



ELIZABETH AND IRWIN WARREN FOLK ART SYMPOSIUM

Objects of Inquiry: New Perspectives on American Folk Art

SUNDAY, MAY 22, 2021, 1:00-5:00 p.m. ET

Online; free with registration

ABSTRACTS

Objects of Dispute

Glenn Adamson, Ph.D., curator, writer, and historian

We live in uncommonly disputatious times. American political discourse is as polarized as it has ever been, to the extent that expressions of conflict—based on class, ideology, party, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, geography, and other forms of identity—are increasingly overwhelming other forms of public discourse. The sense of opposition is further exaggerated by new mass media and social technologies. Can folk art help? This may initially seem a strange idea. Whatever we call them—vernacular, artisan, craft, naive, visionary—the objects usually discussed under the heading of folk art are typically relegated to a marginal role in our culture and politics. But perhaps, by virtue of that very peripheral position, they may serve as a clarifying lens through which to look at American culture. It may even be that craft and folkways could be a political common ground, where those who otherwise find themselves opposed find equally common cause. In this talk, drawn in part from his recent book *Craft: An American History*, curator and author Glenn Adamson will consider these questions. He'll explore role that folk art studies may be able to play in an environment of heated debate and misinformation, and look closely at a few case studies: objects from the American past that can be related directly to contemporary political debates. He'll conclude with a question that might animate our discussions at the conference: if you were to choose an object from the past as a way of confronting the present, what would it be?

High Style Folk Art and New Deal Values: Quilts in the Index of American Design

Janneken Smucker, Ph.D., Professor of History at West Chester University

In the midst of the Great Depression, quilts were having a heyday, not only as part of the larger colonial revival, but because the economic conditions made quilts' symbolic heft—warm, comforting objects, creatively pieced together with repurposed fabrics—the right craft for the right moment. The federal government's New Deal administrators recognized this as well, and used quilts and quilting to support its relief and recovery efforts and promote community and perseverance amid adversity. Quilts too, were among the many objects the administrators of the Federal Art Project's Index of American Design (IAD) selected for inclusion in its planned portfolios featuring paintings rendered by out-of-work commercial artists, intended to serve as a resource for contemporary designers. Yet my examination of the IAD's datasheets and renderings for around 700 quilt related objects reveals that the majority of quilts identified for inclusion were far from humble folk art objects, and instead were high style bedcovers, mostly from the Northeast and mid-Atlantic. In contrast to New Deal programs that presented quilts as a living, thriving art—the Farm Security Administration photographs, the Federal Writers Project life histories and ex-slave narratives, and the WPA sewing rooms teaching women to quilt—the IAD presented quilts as a dead tradition practiced predominantly by privileged white colonial forebearers and pioneer women rather than one that was more popular than ever in the 1930s—as evidenced by circulating published patterns, extant quilts from this era, and recollections from the Depression.

Ghosts of a Whimsey's Woodyard

Joseph H. Larned, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Design History at Drexel University

What stories can absence tell? This paper takes as its subject the formal and material means by which a bottle whimsy's representation of a worker-less woodyard acknowledged the transiency, arduousness, and dangers of sawing wood circa the long Gilded Age. In doing so, my meditation promotes a study of folk art that attends to workers' lived experiences.

Stitching a Feminine Terrain: Authority, Property, and Home in American Schoolgirl Needlework

Mariah Gruner, Ph.D., Recentring Collections Curatorial Fellow at Historic New England

Schoolgirl samplers contain a multitude of voices. They record a young girl's stitches, but they also document the interests, anxieties, hopes, and resources of teachers, parents, and larger communities. By the turn of the nineteenth century, samplers were expectant objects. They were spaces for practice and anticipation, but they also promised to shape a young girl into someone who might attain the very future she practiced for. Carefully building up repeated stitches, young girls were meant to absorb and embody the images and text they formed. These projects were investments in girlhood, communal efforts turned towards shaping young women for prosperous futures.

What, then, did it mean for girls to shape themselves using architectural forms? Two samplers in the exhibit hint at this broad trend in schoolgirl needlework. Buildings and surrounding terrain became ubiquitous by the early years of the nineteenth century, exhibiting feminine visions of property at a time when girls had no expectation of

property-holding, “covered” by the laws of coverture. These objects provide a lens onto period debates about the content and value of girls’ education, the moralized meanings of architectural forms, and the boundaries of the “domestic sphere.” Young girls shaped themselves with outlines of meticulously rendered fanlights atop doorways and gates encircling lawns, but their stitches also provided a staging ground for burgeoning ideas about feminine control of space and property, white femininity and national expansion, and the relationship between the nation, the house, and the home.

More than Memory: New Perspectives on the Klaus Stopp Fraktur Collection

Trevor Brandt, Ph.D. Student in Art History at the University of Chicago

This talk offers new perspectives on German-American folk art by considering a selection of exceptional works from the Klaus Stopp fraktur collection at Chicago’s Newberry Library, examined alongside pieces from the American Folk Art Museum’s *Multitudes* exhibition. The Stopp collection, which contains over 1,350 examples of German-American printed and manuscript objects created between c. 1700 and 1900, has long been a critical source for scholarly understanding of German-American devotional art and domestic record-keeping. Yet the present talk considers its objects not as passive vessels for family memories, but rather as dynamic works displayed, held, and stored within the German-American household. As will be shown, such objects moved as much within the home as within the hands and hearts of their owners.

Sheldon Peck: Radical Folk Artist?

Yinshi Lerman-Tan, Ph.D., Bradford and Christine Mishler Associate Curator of American Art at the Huntington

In addition to being an itinerant folk painter and farmer, Sheldon Peck held politically progressive and even radical beliefs about racial equality and education. His home in Lombard, Illinois was a school and a stop on the Underground Railroad—and Peck himself a conductor. This paper asks how we might consider the visual qualities and subject matter in Peck’s folk portraiture in light of what is known about his status as a radical abolitionist. Can we sense this progressive spirit in Peck’s strange but captivating portraits of known and unknown sitters? In exploring this topic, I survey some research done by the still-extant Sheldon Peck Homestead about Peck’s involvement aiding freedom seekers. I consider how collections of American folk art might reconsider Peck’s paintings in terms of his abolitionist politics, and his connection to contemporary artists working today on legacies of the Underground Railroad.