

A Shared Legacy: Folk Art in America

The story of American folk art unfolds in the small towns, villages, and rural areas of New England, the Midwest, the Mid-Atlantic, and the South between 1800 and 1925. By definition, folk art is not typically made by professionally-trained artists and it does not attempt to emulate art made in major urban centers. Rather, folk art was made by self-taught or minimally-trained artists and reflects the nineteenth-century tastes, social practices, economics, and cultural values of the rural places and people for whom it was made.

Folk art was rarely exhibited in American galleries and art museums before 1900, even though it was the most dominant type of art in the United States during that time. Folk art epitomized the visual language that most Americans living in the nineteenth century knew: it consisted of portraits that hung in family homes, paintings of familiar local places, street and novelty signs used for commercial advertising, and domestic furniture made by local craftspeople. There were many artists practicing in the United States during this time, and the objects included in this exhibition represent the depth and broad appeal of the art produced during this era.

A Shared Legacy: Folk Art in America is drawn from the private collection of Barbara L. Gordon. Over two decades, East Coast-based Gordon assembled a unique collection of rare and very fine portraits, vivid still life and landscape paintings, whimsical trade signs, figurative and animal sculptures, and distinctive German-American furniture. Together the works on view from her collection exemplify the breadth of creative American expression during a period of enormous political, social, and cultural change in the United States.

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Portraits as a Sign of Success

As American communities were established and became prosperous in the nineteenth century, many citizens sought tangible evidence of their success. In large cities, wealthy individuals commissioned portraits of themselves and family members from trained artists. However, in smaller communities, portraits of successful people were made by self-taught or minimally-trained artists. While the work of these folk artists often shows an awareness of the accepted conventions of portraiture, these paintings often diverge from the higher standards expected in urban centers. Many folk art portraits were painted in a style known as the English Tudor-Jacobean style prevalent in England in the sixteenth- and early-seventeenth centuries. This style incorporated careful depictions of jewelry and other items important to the sitter.

American Art with a German Accent

In 1854, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted visited a rural German-American community and later wrote: “I never in my life, except, perhaps, in awakening from a dream, have been met with such a sudden and complete transfer of associations. We were—in short, we were in Germany.”

Many of America’s immigrant communities in the nineteenth century maintained strong ties to their native customs and traditions. This was especially true for German- and Swiss-Americans. These communities were noted for their furniture production. They painted their furniture and also produced illuminated manuscripts using traditions that can be traced to the Middle Ages. German-American folk art tradition offered a means by which this group maintained a connection to its ancestral homelands.

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