*, an expanded version that accompanied a 1980 exhibit at the Hudson River Museum. Porter also was seriously considered in *American Decorative Wall Painting 1700-1850*, published in 1952 and reissued in 1989 by famed collector and writer Nina Fletcher Little (1903-1993). Several Porter artifacts were sold during the historic Sotheby's auction of her collection on January 29, 1994. More recently, in 2011 Linda Carter Lefko and Jane E. Radcliffe published *Folk Art Murals of the Rufus Porter School: New England Landscapes 1825-1845* (Schiffer Publishing, Ltd.). And in Bridgton, Maine, the Rufus Porter Museum, open from mid-June to mid-October, celebrates Porter's life and works.

The revival continues at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art until May 31, and it will be sustained



Benjamin West (1738-1820) painted Robert Fulton (1765-1815) in 1806, and this powerful portrait usually is on the wall of the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, New York. Fulton, like Porter, was both artist and inventor. In the background we see an exploding torpedo, a Fulton design.

Both curators were especially drawn to the close intersection of art and science embodied by Porter and his contemporaries.

long after that for readers of the 152-page hardbound exhibit catalog. Edited by co-curators Laura Fecych Sprague and Justin Wolff and co-published by the museum with Penn State University Press, the book contains an informative foreword by museum co-director Frank H. Goodyear III, two long chapters by Sprague and Wolff, and a third in-depth chapter by independent art scholar Deborah M. Child.

Child has intensively studied Porter miniatures for more than a decade. A rare Porter ad, published in the *Middlesex Gazette* (Concord, Massachusetts) in 1820, assured sitters that only ten minutes were required, and it offered a guarantee of "No likeness, no pay." Her book chapter reveals that there are over 120 miniatures "confidently attributed to Porter," 85 of which bear inscriptions about the sitters, but only four that solidly identify Porter as the artist. There are no known Porter account books, and the production of miniatures often was standardized using mechanical devices such as a camera obscura, so many miniatures by various artists look quite alike. A lovely profile miniature of a young man, identified on the reverse and in its original gilt frame, was attributed to Porter at the auction where I purchased it, but Child and other experts sadly told me that they do not agree. Ear details seem to be pivotal in their assessment.

The exhibit and book include far more than Porter's own output of wall murals, portraits, instructional books and articles, inventions, and the few known letters in his own hand. The curators have made a point of establishing cultural and historical context and connections, specifically focusing on much more famous American artist/inventors Samuel F.B. Morse and Robert Fulton. The point is clear that Porter, while perhaps equally ingenious and productive, lacked the business acumen and steadfastness to see his ideas through to fame and riches. On view too is a circa 1826



Historic New England lent these artist's materials, similar to what Porter would have used in his travels. The watercolor paint box is English. Moses Eaton Jr. (1796-1886), another itinerant artist during the same years, owned the work box and stencil kit.



This Porter wall mural is reproduced on a gallery dividing wall, at about one-third scale. Distinctive elements are the boats, trees, rectangular buildings, distant hills, and sharp perspective amplified by the receding wood fence.



Despite the scary process of moving and installing old painted plaster walls, at least one should be mandatory in any Rufus Porter exhibit. Lent by eminent Porter collector and expert Julie Lindberg, this 1838 panel is the work of Porter and his son Stephen. It was saved before the demolition of the Dr. Francis Howe house in Westwood, Massachusetts.

percussion cap revolving rifle co-invented by Porter, who sold its patent for \$100 to Samuel Colt, whose firearms success story needs no retelling here.

Eye-candy artworks, in addition to Porter's own folk art, adorn the galleries. An 1830 view of Portland harbor in Portland, Maine, by Charles Codman shows the newly built Portland Observatory, which appeared often in Porter's wall murals. A small circa 1822 watercolor by Jabez Ward Barton shows the literally groundbreaking Middlesex Canal that Porter would have viewed near his home in Billerica, Massachusetts. We see a sketch by young Winslow Homer showing a small rocket ship carrying his father to California gold fields, referencing the proposed steam-powered floating airship that Porter envisioned for whisking prospectors across the continent. The sketch by Homer was lent by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, along with a large colorful drum similar to what Porter would have pounded as a musician member of the Portland Light Infantry company during the War of 1812.

Hanging nearby are an 1806 Benjamin West portrait of Robert Fulton and an early 1818 self-portrait by Samuel F.B. Morse. On a pedestal is a Jean-Jacques Caffieri plaster bust of Benjamin Franklin. Perhaps the most impressive artwork is a large circa 1830 oil on canvas by Charles Bird King, *The Itinerant Artist*, illustrating a scene no doubt familiar to Porter as he traveled throughout New England painting portraits and walls.

While the curators lamented that no trove of Porter letters and other personal papers survives, we do benefit from thousands of his words published in his books, promotional materials, and journalism. Several editions of his do-it-yourself book *A Select Collection of Valuable and Curious Arts and Interesting Experiments* were published in the 1820s, and an early version is on display. Readers could learn



In this detail from *The Itinerant Artist* by Charles Bird King (1785-1862), the artist (who may be King himself) is getting plenty of help and attention as he works. We see a male figure (the father?) in the background with a rifle over his shoulder, heading out the door.

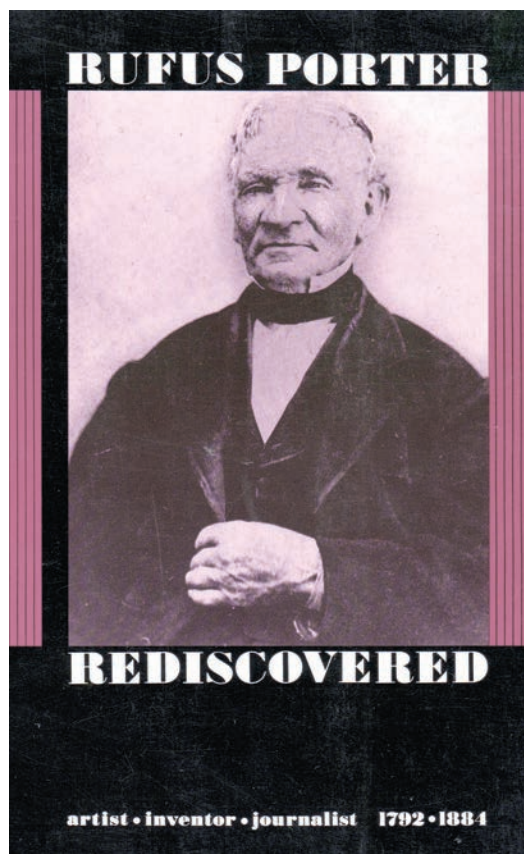
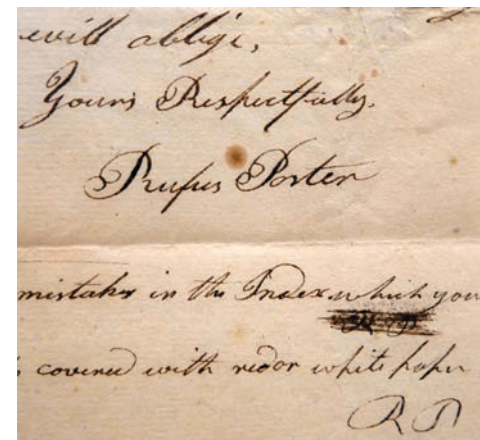


When Porter arrived in Portland, Maine, in 1807, the observatory, with its Dollond telescope from London, was brand new and a marvel of engineering. We see the tower here in a detail from an 1830 Charles Codman painting lent by the Brooklyn Museum. This 86' tall landmark was used to spot incoming vessels for the bustling port city. Porter inserted the tower in many of his murals.

dozens of useful “arts,” including gilding, silvering, making disappearing ink, dyeing, creating fireworks, producing laughing gas, and of course wall mural painting. His educational publishing continued in the 1840s with his founding, editing, and writing of the *New York Mechanic*, the *American Mechanic*, and finally the *Scientific American*. I gingerly paged through originals of the entire runs of the first two newspapers, which are available at the American Antiquarian Society.

Such self-help publications were not unknown or unprecedented. In both America and England, many authors endeavored to help artisans and “mechanics” improve their skills and livelihoods. The Boston Athenaeum has a bound copy of the 1832-33 monthly issues of *The Young Mechanic* published in Boston. On page 64 of the April 1833 issue is notice of a patent issued to Rufus Porter of “Billerica” [*sic*] for “an improvement in Clocks.” Sadly, thousands of patent documents and models, including this one, were lost forever in the disastrous 1836 fire that destroyed the Washington, D.C., Patent Office.

In this very rare example of Porter’s handwriting, we can examine his signature and penmanship. Very few of his murals and portraits are signed, making attributions difficult.



Jean Lipman produced two books about Rufus Porter. The second, to accompany a 1980 exhibit, uses on its cover the only known picture we have of him.

As a horological practitioner and scholar, I find published details of this patent interesting and indeed similar to features of a clock mass-produced decades later by the Ansonia Clock Company. Those specific innovations, however, do not relate to unique mechanical fixes that Porter added to the movement of a cherry-case tall clock with dial signed “Rufus Porter, Billerica” that I own and lent to the exhibit. I confess that I first was attracted to the clock because Billerica is just a few towns away from me. I discovered too that Porter was born in West Boxford, another nearby town and, even better, that his mother, Abigail Johnson, was from my own hometown of Andover, where I still live.

This is the only known signed Porter clock, although he did not make the case or paint the dial (the name on the clock face typically is the name of the movement maker), and I was the high bidder at a 2015 Skinner auction. Coincidentally, two weeks later I heard much about Rufus Porter during Historic Deerfield’s forum “Yankee Ingenuity and New England Decorative Arts, 1790-1840.” My report on the conference was published in the March 2016 issue of *M.A.D.* (p. 12-D), and it included a photo of Deerfield’s brightly painted corn sheller patented by Porter in 1838 and obviously produced in at least limited numbers. An article I wrote about my clock appeared in the Winter/Spring 2018 Newsletter of the Rufus Porter Museum and in the January/February 2019 magazine of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors. (I would be happy to e-mail that article if requested; contact me at <bell-time@comcast.net>.) Happily, the exhibit curators insist that the clock be running in the gallery so visitors can hear the ticking and the same bell that counted the hours for Porter nearly two centuries ago.

Sprague and Wolff stated during the opening presentations and gallery walk that the exhibit took them more than four years of preparation. The long list of 29 private and institutional lenders confirms those



Co-curators Laura Fecych Sprague and Justin Wolff with the cherry-case tall clock signed “Rufus Porter, Billerica” on the colorful painted iron dial. Unique elements of the movement’s striking system and brass plates indicate that Porter was attempting clockwork improvements as part of his documented interest in timekeeping and related machines.

arduous logistics, and the detailed book chapters, with additional pages of endnotes, and clear wall labels offer strong testimony. Back in 2015 at the time of the Historic Deerfield seminar, Porter must have been in the air. Justin Wolff, the co-curator, whose day job is professor of art history at the University of Maine, explained to me that it was around that same time that the exhibit idea germinated. Laura Sprague, the museum’s senior consulting curator, was enlisted, and work began. Both curators were especially drawn to the close intersection of art and science embodied by Porter and his contemporaries, and they were excited to find new information about his early years in the course of their research.

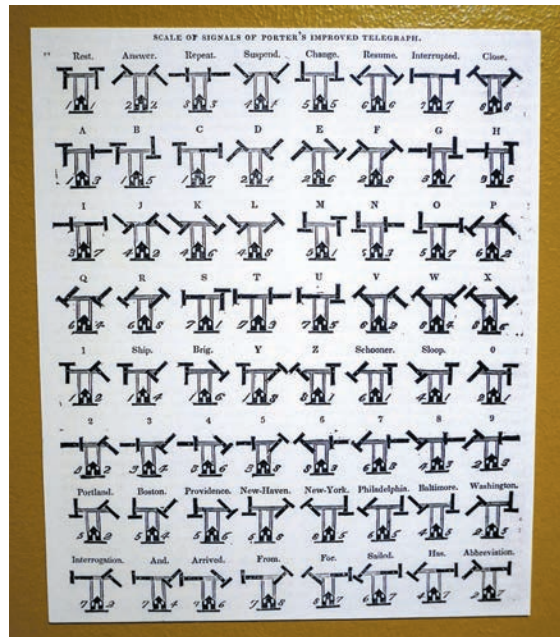
The exhibit galleries are divided into four thematic sections. “American Enlightenment” notes the ethos of self-improvement and individual achievement that emerged after the American Revolution. With very limited education, Porter lived those values. The next illustrates his development of artistic skills that provided his living for decades as he traveled and networked. Then we learn about his mechanical and technological creativity, which, unfortunately, rarely brought him large rewards. The final section reveals that Porter never stopped inventing as he added to his list of patents, and that his attitude and health remained positive until his dying day, despite his ongoing disappointments with raising cash and selling inventions.

For more information, visit (www.bowdoin.edu/art-museum), where copies of the exhibit catalog may be ordered for \$39.95 plus shipping. Other books mentioned above, and scanned reprints of Porter’s *Curious Arts* books, may be purchased online.





The framed front page of *Scientific American*, December 25, 1845, was lent by Julie Lindberg. Porter, founder of the magazine, addressed the “American public” with his strong belief that this kind of printed education strengthened our democracy.



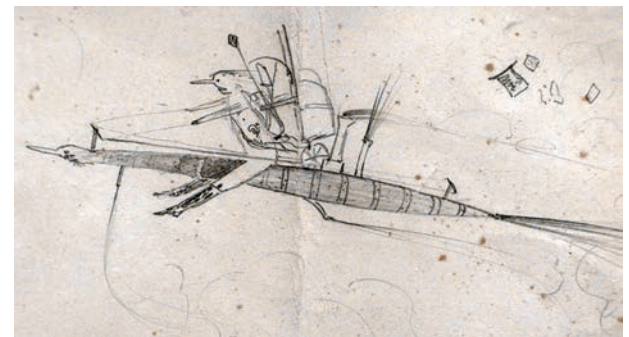
Semaphore telegraphy briefly held Porter's attention, and he published his suggested improvements in an 1834 letter to *Mechanics' Magazine*. He was confident that his system would make money for ship owners, newsmen, and lottery operators.



The Billerica Historical Society in Massachusetts treasures this circa 1822 watercolor showing the Middlesex Canal, a major achievement of industrializing New England. Porter lived nearby and must have been stimulated by the advanced engineering, commercial traffic, and floating towpath. At one time thought to be by Porter, the small painting is by Jabez Ward Barton.



Independent curator, author, lecturer, genealogy expert, and scholar Deborah M. Child poses by a display of rare portraits. Her chapter in the exhibit book is called “Rufus Porter's Miniature Portraits: Practice and Patrons.”



In this detail from a graphite sketch by teenage Winslow Homer (1836-1910), he pictured his father making a quick rocket-powered flight to the California Gold Rush.



As an important lender, Julie Lindberg attended the exhibit opening. We also see curator Justin Wolff and the military drum lent by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



At the lender preview, collectors Paula and Brian Ehrlich said a few words about their collection, which includes two watercolor on ivory portraits on display. These are the only two extant examples painted on ivory, an expensive material offered but rarely used by Porter.



The American Antiquarian Society provided an image of this Rufus Porter ad from the March 31, 1821, issue of *Essex Patriot*. As we see, he would do house calls if requested.



Soon after acquiring my Rufus Porter tall clock in 2015, I took a short drive to Billerica and visited the graves of Porter's first wife, Eunice, and two of his sons, Stephen T. and Washington Irving Porter. Stephen traveled and worked with his father but died in 1850; Washington survived only to age two.

