1990

Native Visions: Art by Folks

Karen O. Janovy

Education Coordinator at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

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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 craftsmen. First acknowledged as an informal manifestation of history in the 1920s and 1930s, folk art assumes a dual role: it is art, and is a chapter in the social history of a people. This work gives a living spirit of a people. This work gives a living spirit of a people. This work gives a living spirit of a people.

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 horseshair 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 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-

Wollt man diesen Brief lesen und von ihm helfen, so bitte sich auch in die Stadt der Freunde, hier vorne ist keiner Macht, die hier ist schon in freier Luft. Hier gibt es viele gute Menschen, die hier Freunde haben, die hier Freunde haben, die hier Freunde haben, die hier Freunde haben.

Verfertigt von der Bord.

Geburt am 27. Mai 1801.
1. W.L. Staples, MIDNIGHT MARINE, 1907, oil on canvas, 22 x 36 1/8 in., NAA Collection, 1972.N-258


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)

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.