NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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FOLK ART FROM THE SHELBURNE MUSEUM ON VIEW AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON - The National Gallery of Art will celebrate America's cultural and artistic heritage this fall with a special exhibition of folk art from the renowned Shelburne Museum, in Vermont. An American Sampler: Folk Art From The Shelburne Museum brings together more than 120 works from the museum's extensive collection of Americana, including quilts and coverlets, hooked rugs, weathervanes and whirligigs, decoys, carousel animals, cigar-store Indians, trade signs and carved figures. The exhibition will be installed on the upper level of the Gallery's East Building, Sun., Nov. 15, 1987 through Thurs., April 14, 1988. It has been made possible through a grant from The New England, the Boston-based insurance and financial services institution.

"This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Shelburne Museum, one of the great treasure houses of American arts, architecture and artifacts," said J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery of Art. "In this exhibition we have concentrated on textiles and sculpture, two groups that are among Shelburne's greatest strengths. We hope that visitors to the National Gallery find the works as aesthetically pleasing in their own right as they are wonderful reminders of American life and culture."

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The Shelburne Museum is situated on the east coast of Lake Champlain, five miles south of Burlington, Vermont. With 45 acres of property and 37 exhibition buildings, the museum seeks to provide visitors with a view of American life the way it was in both the distant, and the not too distant past. The museum and its setting are widely acclaimed for collections of American folk art, architecture, decorative arts, and agricultural implements. Among the most spectacular exhibits at Shelburne are the 220-foot steamer Ticonderoga and newly reconstructed turn-of-the-century round barn.

Shelburne was founded in 1947 by Electra Havemeyer Webb and her husband, J. Watson Webb, to "show the craftsmanship and ingenuity of our forefathers." The motivating force for the museum's acquisitions was Mrs. Webb, who had begun collecting American folk art before it became widely recognized as a legitimate art form. Through her efforts, Shelburne is today recognized as having one of the nation's foremost collections of Americana.

"This exhibition is testimony to Mrs. Webb's vision and the distinctively American values she found in these crafts," said Edward E. Phillips, chairman and chief executive officer of The New England. "We take great pride in sharing that vision and those values with the American public through this exhibition tour. We see our support for this exhibition as an extension of our long-standing commitment to public education, because we believe it offers a unique cultural, historical and educational link to our past."

The exhibition was organized to coincide with the 40th anniversary of Shelburne and was coordinated by Deborah Chotner, assistant curator of American art at the National Gallery. The objects were selected by staff at Shelburne and the National Gallery, under the direction of John Wilmerding, deputy director of the National Gallery and noted American art scholar. Mr. Wilmerding serves as vice president of Shelburne's board of trustees and is the grandson of Electra Havemeyer Webb.

Accompanying the exhibition will be a fully illustrated catalogue, which will include essays by Ben Mason, former director of the Shelburne Museum, David Curry, curator of American art at the Denver Art Museum, and Jane Nylander, director of Strawbery Banke, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

On crowded days free passes to the exhibition will be distributed on a first-come, first-served basis. Passes will be for specified half-hour entry times and will be available at a special exhibition desk in the East Building. There will be no advance reservations.

After leaving the National Gallery of Art, the exhibition will travel to the Amon Carter Museum (May 7 - Sept. 4, 1988), the Denver Art Museum (Oct. 15 1988 - Jan. 1, 1989), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Feb. 5 - April 30, 1989), the Wadsworth Atheneum (June 4 - Sept. 3, 1989), the New-York Historical Society (Oct. 3, 1989 - Jan. 7, 1990), and the Worcester Art Museum (April 15 - Aug. 5, 1990).

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EXHIBITION BACKGROUNDER

An American Sampler: Folk Art From The Shelburne Museum

National Gallery of Art, East Building
November 15, 1987 through April 14, 1988

The Shelburne Museum was founded in 1947 by Electra Havemeyer Webb as a permanent home for her collections of unique and eclectic American artifacts. Today, the museum is recognized as the nation's foremost institution devoted to collecting and preserving American folk art.

Situated on the east coast of Lake Champlain in southern Vermont, the Shelburne Museum includes 37 different structures that were brought to the site from locations throughout New England.

Among the various buildings now on the museum grounds are a 1782 saltbox house, a hunting lodge, a one-room schoolhouse, the side-wheeler S. S. Ticonderoga and a lighthouse that was moved from Lake Champlain. These structures hold a remarkable array of American folk artifacts, from carved carousel animals, carriages, sleighs and ship prows figureheads, to weather vanes, trade signs, farm implements and quilts. By contrast, there is also a collection of European impressionist and old master paintings. These diverse holdings are unified only by the original collecting sense of the museum's founder.

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Electra Havemeyer Webb's pioneering commitment to American folk art began in 1907, when at 18 she bought a wooden cigar-store Indian for $15. While still a young woman her collection grew to include many thousands of works by folk artists and craftsmen.

Mrs. Webb's acquisitions represented a dramatic shift from the aesthetic sensibilities instilled in her by her parents, Louisine and Henry O. Havemeyer, who themselves had assembled one of the finest collections of European paintings in America. Her perplexed mother once asked, "How can you, Electra, you who have been brought up with Rembrandts and Manets, live with such American trash?" The answer lay in Electra's sincere belief in the aesthetic and historic importance of America's folk art.

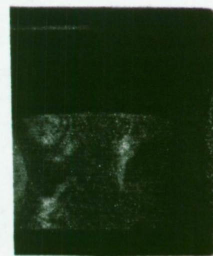
Mrs. Webb collected folk art long before the term "Americana" was coined and before many people even knew that such art existed. Exploring a field with few boundaries, she developed her own rules for collecting: "It must possess beauty, a symmetry of line or movement, an aesthetically satisfying form, or a decoration which the maker had deliberately added to please himself and the eye of the beholder." The museum she founded to house her collections continues to reflect a commitment to these values.

I. American Folk Art

The increasing awareness of abstraction in modern art in the early 1920s gradually led an increasing number of collectors to recognize the aesthetic qualities of American folk art. Many of the nation's leading avant-garde artists found affinities with their own work in the

etric patterning and rhythmic colors of quilts and coverlets, as well
n the bold, stripped-down designs of American weather vanes, decoys
carvings. Others professed respect for the basic American values that
ed to be embodied in many of the objects. Despite its technical
licity, folk art seemed to represent the makers' honesty, innocence,
freedom from the academic restraints of European art.

However, not all folk artists were naive amateurs working in
ural and artistic isolation. They frequently were inspired,
ciously or unconsciously, by European subject matter. Many American
arts, including quilting, and the carving of trade signs, weather
s, ships' figureheads, and carousel animals have origins in European
't traditions.



Quilts, Counterpanes, Coverlets, and Rugs

Before inexpensive color lithographs and machine printed wall
ers became available in the mid-19th century, families relied primarily
quilts and unquilted bedcoverings called counterpanes to enliven their
es with vivid color and design. Pieced quilts were made by stitching
ether scraps cut from worn clothing or bedcoverings to create a single
ge cloth with an overall, usually geometric design. Although American
ltmakers sometimes copied designs from imported European quilts and
ticoats, most quilts were original designs. The "Crazy Quilt," for
mple, made with pieces of fabric arranged in a seemingly random
tern, was first made in this country around 1870, and appears to have
European antecedents.

Quiltmaking was also an integral part of the social lives of
th- and 19th-century women, who were often expected to have pieced a
zen quilt tops before they became engaged. Once engaged, their friends

worked vigorously to complete them and make them part of the future bride's trousseau. The classic themes of love, patriotism, weddings, good fortune, and fertility are evident in Shelburne's collection, as are the various techniques such as patchwork, applique, hand-blocking, and stenciling. One of the most striking quilts in the collection is the so-called Mariner's Compass quilt (cat. 84), which combines a compass design in pieced work with the hickory leaf in applique.

Unlike quilts, which were usually made by women working at home, loom-woven coverlets were often the work of professional weavers, many of whom were men. Especially popular in the 19th century were woolen overshot coverlets, so named because the colored (horizontal) weft yarns overshot or floated over groups of (vertical) warp yarns to form bold geometric patterns.

The word "rug" now refers to floor coverings, but in the 18th and 19th centuries it often described woolen bedcoverings with a thick, embroidered pile. Hearth rugs of similar manufacture served to cover hearthstones during the summer, or to protect a larger carpet from flying embers. Hooked rugs, in which narrow strips of left-over cloth were pulled up with a hook through a coarse foundation material, are believed to be indigenous to North America.

III. Trade Signs

Common in this country as early as 1710, American trade signs are part of a tradition that reaches back to antiquity. In the days when few people could read, merchants advertised their wares or services with carved or painted signs depicting specific objects of the trade or service. Intended to be seen from afar, trade signs were often

brightly painted with strong, two-dimensional compositions, or carved on an exaggerated scale. The smiling sunburst on a tavern sign from Vermont (cat. 7), for example, is a distant reflection of ancient Roman inn signs showing Apollo, who as sun god was associated with good health.

IV. Scrimshaw

Scrimshaw is the art of carving and engraving the teeth and bones of whales. In the 18th and 19th centuries, New England sailors relieved the monotony of whaling voyages by making presents of scrimshaw for family and friends at home. Whale teeth, smoothed with sandpaper or sharkskin, were incised with scenes of the chase and portraits of famous figures -- American presidents were particularly popular subjects. Whalebone was sawed and filed into elegant knitting needles, corset busks, and devices for winding yarn known as swifts. The most popular kitchen tool made of scrimshaw was the pie crimper, used to cut and press designs into pastry (cat. 43). Its zigzag wheel and decorative handle reflect the precision of the scrimshander's carving and his desire to produce an object pleasing to the eye. With the advent of alternative fuels such as kerosene near the close of the 19th century, the whaling industry collapsed, taking with it the mariners' art of scrimshaw.

V. Decoys

Wildfowl decoys are native to the New World. As far back as the year 1000, native American Indians were making decoys of woven reeds and feathers to lure gamebirds within the range of the hunter. By the late 1700s, settlers from Europe were using decoys as well, albeit from longer-lasting wood. Solid, floating decoys were commonly made until the mid-19th century, when craftsmen introduced less cumbersome hollow decoys

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with separately worked heads. Around the same time, decoy makers, who initially had made little effort reproduce specific species, began to carve remarkably lifelike birds in a variety of poses. In the latter portion of the 19th century, decoy making became a cottage industry in America. To meet the intense commercial demand for waterfowl, decoys were produced by the thousands and marketed to professional gunners. The passage of Federal conservation legislation just after the First World War had the effect of greatly curbing decoy production.

VI. Carvings

Many 19th-century carvings were purely decorative. Wooden eagles, symbols of the Republic, were in demand everywhere to adorn public buildings, ships and private homes. Most wood carvings, however, served practical needs. The flourishing shipbuilding trade in 18th and 19th century coastal cities created a market for figureheads, which had graced the prows of sailing ships for centuries.

As steamships replaced sailing vessels, professional shipcarvers like John Cromwell of New York (1805-1873) transferred their skills to trade figures advertising the wares of tobacconists (cat. 49). These life-sized carvings usually portray American Indians, the first to smoke the native tobacco plant. Many were mounted on wheeled bases so that they could easily be moved outside the shop entrance in the morning and back in at the close of business. Cigar-store Indians continued to be carved until the 1920s.

VII. Carousel Animals

Although the carousel reached its peak of popularity and artistic refinement in America, the amusement was a European invention.

The first carousel manufacturing company in America was opened in 1867 by a German-born Philadelphian, Gustav Dentzel. His craftsmen paid careful attention to anatomical detail and rendered subtle nuances of the animals' coloration to produce the most intricate and graceful of all carousel figures. The American carousel industry enjoyed its heyday from 1890 until the late 1920s, when the Depression forced most major companies to shut down or greatly reduce production.

VIII. Weather Vanes and Whirligigs

Wind indicators have been used on rooftops since classical antiquity. Weathercocks, symbols of vigilance, often topped belltowers of medieval churches and civic buildings, while fanes, metal flags bearing family coats-of-arms, flew over the castles of English noblemen. Eventually, the terms weathercock and fane merged to form "weather vane." English settlers brought the European tradition to this country where other barnyard animals, marine life, insects and the ever-popular American Indian soon entered the American weather vane maker's constantly expanding repertoire.

Whirligigs usually portray single figures whose movable paddle arms flail in the wind, indicating its direction and velocity. Some were of more intricate design. As the wind rotated the geared wheel of the spinning woman (cat.77), she spun wool with her hands while her foot worked the treadle. Although this whirligig was apparently used as a trade sign for a weaver's shop in Salem, Massachusetts, most whirligigs were wind toys made just for fun.

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