Talking It Over: A Patriotic Genre Painting by Enoch Wood Perry

DOROTHEE HESSELMAN
Assistant Museum Librarian, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

On February 3, 1872, Talking It Over (Figure 1), a genre painting by Enoch Wood Perry (1831–1915), signed and dated 1872, made its debut at the Century Association exhibition in New York. The picture reflects a poignant longing for the serene and uncomplicated life of a bygone era. Two farmers sit facing each other in a barn in front of a stall. One figure occupies an upright wooden chair; the other makes do with a sawhorse turned sideways. A horse peers out of the stall between them, its head directed toward the figure at left. A mound of hay is stacked at the right edge of the picture, and on the left there is a large barrel containing wooden rakes and a pitchfork. Some pumpkins have been piled against the stall between the men’s feet, and stray ears of corn and bits of hay and straw litter the barn floor. The sun shines in from the upper left, highlighting the men and casting the shadow of a second, unseen horse’s head against the barrel. Both men wear white shirts and work pants. The figure on the right holds an upright clay pipe and wears a soft hat, a neckerchief, a long-sleeved red undershirt, blue pants, and leather boots. He seems the younger of the two, with a full, dark beard and a strong profile. The man on the left, shorter and balding, is turned three-quarters toward the viewer. He is dressed in a brown vest and pants and wears soft leather shoes.

Strong vertical and horizontal lines define the stage-like picture space, and the figures and architectural forms reinforce each other within the boxlike composition. The wall of the horse's stall at the center is constructed of four horizontal planks, which are framed by vertical posts and planks. The floorboards of the barn lead us into the shallow, intimate space; the orthogonal lines of the floorboards direct the eye to the figure on the right. The chair and the figure seated in it form right angles, as does the lower right corner of the stall opening. The figure's facial profile is partially framed by the lower right corner of the stall and is seen in relief against the horse's flank, a device that incorporates the figure into the environment and confers on him the attribute of permanence. The figure on the left, with his elbows on his knees and his eyes half shut, sits forward between the round barrel and pumpkins behind him, his body in harmony with his physical surroundings. The horse stands behind the men and helps unite them pictorially.

In spite of the title, Talking It Over, both men sit in silence, apparently lost in thought. The righthand figure holds his pipe near his knee as he looks toward his companion in an expectant way, which suggests that he is the one who has last spoken. The left figure appears a bit withdrawn as he turns slightly away from his companion and presses the fingertips of both hands together in contemplation. The narrative drama of poses and gestures and the pictorial relationship between the two figures encourage the viewer to speculate about the subject of their conversation. What has been said that keeps them silent now?

Perry was well known and successful throughout his life, producing a few history paintings but mainly rural genre scenes in oil and watercolor and more than thirty portraits of influential persons from both the North and the South, including Andrew Jackson, Jefferson Davis, and Ulysses S. Grant. No searching analysis of Perry's oeuvre has yet been published, but the available references plainly take his pictures at face value. His only biographer to date, Linda Mary Jones Gibbs, characterizes his genre subjects as hardworking and moral citizens whose "simple, yet honorable activities" contributed to the growth of their developing nation. She ascribes a documentary importance to his work, which she says embraces "ideals of patriotism" and records the "labors, pleasures and pleasures" of ordinary people. A local historian wrote that Perry "merely wanted to depict rural Americans at work." His genre pictures were praised in Appleton's Journal as "more valuable" than the "new subjects" of the landscape painters Frederic Church and Albert Bierstadt. An article that appeared in Art Journal in 1875, when Perry was forty-four years old, states: "Mr. Perry at the

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present time occupies a position very nearly at the head of our genre painters. He was one of the first of them to paint American subjects. In modern scholarship Perry's domestic and rural genre scenes are still referred to as embodying quintessentially American themes.

Images of farmers were very popular subjects with nineteenth-century American artists and their patrons. William Sidney Mount painted barnyard scenes, such as Dance of the Haymakers, 1845 (The Museums at Stony Brook, New York), and Bargaining for a Horse, 1835 (The New-York Historical Society), which prefigure the interior barn setting of Talking It Over. Eastman Johnson's Horse Trade (Whittling in the Barn), 1866 (Deerfield Academy, Deerfield, Massachusetts; Figure 2), and Corn Husking, 1860 (Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York), also anticipate Perry's painting in subject and composition, and presumably Perry relied on pictures like these for his models. Perry's expression of patriotism proves to be specific and literal when the figures in Talking It Over are scrutinized. The farmers, who appear to typify two responsible American citizens contemplating a good harvest, exhibit classic American features. Indeed, Perry selected two of the best-known Americans available for his harvesters: George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Perry's model for the face of the man on the left appears to have been Gilbert Stuart's "Athenaeum" portrait of George Washington (Figure 3). The sideburns, the cut of the jowl, the thin-lipped and tight-set mouth, even the three-quarter view (in reverse), reflect the Stuart portrait closely, except that Perry made his figure a bit balder than Stuart's Washington. The farmer on the right bears a strong resemblance to Mathew Brady's May 1861 inaugural photograph of Abraham Lincoln (Figure 4). The sharp angle of the hairline at the temple, the cut of the beard, the tilt of the head, the line of the mouth, the direction of the gaze, all seem
to be indebted to Brady's portrait. Moreover, Lincoln was a tall, lanky man who typically sat with his legs crossed, and he was frequently portrayed that way. Supporting the identification of the two farmers is the timing of the artist’s work on this picture. It was painted in 1872 for the Century Association's exhibition in February, the month of the two presidents' birthdays.

The two portraits by Stuart and Brady were well known. Gilbert Stuart's Athenaeum portrait of George Washington existed in many replicas painted by Stuart and other artists, and the image had been engraved frequently. Stuart called his own copies his "hundred-dollar bills." Mathew Brady's New York studio was on the corner of East Tenth Street and Broadway, just a few doors away from the West Tenth Street Studio Building, where Perry painted Talking It Over. The luxurious reception hall of Brady's gallery was used to display his collection of photographs, described by a reporter as "foremost... among the local attractions in New York." The first portrait Brady made of Abraham Lincoln, in February 1860 before his election campaign speech at the Cooper Institute in New York, was copied for newspapers, lithographed by
Currier and Ives, and widely distributed. Lincoln later remarked, “Brady and the Cooper Institute made me President.”14 Brady was also reproducing carte de visite photographs “by the millions.”15

George Washington had been revered as the founder of the nation ever since his death in 1799. His portrait was a fixture in American parlors. Joel Headley’s biography of Washington was read avidly when it was serialized in *Graham’s Magazine* in 1854, and in 1856 seven thousand persons lined up for Edward Everett’s lecture in New York City, “The Character of Washington.”16 In 1858 Walt Whitman wrote in an editorial for *The Brooklyn Daily Times*, “The name of Washington is constantly on our lips, his portrait hangs from every wall, and he is almost canonized in the affections of our people.”17 When Lincoln was assassinated in April 1865, he was immediately idolized and was paired pictorially with Washington by journalists and lithographers. Political cartoons and lithographs of the period made liberal use of the conjoined images of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, and these likenesses were reproduced in every conceivable medium. Patriotic lithographs of 1865 show a saintly Lincoln ascending into the arms of George Washington in heaven, there to be crowned with laurel leaves and embraced as “the Preserver of the Union” by “the Founder.”18

*Abraham Lincoln, The Martyr, Victorious* (Figure 5), an engraving that appeared the same year, embellishes the ceremony with winged angels strumming on harps.19 *The Father, and the Saviour of Our Country* (Figure 6) is representative of the almost idolatrous nature of this popular iconography.20 A lithograph showing Abraham Lincoln’s family, made in 1867, includes a framed portrait of Washington hanging very prominently on the parlor wall behind the family group.21 Images of Washington and Lincoln together were enlisted to endorse Ulysses S. Grant as the Republican candidate for president in 1872, the same year Perry painted *Talking It Over*. An election broadside titled “YOU MUST MAKE YOUR CHOICE. BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER” (Figure 7) presents Grant between portraits of Washington and Lincoln, all three wreathed in ivy and olive leaves.22

Barns and farmers signified the country and its citizens. The farmer was still considered the backbone of the nation and was frequently portrayed as “the ideal American citizen.”23 *Talking It Over*, with its farm subject and evocation of the two great American presidents, is a manifestation of contemporary patriotism. It also refers
to the average citizen’s awareness of being witness to an influential chapter in American history as the country began to recover from the Civil War and move toward its one-hundredth birthday. Perry reflected the national ethos when he chose to paint two farmers seated in a barn (the repository of a plentiful harvest, i.e., the country itself), and chose to make the farmers resemble nationally revered presidential leaders. He did this discreetly, so that recognition of their identities is easily overlooked, but it is telling that Perry clothed the Lincoln figure in red, white, and blue. In an era when images of farmers were commonly used as the subjects of paintings and when lithograph prints pairing George Washington and Abraham Lincoln were mass-produced as popular mementos, it would have seemed natural to the artist to combine farm imagery with patriotic portraits.

At the conclusion of the Civil War, another American artist, Winslow Homer, with whom Perry worked in the early 1870s, painted The Veteran in a New Field (Figure 8), using harvest imagery to express a national theme. The farmer reaping the grain is a former soldier who has just returned home from the battlefields on which he has served his country; his infantry jacket and canteen lie nearby. But the scythe in his hands, while denoting the honest labor of the harvest, is also a reminder of the earlier harvest of death on the battlefield. As Nicolai Cikovsky Jr. has persuasively argued, the subject and its meaning were prompted by the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, who died in the spring in which Veteran was painted. Much as the martyred president was the implicit subject of Homer’s picture, he became the disguised subject of Talking It Over.

In pictorial language tied tightly to the times, Perry, like Homer, relied upon the farmer to commemorate monumental historic events. With his low-key style Perry made the result so natural-looking that over one hundred years later, in an era far removed from the
post–Civil War decade, it is easy to miss the casting of the two presidents in the roles Perry makes them play. *Talking It Over* is both a reassuringly familiar farm scene tinged with nostalgia and an artist’s tribute to two revered presidents.

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**NOTES**


5. The article concludes, “American art owes him a great deal for his peculiar conceptions, and his return [from his summer sojourn in Europe] to his old subjects will be warmly welcomed.” “Art, Music, and Drama,” *Appleton’s Journal* 10, 250 (Aug. 16, 1873) pp. 219-220.


8. Harold Holzer, a Civil War historian, alerted me to the possible significance of the ears of corn on the barn floorboard that leads to the Lincoln figure. Holzer believes that the corn alludes to the Battle of Antietam, which had been fought in a cornfield. The Confederate general Robert E. Lee had hoped to capture Washington, D.C., from this vantage point in Maryland. His defeat marked one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War. President Lincoln took advantage of the Northern victory at Antietam to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.

9. Photographs and portraits of Lincoln confirm this. *Abraham Lincoln*, 1864–65, by George Peter Alexander Healy, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., is one well-known example, but there are so many portrait photographs of Lincoln seated with crossed legs that the pose has become iconic. A number of examples by Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner, and others can be found in Stefan Lorant, *Lincoln, His Life in Photographs* (New York, 1941).

10. Abraham Lincoln’s birthday was first observed as a holiday on Feb. 12, 1866, George Washington’s February birthday has been observed since 1782. Robert J. Myers, *Celebrations: The Complete Book of American Holidays* (Garden City, 1972) pp. 58, 63.


14. Ibid., pp. 31–32. “It has been said, perhaps with exaggeration, that over one hundred thousand copies [of the first portrait of Lincoln made by Mathew Brady, on Feb. 27, 1860] were distributed in the campaign that year.” Frederick Hill Meserve, *The Photographs of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1944) p. 27.


24. I am indebted to Kevin Avery for pointing out the relationship between *The Veteran in a New Field* and *Talking It Over. The Veteran in a New Field* was exhibited at the Artists' Fund Society and reviewed in *The Nation* (Nov. 23, 1865). Kathleen Luhrs, ed., *American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 1985) II, pp. 433–444. An entry inscribed by hand in the Century Association’s exhibition record for Feb. 5, 1870, mentions an untitled picture, “Reaper male figure wheatfield,” by Winslow Homer. There are also two entries for Perry in the same exhibition record. Mention is made in “Art Notes” in *The Evening Post* (July 8, 1872) p. 1, that “Winslow Homer and E. Wood Perry are at Hurley, Ulster County, N.Y. sketching the quaint old Dutch interiors which abound in that neighborhood.”