

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

FOURTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215/842-6353

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Press Preview  
Tuesday, October 9, 1984  
10am - 3pm

FOLK ART RENDERINGS FROM  
INDEX OF AMERICAN DESIGN  
TO GO ON VIEW AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON, D. C. July 23, 1984. Eighty-five objects selected from approximately 17,000 watercolor renderings of American decorative arts which make up the Gallery's Index of American Design go on view October 14, 1984 through January 27, 1985 in the Gallery's West Building Ground Floor drawings galleries.

The exhibition is being presented in conjunction with three other shows of works on paper relating to nineteenth-century America: John James Audubon: Birds of America, American Naive Watercolors and Drawings (both through January 13, 1985) and Thomas Moran's Watercolors of Yellowstone (through January 27, 1985).

The Index of American Design was established in 1935 as a federal work project and employed more than 1,000 artists over a seven year period during the Depression. The Index provides a pictorial record of American decorative arts from the colonial period through the nineteenth century and includes renderings of ceramics, costumes, furnishings, glass, carvings, tools, textiles and domestic utensils. Index artists used various watercolor techniques to meticulously record the colors, textures and details of these objects. As a result, many of the renderings are outstanding examples of trompe l'oeil painting.

Published portfolios of the finest renderings were the Index's ultimate goal. With the onset of World War II, however, the project (like other Depression programs) came to a close with the portfolios unpublished. It was decided that the works should remain in the hands of a federal agency; in 1943 they became part of the Gallery's permanent collection.

(MORE)

The exhibition is divided into four geographical areas: the Northeast, the Mid-Atlantic and Southern States, the Midwest, and the Southwest and the West to reflect the character of the region and also the development of the Index project.

The first room of the exhibition includes renderings of traditional crafts from the Northeast where English and Dutch colonists established some of America's first permanent settlements. Among the utilitarian objects exhibited are weathervanes of various themes: the angel, Gabriel; a symbolic figure of Liberty, and Cockerel (a rooster) by Shem Drowne, the famous weathervane maker of Boston. Known as the "Revenge Cockerel" because it was made for First Revenge Church of Christ in Boston, it was hammered out of copper kettles and weighed 172 pounds.

Also on view are renderings of shop signs---either panels or carved three dimensional figures---which publicized services and products. One sign which reflects New England's colonial maritime industry is a rendering of The Little Navigator, a mariner holding an oversize sextant. Another is the familiar Cigar-Store Indian. Tobacco was considered the gift of native Americans, and the Indian became the tobacconist's symbol. By 1840 production of these figures had developed into an industry and by 1860 every tobacconist had a life-size Indian in front of his store. A rendering of the tavern sign from the Black Horse Inn depicts a sharply delineated horse and advertises "entertainment;" the frame, delicately shaped pediments and spindlelike colonnettes distinguish the design.

Among the other watercolors in the first section are a ship's figurehead, a bandbox, (small boxes used to hold fancy neckware and articles of finery), a chintz and calico quilt, and a civil war drum, each decorated with a patriotic eagle.

The second room is devoted to folk art from the mid-Atlantic and Southern states. Prominent among the groups to settle here were the Pennsylvania Germans (peasants from the German Rhineland) and the Shakers (a religious sect which migrated from New England).

Many of the objects in this section are utilitarian, and they reflect the cultural and religious backgrounds of the two groups. For example, renderings of the Shaker objects on view---a rug, a bonnet, a spirit message---seem very plain in comparison

to the lively, colorful motifs of the Pennsylvania Germans whose designs are free and bold. A toleware (or tinware) coffee pot provides an excellent example of the floral designs commonly used on household objects. Decorations on tinware were frequently executed with Chinese vermilion, yellow, green-blue, white and bronze powder. Among the other renderings of Pennsylvania German objects are a Vorschrift (an ornate baptismal certificate) portraying Adam and Eve, and two gaily decorated earthenware pie plates.

The settlement of the Midwest was greatly aided by the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1862. The rural midwest is represented in a third grouping by renderings of the Conestoga and settlers' wagons, trains, and domestic objects which recall the migrating pioneers and European immigrants of the 1870s and 1880s.

On view is a watercolor depicting the drawing room of a Pullman coach reflecting the 1888 creation in Chicago of the luxurious Pullman parlor car. Also included is a rendering of the locomotive weathervane which was made in the round as a virtual model of a real locomotive. The weathervane was nine feet long, and was made out of copper, brass and iron.

The fourth room focuses on the Southwest and the West---areas which are diverse and interesting because of their Spanish and American Indian traditions. Many of the renderings show the strong influence of Spanish Catholicism. Church architecture and religious objects such as santos (holy images), bultos (religious figures carved in the round), and retablos (religious paintings executed on wood) were recorded.

The exhibition has been organized by Laurie Weitzenkorn, assistant curator, Index of American Design. Nancy Allyn of the National Museum of American Art has written the brochure which accompanies the exhibition.

END