

NEWS RELEASE

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FIRST EXHIBITION OF AMERICAN PRIMITIVE PAINTINGS
FROM THE COLLECTION OF EDGAR WILLIAM
AND BERNICE CHRYSLER GARBISCH, May 9 through July 11, 1954

WASHINGTON, May 1: David E. Finley, Director of the National Gallery of Art, announces the opening, on May 9th at 3 p.m., of the first exhibition of American Primitive Paintings from the collection of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch. The gift from Colonel and Mrs. Garbisch was announced on March 1st, 1954. Included in the exhibition will be more than 100 oil paintings dating from the beginning of the 18th century to the 3rd quarter of the 19th century. Further exhibitions illustrating other aspects of American primitive painting are planned. These will include miniatures, water colors, pastels, etc. In addition to these special exhibitions, groups of pictures will be formed and made available to museums in this country and abroad for loan exhibitions.

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In speaking of the collection, one of the largest and most comprehensive of its type ever assembled, Mr. Finley said, "The collection of early American primitive paintings, which Colonel and Mrs. Garbisch have given to the National Gallery, represents an authentic and important part of our national heritage. These paintings will add greatly to the Gallery's resources in the field of American painting and, because of their indigenous quality, will be of widespread and increasing interest to the American people now and in the future."

Colonel and Mrs. Garbisch, who live in New York, also have a home, Pokety, near Cambridge, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. In addition to their interest in art, and particularly American art, they have taken an active part in historic preservation in this country. Colonel Garbisch, a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, and a former officer in the United States Army, is a trustee of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and of the Maryland Historical Society. Mrs. Garbisch is now restoring Old Trinity Episcopal Church, built before 1692, near Church Creek, Maryland, as a memorial to her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Walter P. Chrysler.

Writing about their collecting Colonel and Mrs. Garbisch

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have said, "We started our search for American primitive paintings in 1944, shortly after we had acquired a home on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. We were about to furnish this home with American antiques and decided that American primitive paintings would be the most suitable to hang on the walls. We saw in these native American works of art those unique qualities of simplicity, forthright directness, and creative vitality in color and design, which set them apart as being so indigenous to our country, so genuinely American.

"By the time we had gathered a representative group of these pictures, we had arrived at the very definite conclusion that good American primitive paintings reflect extraordinary creative imagination and possess unusual artistic values. Therefore, we felt, they merit an important place not only in the history of American art but in the history of world art as well. Such an exalted appraisal, we realized, was not generally acknowledged, and we did not think it could be until a comprehensive collection of these paintings was made available for the general public to see and for art historians, students, and critics to evaluate. It was then that we decided to assemble such a collection and give it to the nation. From

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that time on we were not just collecting for our Maryland home but with an art museum in mind."

Commenting on the exhibition, John Walker, Chief Curator of the National Gallery, noted that the primitive painter expressed with particular vividness the charm of youth, of spontaneity, of unsophisticated vision. "These are qualities the contemporary painter especially prizes," Mr. Walker said, "consequently primitive paintings, such as those included in the present exhibition, have a strong influence on the art of our time."

The Foreword and Introduction of the illustrated catalogue to be issued in connection with the exhibition are enclosed with this release.

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FOREWORD

Over a period of many years Colonel and Mrs. Edgar William Garbisch have been collecting early American paintings. At the present time their Collection contains more than 1500 works of art in oil, water color, pastel and other media, executed by native American artists who had little or no instruction in the techniques of recognized English and Continental masters.

These paintings date from the early eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century. They constitute the largest and most comprehensive collection of American primitive paintings yet assembled. In choosing them Colonel and Mrs. Garbisch have insisted that, in order to enter their Collection, the painting must show evidence of creative imagination. For no one realizes more clearly than these intelligent and perceptive collectors that, without creative imagination, we can have no work of art, regardless of the degree of technical competence which the artist may or may not possess. Furthermore, they have taken infinite pains to have the paintings cleaned and preserved, so that they may be seen, so far as possible, in their original state, and also in their original frames or in frames of the period.

Colonel and Mrs. Garbisch have now chosen from their Collection a representative group of 300 paintings and 200 miniatures which will become part of the collection of American painting at the National Gallery of Art. The paintings included in this gift represent an authentic and important part of our national heritage and will add greatly to the Gallery's resources in the field of American painting.

Because of their indigenous quality, they will be of widespread and increasing interest to the American people now and in the future. With the other paintings by American artists, and with the Index of American Design now in the Gallery's collection, the National Gallery will offer a unique opportunity for the study of American art and its development over a period of more than 200 years.

An exhibition of paintings from the Collection of Colonel and Mrs. Garbisch will open at the National Gallery on May 9th and will continue for two months. This first exhibition, as shown in this catalogue, will be confined to oil paintings and will include over 100 portraits, landscapes, still-lives, and genre paintings. Other exhibitions will be arranged later, each devoted to a particular type of art, such as miniatures, water colors and pastels. In addition to these special exhibitions, selections from the Collection will be on view at the National Gallery at all times; and groups of paintings will be formed and made available to museums in this country and abroad for loan exhibitions.

Colonel and Mrs. Garbisch hope that in this way their Collection will be of maximum benefit to the American people by making us aware of our past, as seen through the eyes of our own creative artists. We, on our part, have reason to be grateful to these generous donors for their splendid gift and for all that they have done for the preservation of American art.

DAVID E. FINLEY
Director

INTRODUCTION

Americans seem always to have had a surprising passion for paintings. Like the Dutch in the seventeenth century they have eagerly and unceasingly commissioned portraits of themselves, of their possessions, of their way of life, and, in the mementos and memorials, of their way of death. As John Neal wrote in 1829, "You can hardly open the door of a best room anywhere, without surprising or being surprised by, the picture of somebody, plastered to the wall and staring at you with both eyes and a bunch of flowers."

This passion for painting seems to have been ubiquitous. Patronage was divided between the more sophisticated artists, who were often trained in Europe, sometimes becoming associates or members of the British Royal Academy or with aspirations in that direction, and the more native painters, usually self-taught and now frequently no longer remembered by name. It is the creations of these artisans of genius that Colonel and Mrs. Garbisch have especially collected. These brilliantly gifted painters, who flourished chiefly in the nineteenth century, though talented practitioners are to be found from earliest colonial times, established a native style, one that is uniquely different from that of any European school.

There are reasons why this type of painting should have developed with particular distinction in America. In Europe a certain standard of technical competence was imposed by the guild tradition. When the guilds declined, their authority passed to Academies and Salons. Such institutions opposed any idiosyncrasy of style or distortion

of form, qualities which make a strong appeal to our modern taste. Restraints of this kind were lacking in the New World, and when they were imposed, as they were toward the middle of the nineteenth century, they exercised a much feebler control. Consequently the primitive painter in America was freer than elsewhere to express himself, to offer in his pictures his peculiar contribution, the charm of youth, of spontaneity, of unsophisticated vision. As these are qualities that contemporary painters especially prize, this style has had a strong influence on the art of our time.

There are many designations of this style, the most satisfactory of which seems to be "primitive painting." It is a method of delineation that is realistic but not naturalistic. It is an objective statement of fact to which lack of technical accomplishment adds a touch of fantasy. It is an idea of a person, a place, or an object, around which the artist, so to speak, puts a line. But such representation is rarely achieved without a certain stress and strain. Part of the charm of these pictures lies in the tension between a recalcitrant image and the artist's determination to get it down on his canvas or panel. This challenge and response is always implicit and lends to the American primitive an archaic character, which has proved a shield against the meretricious facility characteristic of so much of the painting of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The American primitive shows at his best an unerring instinct for significant detail: a physical feature, the set of a mouth which tells the character of an individual, or even an attribute such as an ear trumpet which implies the problem of a personality. Or in landscape, the significant aspect: the appearance of a village or a farm as held in the memory, or the mood of a landscape, benign or malevo-

lent, which has impressed itself on the imagination. These singularities of observation are distorted, emphasized, thrust awkwardly but touchingly at the spectator so as to convey in the most emphatic way the message of the artist. From this desire for significant emphasis there usually results a startling and stimulating transformation. Yet because the primitive painter's intention is basically realistic, he manages to convey the specific character of his subject with a vividness which the academic painter, trained to generalize and to idealize, often loses.

Thus American primitive painting is in some ways the best source of our knowledge of the appearance of our past. It is almost impossible to look at the pictures reproduced in this catalogue, recalling as they do the history and customs of our country, the types of people who created our institutions and safeguarded our freedom, the simplicity and charm of their way of life, without a feeling of deep pride in our ancestors and in the culture which they produced, a feeling not untinged with nostalgia, and perhaps a touch of envy.

JOHN WALKER
Chief Curator