"A Shared Legacy:
FOLK ART IN AMERICA"

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INTRODUCTORY PANEL TEXT

The following is suggested wall text (provided by the exhibition's Guest Curator, Richard Miller) to help introduce the exhibition to your visitors. You are free to amend the copy in order to best relate the text to the interests of your audience.

Introductory Panel:

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The paintings, sculpture, and furniture in the Gordon collection were made between 1800 and 1920--years that bookend a period of rapid and dramatic change in the United States. In 1800, the United States was an agrarian nation and still deeply in financial debt to France for loans it had received to pay for the War for Independence. The Nation had witnessed its first peaceful transfer of power a few years earlier when John Adams because president, but many European nations were not convinced that the fledgling nation would survive. By 1920, the world had changed. The United States was the world's wealthiest nation, and three years before it had demonstrated its power and influence by crossing an ocean to participate in a world war to help secure Europe's--and France's--victory. In 1917, Colonel Charles E. Stanton of the American Expeditionary Force stood at the tomb of the Marquis de Lafayette in Paris and said, "Lafayette, we are here." His words acknowledged mutual debts: the support the American colonies had received from France during its war for independence from England, and America's participation in a war to help free France.

The art produced in America during this period was indebted to the art of Europe. Not until the 20th c. did American artists introduce new art forms that would have wide influence in Europe. Before, the art of Western Europe provided the models that American artists emulated. The ocean separating Europe and North America slowed the transmission of the latest developments in the arts: landscape painting was well established in Europe in the 17th c., but not until the 1820s did American painters such as Thomas Cole (1801-1848) create works that, while influenced by European landscape paintings done two centuries earlier, celebrated what was distinctive about the American landscape. Whether it was portraits rooted in European traditions, or sculpture and furniture that acknowledged their classical origins, American art never strayed very far from it roots.

Rather than being merely derivative expressions, art played an important social role by helping to maintain and strengthen the cultural bonds between Americans and the places where they came from. There was never a shortage of artists in the United States, and the paintings, sculptures, and furnishings in this exhibition represent the depth and broad appeal of the art produced here. Today this art is called folk art. It is not representative of the kind of art exhibited in the few galleries and even fewer American art museums that existed before 1900, but it was the art that was dominant in the United States from its founding. This is the visual language that most Americans living in the 19th c. knew: portraits, paintings of familiar local places, street art in the form of commercial sculpture, and domestic furnishings made by local craftsmen. Often--but not exclusively--produced in rural areas, towns, and villages, folk art does not mimic the art made in major cities. Rather, it uses that art as a starting place for original interpretations of conventional art forms made by academic artists who, themselves, borrowed directly from European sources. Being one step removed from its source may, in and of itself, explain folk painting's differences and its appeal. Rural and urban cultures are different. Therefore, the art made in the city and country unavoidably expresses the cultural values of these places and of the people for whom it was made. Folk art is a gauge of the tastes, social practices, and the economics of the places where it was made.

Despite sharing a national identity, the United States has never been a fully homogeneous society. The customs and social practices brought here from all parts of the world have been preserved by the religious and ethnic groups that settled here beginning with the first English inhabitants of North America. Folk artists both amateur and professional expressed these differences by selectively modifying and reinterpreting pictorial conventions, creating art that mirrored the traditions of the communities where they lived or worked. For example, portraiture was an integral part of the visual culture in the Northeast. Brought by English immigrants, portraiture never took hold to the same extent in the German-American communities of New York, Pennsylvania, and the South. Still, German and Swiss immigrants tenaciously maintained the traditions and their material culture, which was aided by their settlement of relatively remote areas. Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted visited the German-American community of New Braunfels, Texas, in 1854 where, he later wrote, "I never in my life, except, perhaps, in awakening from a dream, met with such a sudden and complete transfer of associations . . . we were--in short, we were in Germany." In place of strong portrait or landscape painting traditions, America's early German communities painted their furniture and produced illuminated manuscripts documenting the lives of individuals called "fraktur." These arts are manifestations of practices dating to the Middle Ages. Much German-American folk art was rooted in the family and the preservation of personal and cultural identity and it was a means by which this group maintained a connection to its ancestral homelands. Over time, new generations with no firsthand memories of these traditions continued them until they weakened and the evidence of their cultural origins mostly disappeared.

As communities were established and became prosperous, many Americans sought tangible evidence of their success. The well-to-do living in cities patronized trained artists to paint portraits, but to meet the demand of customers living far from urban centers, self-taught or minimally-trained artists worked for customers or for their own pleasure. The demand (the <u>need</u>, it could be said) for art in more outlying areas created a market for the work of several generations of portrait artists. Artists emerged who responded to this demand rather than creating the demand. Their work often shows their awareness of the conventions of portraiture; but these paintings often diverge from the standards that were acceptable in urban areas. A group of portraits painted in 17th-c. New England are the earliest known examples. These paintings continue the English Tudor-Jacobean style that was prevalent in

England in the 16th and early 17th centuries. In time, this style was replaced in American cities by a new kind of portrait from England exemplified by the highly-finished, elegant likenesses of wealthy Bostonians and New Yorkers painted by John Singleton Copley (1738-1815). But the Tudor-Jacobean style didn't completely disappear. Evidence of its continued influence into the 19th c. can be seen in the careful depiction of jewelry and other luxury goods and, occasionally, the name of the sitter painted next to their image along with other information about them or the year the portrait was painted.

British novelist L. P. Hartley wrote, “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” The American author William Faulkner asserted, “The past isn't dead. It isn't even past." Hartley's England had been in existence for a millennium: Faulkner's America was 250 years old. Perhaps the length of a national tradition influences how one perceives the past. It may seem distant, unfamiliar, or strange; or, the past and the present may be perceived as inseparable, concurrent. The collective years of three 80-year-old individuals living today takes us to the year 1773 when America was still a Crown colony. We are, in actuality, only three handshakes removed from a time that often seems distant, but this forward telescoping of time can make the past seem recent. The art in this exhibition represents a period that may feel distant. But these objects that held special meaning for Americans living up to two centuries ago show that their aspirations were little different from ours today: celebration of family, pride in heritage, and leaving some evidence of our lives and accomplishments after us.

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