

**Herbert W. Hemphill, Jr., *Folk Sculpture, U.S.A. Brooklyn, N.Y.:*  
The Brooklyn Museum, 1976, 76 pp., illus., \$8.25**

**Naney-Lou Patterson**

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“I Saw the Figure Five in Gold”, which the author describes in his chapter on “Painting the Machine”. He might have chosen, perhaps even more appropriately for the cover, one of John Marin’s skyscraper series. The one which “graced the cover” of the June, 1915 number of *291* (Figure 1) would have been delightful, especially as it is

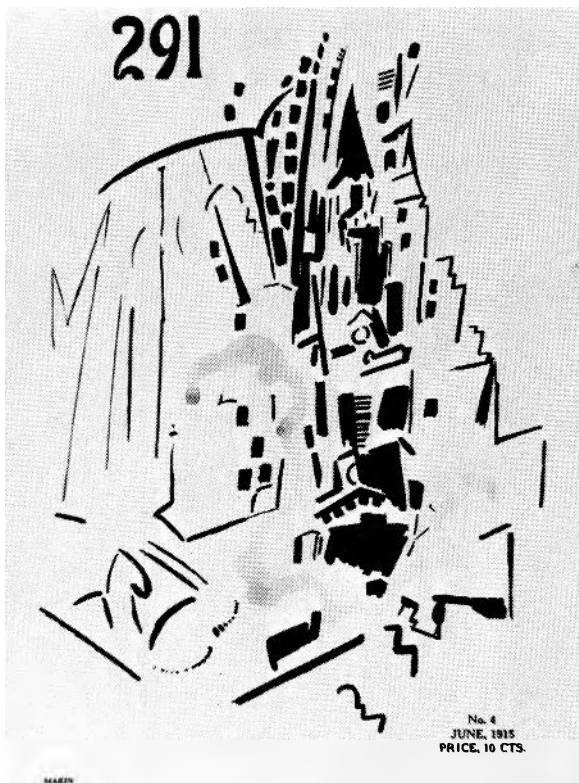


FIGURE 1. John Marin, cover of *291*, No. 4 (June, 1915). Courtesy of The Philadelphia Museum of Art; The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection Archives.

with that issue that Mr. Tashjian says the review “spiralled straight into Dada”. “Skyscraper Primitives” is one of the first works in the literature on the cultural milieu in America in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Since the undisputed centre of modern art has been in America for the past thirty years, it is imperative to search for its roots. Professor Tashjian has made a notable contribution to that search.

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Herbert W. HEMPHILL, Jr., *Folk Sculpture, U.S.A.*  
Brooklyn, N.Y.: The Brooklyn Museum, 1976,  
76 pp., illus., \$8.25.

In reviewing this volume, which is really an exhibition catalogue, it is necessary to address two aspects: the extremely significant essays which have been included, and the many illustrated works which comprise, for the reader, the exhibition. There are three internal essays, a foreword, an introduction, and a very useful bibliography. The book thus becomes a symposium which will launch the reader into a subject of strong contemporary interest, and for this reason would be uncommonly useful as resource material for a course on folk or popular art.

A genuinely important essay is “Folk Sculpture Without Folk”, by Daniel Robbins, Visiting Professor, History of Art, Dartmouth College. Robbins gives a brief historiography of folk art, and especially of naive art (which can occur when there are no “folk”). He sees Robert Goldwater’s *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1938) as having “brought intellectual order into an area that previously could only be described as chaotic”, (p. 12) and discusses the various tendencies of taste which have made folk art function as a kind of “found object” or play the role of lightning-rod for our dreams of a simpler society. He concludes, somewhat wistfully, that “among the many influences and relationships that have contributed to the formation of American folk art, we — collectors, dealers, curators, or historians — must add our own influence.” (p. 30)

Michael Kan, Curator of African, Oceanic, and New World Cultures at The Brooklyn Museum, in “American Folk Sculpture: Some Considerations of its Ethnic Heritage,” discusses Black and New Mexican Spanish ethnic styles as specialized New World developments rooted in African and Spanish traditions. Black forms include the effigy vessels of South Carolina, certain voodoo images like “Baron Samedi” smeared with chicken blood and found in New Orleans, and Afro-American staffs and walking sticks with their West African reptilian motifs, as well as profoundly sensitive folk works like the Black figures from Hamilton, Ohio. The superb *bultos* and *retablos* (sculptural and flat images) from the *santeros* of New Mexico and southern Colorado represent the flowering of an isolated culture with their hatted saints, numinous *virgencitas*, and the awesome images of skeletal Death with a bow and arrow, which were pulled in carts by penitents and flagellants.

Herbert W. Hemphill Jr., in his introduction to the catalogue which accompanied the 1976 exhibition, "Folk Sculpture, U.S.A.", at the Brooklyn Museum, states of the collection that "the attempt here is to emphasize primarily those pieces that would not appear in the *Index [of American Design]* and that have been ignored or misinterpreted for so long." The *Index* to which he refers was "a monumental compilation" of "all the extant good material" which was "sponsored by the federal government to record the handicrafts of pre-industrial America," published in 1950 (p. 8). Included in the *Index* were a host of splendid works, including carousel figures, cigar store figures, ship's figureheads, and similar forms which, though no one in the present book says it, have definite prototypes in Baroque style. They have a common reliance on a Neo-Classical quality, with their drapery and figural origins in ultimately Hellenistic conventions. Canadian works of a similar type may be found in the superb French Canadian sculptural tradition, or in the marine figureheads of Nova Scotia. Quite properly, such forms found a place in J. Russell Harper's pivotal exhibition and catalogue, *People's Art: Naive Art in Canada* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1974). The presence of influences from "high art" is perfectly appropriate for folk art, and some writers would almost make it a definition. "The word 'folk'... suggests the inclusion of peasant and rustic people who are not wholly independent of cities," Robert Redfield states in "The Folk Society," *The American Journal of Sociology* (January, 1947), and Helmuth Th. Bossert states that "A history of folk art should begin with the time of the neo-Renaissance... when the breach between town and country, between educated and uneducated people, became apparent." (*Peasant Art of Europe and Asia*; New York: Praeger, 1966).

What *has* been included in "Folk Sculpture, U.S.A."? Included are precisely those works which are least influenced by, or perhaps least capable of, a "formal" or "classical" style. They strongly resemble the objects in a splendid Canadian book, *Les Patenteux du Québec* by Louise de Grosbois, Raymonde Lamothe and Lise Nantel (Montréal: Parti Pris, 1974). (A "patenteur" is a "gadget-maker, one who likes to put things together, but nothing of earth-shaking importance," a French Canadian colleague tells me.) It must be admitted that there *are* some cigar store figures, and one breathtaking image, "The Black Slave" (which may have served as a trade sign for a New Orleans slave auction), that do have undeniable classical

form, if staring eyes. Perhaps the most ubiquitous trait of the human figures — there are animals too, but this is a predominately anthropomorphic show — is what Michael D. Hall refers to when he speaks of Edgar Tolson's work in the book's third essay, "A Sorting Process: The Artist as Collector": "I've seen dozens of them and they always have that frozen frontality that's so in-turned..." (p. 39) Rudolf Arnheim says in *Art and Visual Perception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969): "Every beginner in the art of sculpture finds that the cubic concept imposes itself upon his work. When he tries to abandon it in favor of the kind of roundness that was achieved during the Renaissance, he has to overcome the Egyptian in himself." (p. 211) Faces here are like masks, awesomely frontal, with staring eyes fixed straight ahead, a syndrome found in every first-year sculpture class.

The works in *Folk Sculpture, U.S.A.* are monumental expressions of the whittler's art; as such they are a masculine art. These sexual categories still operate at the vernacular level of our society; the artists whose names are listed in the catalogue are, without exception, males. In addition to the masterpieces already mentioned, the reader is referred to "The Buckeye Family" (c. 1925), by Joe Lee (d. 1941), with its strangely multi-racial demeanor; the sad-faced, endlessly peddling "Bicycle Boy" (c. 1922); the Kali-esque "Bathing Beauty" (1973) by Clarence Stringfield (b. 1903); and the delightful "Newsboy" (1889), a trade sign in which a lad eternally runs toward us with the *Pawtucket Record* held aloft.

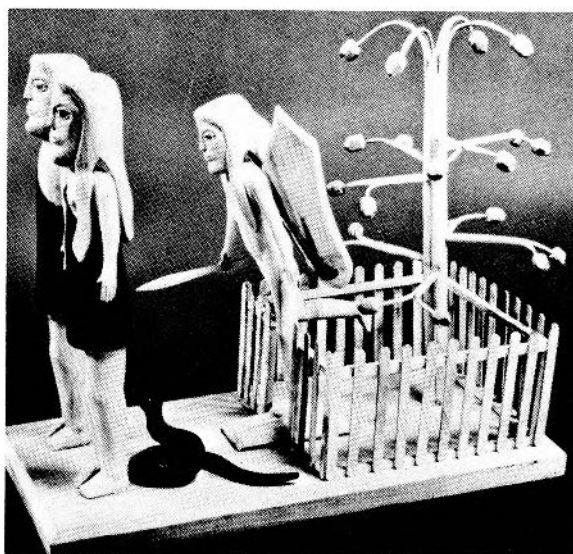


FIGURE 1. Edgar Toison (b. 1904) "Paradise Barred", 1969/70, Painted Wood, 15½", Collection: Michael and Julie Hall.

I have left till last a mention of the "Cain and Abel" series illustrated here (Figure 1) with "Paradise Barred" (1969/70), by Edgar Tolson (b. 1904). This work, which one writer calls an "anachronism," seems to me a very parable of an American culture which collects and exhibits these objects of art. The primal pair (Tolson thinks, untheologically, that the "original sin" was the charmingly priapic coupling of the two — he knows nothing of the Fall as a disobedience to God) stand in their new clothing, with the snake at their heels, outside the picket fence of Paradise, which is guarded by a sternly vigilant angel against re-entry. The lovely little tree still droops its forbidden apples of self-knowledge; that terrible knowledge is to come, for the rest of the series shows the killing of Abel by Cain and concludes with the stiffly standing image of Cain, in awful clothes-peg *angst*, his whittled stare gazing into the present we all occupy. Anachronistic? Innocent? Childlike? The

technique may be all these things, but the reality is one for adults. Maybe this is the quality that kept these works out of the beautiful *Index*, and makes them fit icons for contemplation today.

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## noted in brief

## en bref

Jeff DYKES, *Fifty Great Western Illustrators*. Flagstaff, Arizona, Northland Press, 1976. 458 pp., illus., \$35.00.

One of the more valuable and unique titles devoted to American art to appear during the bicentennial year is Jeff Dykes' bibliographic checklist. This hefty and handsomely-made volume emerges as the result of over thirty years collating of bibliographic material by an avid collector and bookseller of Americana. Mr. Dykes, professing the historical as well as artistic relevance of the illustrator's craft, has chosen fifty of his favorite artists, which include both well-known names such as Frederic Remington, Peter Hurd, Newell Convers Wyeth, and less remembered sketchers of the "old west". The only artist of major importance omitted is Charles Marion Russell, Mr. Dykes bowing to Frederic Renner and Karl Yost's bibliography published in 1971 by the University of Nebraska Press.

For each of his chosen artists, Mr. Dykes offers entries in three categories: 1) catalogues from art exhibitions and galleries; 2) books and pamphlets either fully or partially illustrated by the artist

(only first editions); 3) material about the artist and his work. Although in the second category fall many entries that may contain only one illustration, Mr. Dykes hastens to admit that his listings do not include material that may have appeared in magazines. Here the prerogatives of the bibliophile intrude on the desires of the researcher for bibliographic completeness. Nevertheless, while Mr. Dykes' list may thus not be definitive (there are 1478 entries for Remington), they provide, in many cases, a more thorough catalogue than previously existed, and, in the whole, a valuable tool for future research.

Each artist has been represented by at least one illustration (there are thirteen rather washed-out colour plates), and the quality of work ranges from the merely competent (Nick Eggenhofer, Robert Elwell, Joseph E. N. Dufault) to the inspired (Alfred Jacob Miller, Frank E. Schoonover, Frederic Remington). Mr. Dykes would have increased the high value of his book had he provided some condensed biographic information for each of his illustrators.

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