

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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Press Preview:

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DIVERSE COLLECTION OF AMERICAN NAIVE GRAPHICS
TO GO ON VIEW AT NATIONAL GALLERY

WASHINGTON, D. C. July 18, 1984. American Naive Watercolors and Drawings, an exhibition of approximately fifty works of art on paper, has been selected from the National Gallery's Garbisch Collection, one of the country's foremost holdings of American naive art.

It is one of four exhibitions of works of art on paper relating to nineteenth-century America scheduled to go on view in the Gallery's West Building Ground Floor drawings galleries October 14, 1984 through January 13, 1985. The others exhibitions are: John James Audubon: Bird Prints of America, Index of American Design and Thomas Moran's Watercolors of Yellowstone (through January 27, 1985).

Between 1953 and 1980, Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch assembled the most comprehensive collection in the field and generously gave the Gallery more than 400 works---including 100 works of art on paper. Because of the fragile nature of these objects on paper, the Garbisch graphics have been less frequently exhibited than the paintings; the last showing at the Gallery was in 1966-1967.

On view are eighteenth-and nineteenth-century American watercolors and drawings including boldly designed Pennsylvania German fraktur, detailed and calligraphic Shaker "sacred sheets" in pen and ink, mourning pictures, watercolor landscapes, large-scale pastel portraits, genre scenes and still lifes. Deborah Chotner, Assistant Curator, Department of American Art, is organizing the exhibition.

Naive artists derived their subjects from varied sources including European prints and illustrated books. Eunice Pinney, a Connecticut artist, drew inspiration from the literature of her time. Her watercolor The Cotters Saturday Night (c.1815) is based on a

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verse by the Scottish poet, Robert Burns, which describes the simple pleasures of a household gathered to hear its patriarch read.

Folk artists characteristically emphasize shape and pattern in their compositions. This concern is seen in its fullest in the work of Mary Ann Willson. In her interpretations of the story of the Prodigal Son, (c.1815) based on eighteenth-century engravings after Cornelis Tiebout, the forms are bold and combined into brilliantly colored abstract patterns.

Prior to the advent of photography in the middle of the nineteenth century, artists traveled regionally to execute portraits of middle-class citizens. One such artist is J. A. Davis, who did more than 125 watercolor portraits, often in the same profile pose. To individualize these, Davis included variations in furnishings and costumes and paid close attention to the graining of tables and the design of chairs---an indication that he may have been a cabinetmaker as well. His handsome portrait of John and Abigail Montgomery (1836) contains these decorative elements.

Another category of the exhibition includes mourning pictures, an art form which flourished in America during the four decades following the death of George Washington in 1799. While at first they were intended to honor public figures, they were later created in memory of ordinary people as well. Memorial to Giles Pettibone(sic.), (c.1811) by his daughter, Susan Pettibone, is the earliest mourning picture in the exhibition. As in other such works, it includes the prescribed elements of mourners, a pyramidal monument and a weeping willow tree.

Among the landscapes on view is Poor House, Hospital and Lunatick Hospital of Northampton County, Pa., (c.1865) one of two watercolors by Charles Hofmann. It is executed with meticulous attention to detail. Ludlow Patton by an unknown artist, is a fascinating depiction of the city of Washington (c.1875) with the Capitol in the background, a partially constructed Washington Monument, the busy port of Georgetown, and, in the foreground, the canal barge for which the watercolor is named.

Fraktur executed in the eighteenth and nineteenth century are highly decorative documents derived from the tradition brought to this country by German and Swiss

immigrants. Many fraktur commemorate important events as seen in one such work, Birth and Baptismal Certificate of Margareta Munch by Carl E. Munch, who includes freely drawn, detailed vignettes of the four seasons among his flowered borders and surrounding his text.

The section of the exhibition devoted to fancy pieces contains highly imaginative works that defy categorization. Among the very inventive and humorous objects is Victory Parade (early 19th century), which depicts lively rows of figures carrying swords or pistols, knives or tomahawks, and one figure with a fife, and a drum. George Washington is my Name (first quarter 19th century) is a whimsical depiction of the Father of our Country and The Indian Hunter (19th century) by James M. Gibbs is a tour-de-force of the art of calligraphic drawing in its precise, delicate touch, rhythmic strokes, and clever design.

Animal Kingdom (19th century) is an intricate paper cutout of forty symmetrical pairs of creatures and people with characteristics carefully differentiated in watercolor. The animals are both exotic and domestic and include two happy horse-sized dogs.

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