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Simple, but Oh, What Depths

'A Shared Legacy,' at the American Folk Art Museum

By KEN JOHNSON JAN. 1, 2015



"A Shared Legacy: Folk Art in America," at the American Folk Art Museum, includes more than 60 choice objects made between 1800 and 1920, including these wooden sculptures from 19th-century tobacco shops.

Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

In a letter he wrote in 1825, the American painter John Vanderlyn said that paintings by the itinerant portraitist Ammi Phillips were "... cheap and slight, for the mass of folks can't judge of the merits of a well-finished picture." Vanderlyn had gone to France for academic training. His masterpiece, "[Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos](#)" (1809-14), a suavely erotic, neo-Classical vision of a nude woman dozing in a pastoral landscape, is one of the gems of the collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. But a discerning viewer today might well prefer Phillips. His "[Girl in Red Dress With Cat and Dog](#)" (1830-35) is one of the loveliest paintings by any American artist.

A wonderful painting attributed to Phillips is included in "[A Shared Legacy: Folk Art in America](#)," an inspiring exhibition at the [American Folk Art Museum](#). "James Mairs Salisbury" (circa 1835) depicts a boy of about 3 in a blue shoulder-baring dress (young boys were commonly portrayed in dresses back then), sitting on a red-cushioned stool with a little dog at his feet, against a dark, flat background. Holding a single strawberry by the stem in one hand and a sprig with four more berries in the other, he gazes out at the viewer with a preternaturally calm expression, like a little Buddha.

You can see what Vanderlyn would have found lacking in such a painting: It's relatively flat, and its parts appear patched together rather than seamlessly conjoined. But to a modern viewer, all this yields a captivating interplay of realism, abstraction and psychological mystery.

Drawn from the collection of Barbara L. Gordon, the show presents more than 60 choice objects, including paintings, drawings, sculptures, furniture, painted chests and knickknacks made between 1800 and 1920. It was organized by Art Services International in Alexandria, Va., a nonprofit educational institution.



Drawn from the collection of Barbara L. Gordon, the show presents works made primarily in rural areas of New England, the Midwest and the South. The objects include these two cats (1850-1900), in gypsum and paint by an unidentified artist.
Ruth Fremson/The New York Times



The show includes many children's portraits. From left, "Portrait of a Girl" and "Portrait of a Boy" (both 1810-20), attributed to John Brewster Jr.; "James Mairs Salisbury" (circa 1835), attributed to Ammi Phillips; and "Portrait of Two Children," attributed to Sturtevant J. Hamblin (circa 1845).
Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Despite the diversity of its contents, something like Phillips's unpretentious, workmanlike concentration on the task at hand can be seen in one way or another throughout "A Shared Legacy." A striking example is "Still Life With Basket of Fruit" (1830-50), by an unidentified artist. The image is generic: Printed pictures of overflowing fruit baskets circulated widely in 19th-century America. In this painting, which might have been made by a trained sign painter, the forms of the woven basket and of the pears, peaches, grapes, berries and melons that fill it are rendered with vivid clarity.

"Steamboat 'Victoria' " (1859) offers a meticulously detailed image of a ship plying rolling waves. It was painted by James Bard, who, along with his brother John Bard, had a thriving business making paintings of steamboats and other ships based on measurements taken from actual boats.

Besides Phillips's boy in blue, there are numerous other portraits of children. Among the most soulful are two attributed to John Brewster Jr. from between 1810 and 1820. One is of a boy, and the other of a girl. In these magnetic, waist-length likenesses, the boy holds a red wallet in one stubby-fingered hand, and the girl a red rose. They gaze back at us with large, solemn and strangely sad eyes.

An ethereal miniature portrait attributed to Mrs. Moses B. Russell, "Child in Red" (1845-1850), pictures a girl of 2 or 3 in a red dress, seated outdoors on a green cushion. A red curtain is pulled back to the left; ivy grows up the edge of a stone archway to the right; and a fruit basket is on the grass in the foreground. Seen against a glowing, hazy sky, the child's head appears strangely luminous and nearly transparent, as if she were a ghost. A museum label notes that some of Russell's portraits were probably posthumous, which makes sense, considering the low survival rate for 19th-century children. This one certainly has a haunting, memorial mood.

In "The Peaceable Kingdom With the Leopard of Serenity" (1835-40), attributed to Edward Hicks, angelic children gambol in the midst of a tranquil gathering of big cats, a sheep, an ox, a wolf and other wild and domestic beasts. In the distance, Europeans and Indians gather amicably on the shore of a calm, light-struck lake.



Works from 1907-15 attributed to John Scholl: "The Wedding of the Turtle Doves," near left, has two smoothly carved birds perched on either side of a 37-inch-high tower assembled from all kinds of dollhouse-scale architectural elements. Next to it is "Snowflake Table."

Ruth Fremson/The New York Times



The show includes small, toylike, roughly whittled and painted sculptures of animals attributed to Wilhelm Schimmel, including, at bottom, "Poodle" (1875-1885), in pine, gesso and paint, from Cumberland County, Pa.

Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

While most works don't represent children, many seem imbued with a childlike spirit. Small, roughly whittled and painted sculptures of animals by Wilhelm Schimmel, including a lively four-inch-tall bright red squirrel gnawing a nut, look as if they were made for a toddler's toy box. So does an alarmingly lifelike, pony-size rabbit with big glass eyes from 1910 that once carried riders on a steam-powered carousel. It's thought to have been made by Salvatore Cernigliaro (1879-1974), a master wood carver for the Dentzel Carousel Company of Philadelphia.

Among the show's most imaginative works are sculptures attributed to John Scholl (1827-1916). "The Wedding of the Turtle Doves" has two smoothly carved white birds perched on either side of a 37-inch-high tower assembled from all kinds of dollhouse-scale architectural elements, topped by a complicated circular device like a wheel of fortune. A skilled house carpenter during his working life, Scholl began producing his assemblages when he was 80. He displayed his creations in the parlor of his home and invited people in to enjoy them.

It's fitting that the broader context evoked by the exhibition is that of family and domesticity. Except for the urbane, life-size sculptures of a cigar-smoking woman, an Indian, a goddess of liberty and a suspicious-looking dandy in a bowler hat, all made to advertise tobacco shops, almost everything on view would have been found originally in someone's home.

Familial tradition is rendered with inventive panache in pages taken from a [set of volumes](#) called the "Laing Family Record Book," produced between 1801 and 1820. The unidentified artist carefully documented the births and deaths of family members, mainly in red and black ink and watercolors. Each page has block letters and calligraphic script within intricately worked decorative borders further enhanced by birds, flowers and, on some pages, coffins. Like many other works in the exhibition, these drawings embody a paradox for modern viewers: They evoke a world and a way of life that modernity has eclipsed, and yet they feel as fresh and lively as anything you might desire in the art of today.



These basswood animals once carried riders on steam-powered carousels. The pony-size rabbit with big glass eyes, from 1910, is thought to have been made by Salvatore Cernigliaro, a master wood carver for the Dentzel Carousel Company of Philadelphia. The elephant, circa 1882, is attributed to the shop of Charles I.D. Looff in Brooklyn.

Ruth Fremson/The New York Times



The paintings include "The Peaceable Kingdom With the Leopard of Serenity" (1835-1840), center, attributed to Edward Hicks.

Ruth Fremson/The New York Times



"Gentleman With Top Hat," a wooden sculpture by an unidentified artist, circa 1830, and probably from New England, is among the three-dimensional works in the show, which runs through March 8 at the museum.

Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

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