1-1-1990

Native Visions: Art by Folks

Karen O. Janovy
Education Coordinator at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

NATIVE VISIONS: ART BY FOLKS

MARCH 20 - MAY 27, 1990

SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN
LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

NATIVE VISIONS: ART BY FOLKS

Among the prestigious holdings of 20th-century American art at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, are outstanding examples of folk art that visitors frequently refer to as their favorites. *Native Visions: Art by Folks* includes Sheldon's sensitively rendered 19th-century shop sign *Horse,* the 18th-century limner portrait *Girl with Rose* and *Book,* and the 19th-century watercolors *Ship* and *Whale,* both of the latter undated, by unknown artists, and found in whaling log books. In addition to these familiar pieces, the exhibition features 18th-, 19th- and 20th-century folk art objects selected primarily from private collections throughout Nebraska. Works in a number of media, including paintings and sculpture, weathervanes, toys, shop or trade signs, hooked rugs, quilts and furniture provide this special glimpse of our cultural heritage. By carefully looking at such objects, the observer can learn how Americans have spent their lives, both at work and play, throughout our history.

Webster defines folk art as "of or existing among the common people." Folk art is generally understood as decorative and/or functional arts and crafts created by untrained, ordinary citizens, as well as experienced craftspeople. First acknowledged as an informal manifestation of history in the 1920s and 1930s, folk art assumes a dual role: it is art both by and for the people. The makers are often both producers and consumers, whose individuality is their outstanding characteristic.

In 1932, Holger Cahill, the "first scholar to interest himself in American folk art," gave credibility to the term "the common man" when he referred to folk art as being created by "ordinary average citizens." American folk art is "the unconventional side of the American tradition in the fine arts....It is a varied art, influenced from diverse sources, often frankly derivative, often fresh and original, and at its best an honest and straightforward expression of the spirit of a people. This work gives a living quality to the story of American beginnings in the arts, and is a chapter... in the social history of this country."*

Jean Lipman, former editor of *Art in America* and editor of publications at the Whitney Museum of American Art has written, "The decorative and utilitarian functions and styles of folk art are closely interwoven....The relationship between some folk art and twentieth-century art is equally striking and has had a good deal to do with the steadily increasing appreciation of folk art. In the twenties and thirties, artists, sensing an affinity with their own work, began to collect this material; prominent among them were Elie Nadelman, Robert Laurent and William Zorach." Nadelman, Zorach and Laurent are all represented by major pieces of sculpture in Sheldon's collection and are known to have maintained early, important collections of folk art. In the early nineteen-hundreds, Nadelman and his wife amassed one of the most significant private collections of folk art, and created the Folk Art Museum at Riverdale-on-Hudson in New York, where the first major public exhibition of folk art was held. Nadelman is represented in the Sheldon collection by his well-known, seminal work, *Man in the Open Air,* c. 1915.

As an educational institution committed to the acquisition, exhibition, preservation and interpretation of 20th-century American art, it is the responsibility of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery to record and document the visual arts in America. Thus the museum continues to expand and broaden its collection and knowledge of the folk art tradition. *Native Visions: Art by Folks* is presented to fulfill that mission.

SCULPTURE

Shop or trade signs, weathervanes and whirligigs

Among the most prominent kinds of folk art objects are shop or trade signs. The magnificently carved *Horse* from the Sheldon's permanent collection originally advertised a saddlery shop in upper New York. This important piece, whose original purpose was to sell a product, specifically harnesses, sets a precedent for the beginnings of 20th-century sculpture in America. The inordinate attention to detail and the fine chiseling of the head is reminiscent of Oriental work from the 19th century. The inclusion of actual leather ears and horsehair for a tail (remnants long since removed for safe keeping), the hardly noticeable drilled holes for the attachment of brace, bit and bridle, all blend with the aesthetic perceptions of the well-trained craftsman. *Horse,* found on the lawn of an antique shop east of Westfield, New York, serves to illustrate an occupation of the day.

Such also is the case with the *Cigar Store Indian* and the *Glasses Sign.* This particular cigar-store Indian advertised the United Cigar Shop at 1300 O Street in Lincoln from 1914 until the late 1930s. It found its way to Sidles Pontiac dealership in what is now the Gunny's Building at 13th & Q Streets during the late 1940s. The original cigar advertising on the front of the base was removed and "Chief Pontiac" was applied during those years. It was purchased by Wally Smith, a used car and antique gun dealer in Lincoln, in 1949. Traded for antique guns, it was placed in Murrell Johnson's antique shop, Swapper's Paradise, at 10th & P Streets in the 1950s. *Cigar Store Indian* was probably used at another Lincoln tobacco shop from the 1880s until 1914 when it was purchased by United Cigar. Since most store trade figures were used outdoors very few retain their original paint. Although often wheels were installed at the base so the figures could be rolled indoors for the night, this wooden figure surely spent most of his life inside, protected from the elements, and so its original coloration is discernable. Cigar store Indians were often associated with Egyptian, Turkish or other fine imported cigars. But more importantly, they illustrate an adaptation of the traditionally rendered ship's decorative figurehead by early artisans. With the decline in the sailing-ship industry, those figurehead carvers quite naturally turned to a similar trade-- in this case, the carved figures became an advertisement for a tobacconist's shop.

The *Glasses Sign* hung outside over the sidewalk at the C.A. Tucker Horologist (a maker or dealer in timepieces) and Jeweler merchandising shop at 1123 O Street from 1896 until 1932. Made of hand-forged cast iron rims, with blue cobalt lenses, this colorful sign beckoned one to enter for prescription services or ornamental eyewear products.

Weathervanes also were known to function as shop signs. Designs for weathervanes were frequently endemic to the chosen area, and related to the type of occupation housed in the building. Early examples were simple designs referring to farmers and livestock animals, including horses and roosters. In coastal areas weathervanes took the shapes of ships, whales, mermaids, fish and gulls.

Whirligigs also were sculpted with a more whimsical approach than the functional weathervanes. Some whirligigs, however, were used as weathervanes. More whittled than carved, their paddlelike arms rotated with the wind, making them a fascinating toy.

PICTURES

painted, drawn and stitched

Whale, from the permanent collection of the Sheldon Gallery, was made by an unknown person who clearly had memorable encounters with the huge mammal. The artist was surely one who had experience with the capturing of the prey, and felt a compulsion to record it in his log. *Ship,* also from a whaling log book, might well have been painted by a shipmate, well-skilled and knowledgeable about sailing and the seas. Both these watercolors, though small enough to be recorded in a daily log, are precisely rendered, quickly executed due to the medium, and conveying their creators' pure pleasure and satisfaction.

The lovely colonial portrait, *Girl with Rose and Book,* is of the limner tradition of American folk art. From the 16th century onward, to limn meant to depict a likeness. So, a limner, often thought of as a 'jack-of-all

2.

4.

5.

Diese beyden Ehegatten, als Johannes Felz und seiner ehelichen
Haus-Frau Margaretha gebohrne Scherrat ist ein Töchterlein zur
Welt gebohren, Namens Catharina im Jahr unsers HErrn JEsu 1797.
den 27ten Tag Maij um 3 Uhr Morgens im Zeichen de
Diese Catharina ist Gebohren und Getauft in America, im Staat Pensylvani
in Berks Caunty in Richmond Taunschip
Obgemelde Catharina ist Getauft worden den 6ten November 1797
von Herrn Pfr. Lehman Tauf-Zeugen waren Jacob Scherrat
und seine Ehe-Frau Margaretha

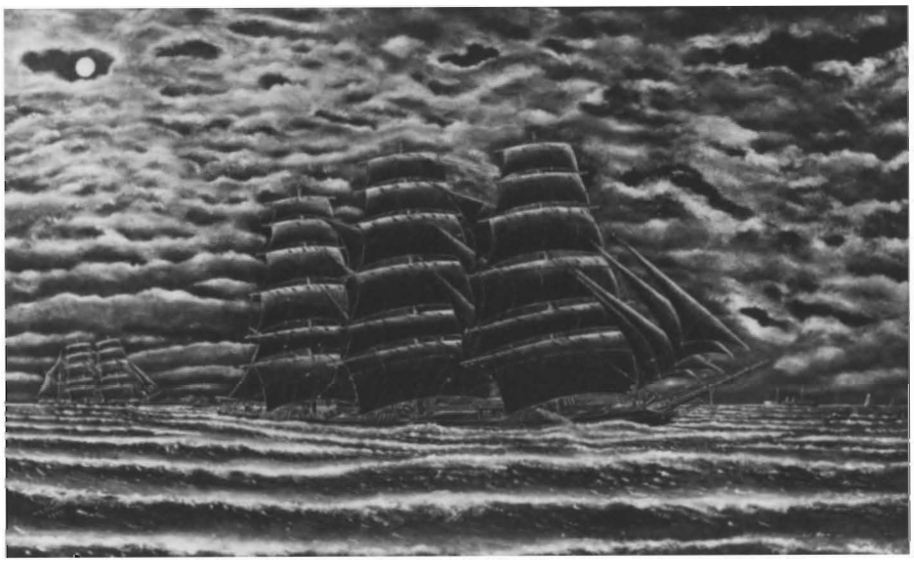
Was wir kaum gehoffet worden, ist nun eitles Schwerlich bis ins Hohe Grab der Eiden. Nur ein kurz gemessner Schritt,
Sich mit jedem Augenblick Gehet unter Kind zurück. Und wir sind mit jedem Jahre-alle auf
gar Totenbahre; Und wer weiß in welcher Stunde, und die letzt Stimme weckt:
Denn GOtt hat's mit jenem Monde, Kinder Menschen auch entseelt.
Wir sind Haus nun wohl behalt geht mit Freuden aus der Welt.
Da die Eitelkeit hingegen; Ewigs Sterben kan erregen.

Verfertigt von Ph. Mins.

Gedruckt
im Jahr
1800.

Ich bin getauft, ich steh im Bunde,
Durch meine Tauf mit meinem GOtt
So sprech' ich frei mit frohem Munde,
In Creutz, in Trübsal, Angst und Noth,
Ich bin getauft, drum
ich mich. Die Freude
Bleibt ewig
sich.

Ich bin getauft, ob ich gleich sterbe,
Was schadet mir das Hölle Grab?
Ich weiß mein Vaterland und Erbe,
Daß ich bey GOtt im Himmel hab.
Nach meinem Tod, ich mir
bereit, Dich Himmels
Freud, das Ewig
erfreut.



1.

1. W.L. Staples, MIDNIGHT MARINE, 1907, oil on canvas, 22 x 36 1/8 in., NAA Collection, 1972.N-258

2. American, 19th C., GIRL WITH ROSE AND BOOK, n.d., oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 27 1/2 in., UNL-Gift of Mrs. Edith Gregor Halpert, 1964.U-447

3. Unknown American, WHALE, 19th C., watercolor, 5 3/8 x 8 in., UNL-Gift of John Davis Hatch Jr., 1960.U-312

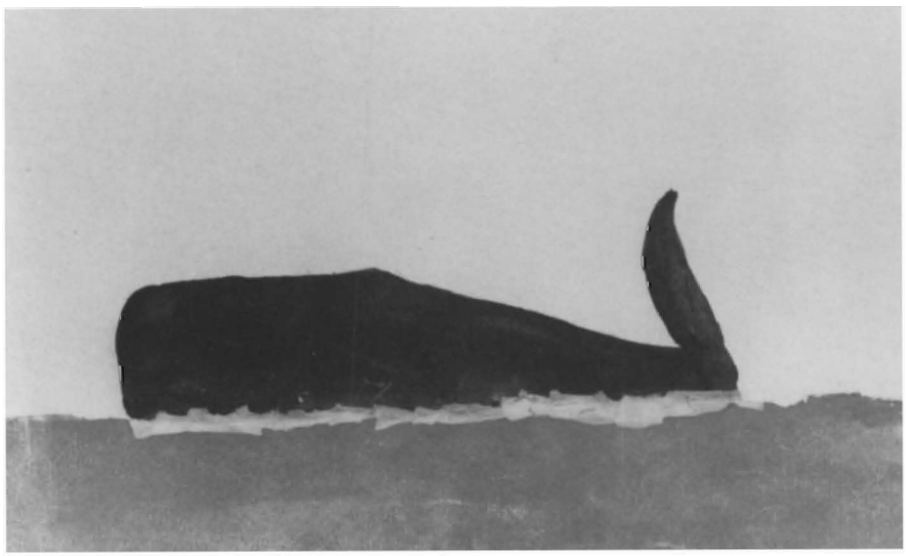
4. Unknown American, HORSE, 19th C., wood, 27 1/2 x 26 x 6 in., NAA Collection, 1957.N-100

5. Unknown American, PENNSYLVANIA DUTCH BIRTH CERTIFICATE, 1800, watercolor on paper with printed text, 13 x 15 1/2 in., UNL-Gift of Mrs. Edith Halpert, 1964.U-448

6. Bill Traylor, 1854-1947, TURKEY, c. 1940-42, ink on cardboard, 13 x 8 in., collection Dr. & Mrs. David Harter (Back cover)

7. Samuel Robb, 1851-1928, CIGAR STORE INDIAN, c. 1880, carved white pine, original paint, Private Collection-Lincoln (Overleaf)

8. Unknown Artist, GLASSES SIGN, c. 1890, hand forged cast iron, cobalt blue glass lenses, Private Collection-Lincoln (On the cover)



3.

trades,' was one who upheld a "specific value in art--its capacity to preserve an image, and their procedures were appropriate to the end they sought." With minimal artistic ability, a limner earned a living as an itinerant at some other trade, roaming about the countryside during the summer months, executing commissioned portraits. Often housepainters, their canvases could be prepared with backgrounds painted during the inclement winter, with the face and icons of the particular person being added according to the sitter or commissioner. These portrait paintings fulfilled the impulse to "preserve for posterity likenesses of oneself and one's family." With the invention of the camera in the mid-1800s, the popularity of, and necessity for, these portraits waned.

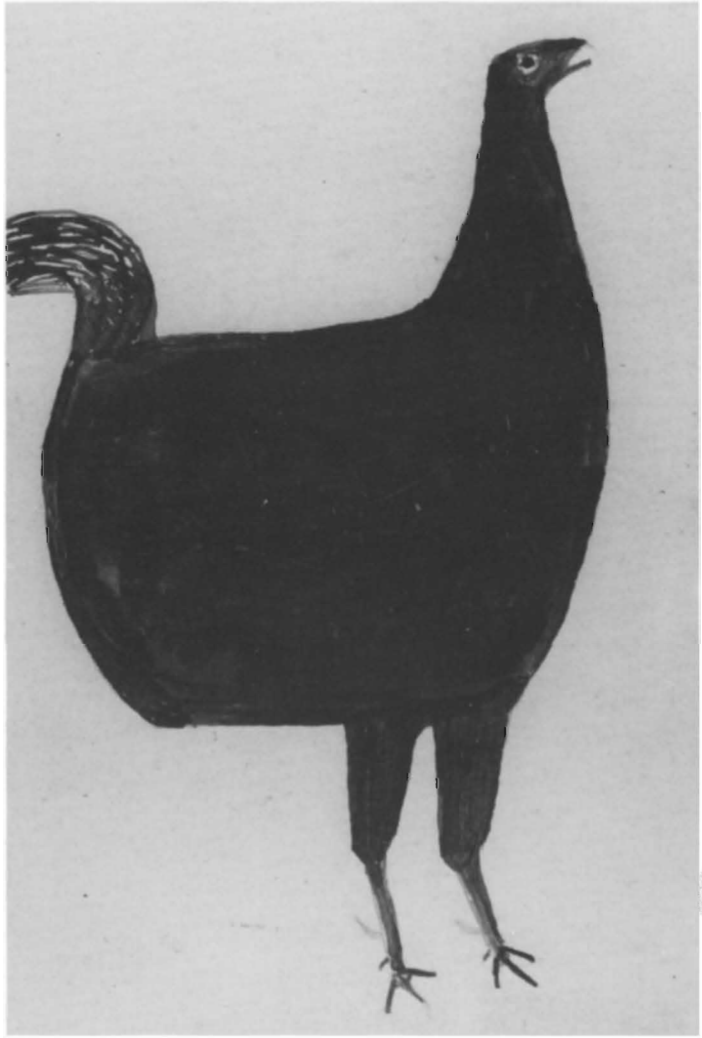
Samuel Colwell Baker's oil on canvas, *The Alexander McKenzie Going Up the Mississippi,* is what we commonly refer to as a "memory painting." This folk landscape tells a tale from the memory of the artist. The work is characteristic of a number of American folk paintings, often referred to as "primitive" or "naive," and executed very late in the life of the artist. Baker was in his 70s when he again began painting. Naive artists do not draw or paint or sculpt to record history for posterity, but create for their own pleasure, and chose their subjects from the life around them.

The *Pennsylvania "Dutch" Birth Certificate,* from the Sheldon Collection is a record of the birth of Catharina Sell, executed in watercolor, with the unique lettering of traditional German designs. Certificates announcing marriages, births, etc., are known as fractur; birth certificates are called Taufschein. This kind of folk art was practiced in Germany in the 18th and 19th centuries, and was brought to America by German immigrants who settled in southeastern Pennsylvania and were referred to as 'Pennsylvania Dutch' from the German, Deutsch. Fractur writing (fraktur-schriften) is derived from a 16th-century type face that is imitative of calligraphy of medieval manuscripts. Fractur makers did not sign their work. Thus they carried on the medieval tradition of the anonymous scribe. More than half of the surviving fractur certificates are birth certificates. A schoolmaster's fractur paintbox contained goose-quill pens and cat's hair brushes, small bottles containing colors that were once liquified with whiskey, and cherry gum varnish diluted with water that was occasionally used to add a shining finish to the colors. The paints--golden yellow, blood red, soft blue and delicate green--were homemade from dyes concocted by the artist according to old recipes.*

Karen O. Janovy
Education Coordinator

*Quoted and adapted in part from Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester. *The Flowering of American Folk Art* (Courage Books, Philadelphia, PA in cooperation with the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1987)

Native Visions: Art by Folks was organized by the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery in cooperation with the Nebraska Art Association. The exhibition was generously underwritten by Information Technology, Inc. with additional support from the Nebraska Arts Council through a Year-Long Program Grant.



7.

Nebraska Arts Council

SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN
12TH AND R STREET, LINCOLN, NEBRASKA 68588-0300