



Breaking ground

By Robert Young

A millennium overdue, the first ever exhibition of British folk art arrives at Tate Britain



In 1768, when the British Royal Academy of Arts was established, it emphatically distinguished the fine arts from crafts by exiling the latter, declaring that “no needlework, artificial flowers, cut-paper, shell-work or any such performances should be admitted.” By 1948 artworks from outside the mainstream still had not overcome this prejudice, prompting the designer, writer, and folk art enthusiast Enid Marx to note that “England is one of the few countries where folk art has not found a recognized place in any of our great national collections.” Six more decades passed with works generally categorized as “folk,” “naive,” “vernacular,” “self-taught,” “popular,” and “outsider” art still ignored by the British art establishment and not represented in any national institution.

But in 2009 Tate Britain, led by curator Martin Myrone, initiated a series of workshops entitled “Folk Art and the Art Museum” that have culminated in the Tate hosting *British Folk Art*, the first ever national exhibition of British folk art. The exhibition’s eponymous catalogue illustrates and discusses some fifty pieces and includes three well-considered essays by Myrone, co-curator Jeff McMillan, and assistant curator Ruth Kenny.

Fig. 1. Sun-in-splendor pub sign, English, eighteenth century. Painted wood; height 38 1/4, width 38 3/8, depth 3 1/8 inches. *Norfolk Museums Service, Norwich.*

Fig. 2. Tobacconist’s trade sign in the form of a Highlander, 1866–1900. Painted wood; height 29 7/8, width 9, depth 6 7/8 inches. *Museum of London.*

Fig. 3. Detail of Fig. 14.





Fig. 4. Butcher's shop diorama, English, c. 1850. Hand-carved and painted wood and various mediums in its original glazed box frame; height 8 ¼, width 11 ¼, depth 3 inches. Robert Young Antiques, London.

Hallelujah! Finally British folk art is to be recognized in a national institution and presented without explanation or theory, just simply for what it is

Myrone understands the complexities of the subject and takes a fresh approach, writing that, "re-instituting 'British Folk Art' in the context of the Tate, and the national collection of British Art, is less a matter of trying to fix a category than attempting to open it up as a source (we hope) of pleasure and provocation."

Myrone invited the contemporary artist and folk art enthusiast Jeff McMillan to work with him and together they established a few basic principles, all

somewhat alien to traditional museum conventions, as a framework for this groundbreaking exhibition. Myrone emphasizes their desire to explore "the modes of making (particularly where these appeared idiosyncratic and improvised)" and McMillan adds that they set out to show works that serve as a "reminder of the hand-made object, with its brilliant imperfections and anomalies." They hoped to achieve their goals by avoiding disputes about definitions and counter-definitions and by selecting, Myrone says, "objects (specific examples wherever we could) that had been collected, prized or written about as 'folk art.'" McMillan also suggests that "a generalization about folk art might be to say that it has its origin in tradition," and proposes that "what becomes interesting, then, is finding the most intriguing and original examples of these art forms."

Almost as significant is what the curators did *not* set out to do. Myrone says they have not "sought to represent these objects as symbols of a coherent 'native'

culture (regional or national)," nor do they want to "proclaim this as an encyclopedic project." McMillan observes that "many of these works represent a kind of 'condensation'; a thing boiled down to its essence" and confirms that "because the subject is vast and there is no absolute definition of folk art, we might best approach the exhibition as a proposition." Hallelujah! Finally British folk art is to be recognized in a national institution and presented without explanation or theory, just simply for what it is.

In order to put this show together the curators raided the dusty shelves and corners of Britain's re-



Figs. 5a, 5b. *Old Bright, the Postman and The Goose Woman* by George Smart (c. 1775–1845), c. 1840. Fabric collage on printed and hand-painted paper, each approximately 11 ¾ by 9 ½ inches. Robert Young Antiques.

Fig. 6. *The Tailor's Coverlet*, bedcover made by James Williams, Wrexham, 1842–1852. Inlaid patchwork, 92 ½ by 79 ¾ inches. St. Fagans National History Museum, Cardiff, Wales.

gional museums and a handful of private collections to assemble a highly personal selection. McMillan had considered subtitled the exhibition "The House that Jack Built" as this ties together two significant elements for him. The first being tradition, which he believes is a tangible thread that links works of folk art, and the second, resulting from a fortuitous viewing of a 1958 British Pathé film of the same name, which he came across shortly after starting work on the Tate project. The film was an insight into the work of obsessive DIY builder Jack Punter, who, in his middle sixties, created a remarkable environment of miniature houses, architectural fantasies, arches, and ponds in his home and garden in Bordon, Hampshire, in the 1950s. As McMillan explains, this Jack "wears many hats. He's not just Jack Punter who picks up a trowel one day and begins to create compulsively;" he is "also the fabled

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builder in the house of many stories,” referring to the traditional nursery rhyme and cumulative tale that begins, “This is the house that Jack built...”

So, while such a title would have been somewhat clumsily “folksy” in the context of a Tate exhibition, the thinking behind it reflects the journey of the curators, discovering one work as the result of another as they sourced material for the exhibition. This creative process results in an individual and curious collection that, in specialist terms underrepresents significant categories of recognized forms of British folk art, such as weathervanes, decoys (particularly wood pigeons, which are typically British), game boards, love tokens, and even the iconic British Butcher shop dioramas, or “shadowboxes” (see Fig. 4), among others, and includes only a small collection of naive paintings. On the other hand, relatively obscure works such as pin cushion valentines, novelty leather Toby jugs, “God-in-a-bottle” whimsies, woven straw work, decorated Welsh slate, “boody ware” (patchwork ceramic mosaics), and the derivative needlework pictures of Mary Linwood have all been given some prominence. Also surprising in a museum context is the inclusion of some works in fully restored and entirely repainted condition, including the majority of the ship figureheads.

And yet one could argue that by not following in the footsteps of the American model for the presentation of folk art, this first national exhibition manages to be essentially British in both style and content. I applaud the decision to select and curate it subjectively, to celebrate the chaotic variety of the abstract, the figurative, the incongruous, the personal, the public, the subtle, and the blatant. At the very least it is a welcome departure from presenting folk art as social commentary, addressing as it does the *art* rather than the *folk*. And, happily, the exhibition includes some important and virtually unknown pieces, including an exciting variety of British trade signs. As a category, these are exceptional for their individuality and inventiveness. Originally created for a largely illiterate society to advertise businesses and services, they were designed and made to attract attention. Included here are an arresting group of outsized three-dimensional objects—a padlock from a lock-



Fig. 7. Chimney sweep trade sign, English, possibly c. 1800. Wood and paint; height 40 1/4, width 15, depth 9 7/8 inches. Horniman Museum, London.

Fig. 8. *The Four Alls* by D.J. Williams, c. 1850. Oil on wood, 31 1/8 by 46 7/8 inches. Gwynedd Museum and Art Gallery, Bangor, Wales.

smith’s (Fig. 9), a kettle from a tea shop, a glove maker’s glove, an enormous leather boot from a cobbler’s, a fish from a fishmonger’s, a (now) one-armed statue of a chimney sweep (Fig. 7), a carved and painted sun-in-splendor pub sign (Fig. 1), and both a Blackamoor and a fully kilted Highlander tobaccoist’s figures (Fig. 2).

In grouping these signs together, their unique forms, scale, materials, age, colors, and sculptural qualities are enhanced by comparison and juxtaposition. Assistant curator Ruth Kenny observes that while there is a common visual language to such signs, “conformity did not render the individual makers entirely invisible; rather they distinguished

themselves by their ability to fashion and display signs of individual ornamentation within the system.” She goes on to observe that when sorting through the drawers and shelves of museum storerooms, “it is the tobacco-shop highlander with the cross-eyes, the sampler with the spelling mistake or the life-size chicken [created from pieces of bone by prisoners of war] among the usual bone boxes and ships, that exerts the strongest draw.” In effect it is the unusual, the primitive, and the imperfect that now commands our attention and excites our eye.

Such individuality is of course immediately apparent in “naive painting,” which has historically probably been the most widely published and familiar



form of British folk art. Myrone notes that in Britain “naïve paintings have been valued as immediate records of daily life and for their direct visual qualities, often seen as anticipating modernist formal experiments” (see Fig. 13). To underline this, he places a group of works by the Cornish fisherman painter Alfred Wallis (who was “discovered” by Ben Nicholson and Christopher Wood in 1928 and is acknowledged to have inspired aspects of the British modern art movement in the 1930s and 1940s), alongside other primitive paintings and two-dimensional painted signs from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. (It is interesting to note that at around the same time as Wallis was “discovered,” the Museum of Modern Art in New York hosted its groundbreaking exhibition *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750–1900* in 1932, some eighty years prior to this first national folk art show at Tate Britain.)

Naïve paintings tend to have an immediacy about them and share a bold disregard for observation, an engaging ignorance of perspective, irrespective of their age or origin (see Fig. 17). McMillan is especially enthusiastic about the combination of painted lettering—the written word and painted images—as seen in several works, including the static stylized figurative pub sign of the Four Alls (Fig. 8), and shares the opinion of the artist and designer A.J. Lewery, who wrote in his 1989 study *Signuritten Art* that the painting of lettering was a “skilful and underrated trade, one that often produces perfect examples of popular art, and creates work which can even be regarded as true folk art.”

Marine art inevitably forms a significant part of the folk art of this island nation. Ship figureheads and sailors’ valentines are well represented as are sailors’ patchwork and woolwork ship pictures (see Fig. 14).

Not included at all or underrepresented are other sailor works such as scrimshaw, rope work, shell work, carved nuts and gourds, cut paper, and ship models and ship portrait paintings. But, again, this was never intended to be a comprehensive survey.

There is an impressive collection of fabrics and needlework, including two remarkable individual works with uniquely personal narratives and timeless graphic appeal. The first, an enormous quilt embroidered by fiancées Herbert Bellamy and Charlotte Springall during their year-long engagement in 1890 and 1891 (Fig. 15), is a delightful single-faced textile scrapbook with images of interest to the couple: their initials, a favorite musical score, feast days and holidays, flowers and birds. It is a riot of shapes and colors put together in a seemingly random manner, but with evidence of certain embroidery skills and an innate understanding of composition. The second, the so-called *Tailor’s Coverlet*, created over a period of ten years between 1842 and 1852, is an intricate patchwork of 4,525 pieces of woolen cloth, scraps left over in James Williams’s tailor shop (Fig. 6). Framed by a geometric background, the center of the large coverlet has a variety of figurative designs, including recognizable landmarks interspersed with biblical scenes including Jonah and the Whale, Cain and Abel, Noah’s Ark, and Adam naming the animals. Again there is powerful iconography and a natural understanding of color and pattern that makes for a strong and curiously abstract work.

In addition to Wallis, the curators have also chosen to include works by two other recognized folk artists, George Smart (Figs. 5a, 5b) and Mary Linwood, both of whom worked with textiles. Smart, another tailor by trade, created fabric collage pictures using textile scraps from his workshop. His works

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Fig. 9. Padlock locksmith’s trade sign, c. 1850. Wood and paint; height 36, width 23 3/8, depth 4 3/8 inches. Museum of London.

Fig. 10. Horse vertebra representing a Methodist preacher, c. 1800. Bone and paint; height 4 3/4, width 5 1/4, depth 5 1/8 inches. Beamish, the Living Museum of the North, County Durham, Ireland.

Fig. 11. Cockerel, Norman Cross prisoner-of-war camp, near Peterborough, c. 1797–1814. Bone; height 9, width 4 3/4, depth 9 inches. Peterborough Museum.

Fig. 12. Rembrandt’s *Mother* attributed to Mary Linwood (1755–1845), Wool on linen, 41 by 35 inches. Leicester Arts and Museums Service.

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Fig. 13. *Country Fete and Country Procession*, c. 1790. Oil on panel, 21 3/4 by 28 inches each. Compton Verney, Warwickshire.

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are uniquely individual and immediately recognizable, generally depicting characters within stylized landscapes local to his "Repository" in Frant, outside Tunbridge Wells. While Smart had a limited range of subject matter, it is fascinating to see a collection hung together and note the variety of materials, colors, backgrounds, and details included in each work. There has been some criticism of Smart as having been cynically commercial, but I think his instinctive understanding of composition and color combined with his intuitive use of different materials make him an exceptional figure in the body of British folk art.

On the other hand, I question the inclusion of works by Mary Linwood, who though technically competent and much celebrated in her day for the remarkable detail and skill of her embroideries or "needle-paintings," strikes me as essentially derivative (see Fig. 12). In the 1770s Linwood exhibited her



embroidered copies of paintings by British artists such as Reynolds, Gainsborough, and Stubbs and also of the Old Masters including Rembrandt and Carracci, at the annual exhibitions of the Society of Artists in London. While much naive art is inspired, even informed by prints and historical imagery, an embroiderer like Linwood, who even copied her own portrait directly from a work by artist John Russell, falls somewhere short of the category I understand as inherently "folk," "vernacular," "naive," or "primitive."

There are a number of delightfully curious works here that have certainly never been shown on such a grand stage, works such as the painted horse vertebra in the form of a Methodist preacher, popularly known as a "Wesley Scarer" (Fig. 10). This primitive sculpture, fashioned from the vertebra of a heavy horse retains its organic form, but with artful use of paint the piece of bone is transformed on one side into the image of a robed preacher with his hands raised and on the reverse transformed with black paint into a primitive stylized silhouette of the devil. Two pieces display butcher's "cuts of meat," fashioned life size and painted in the form of a rolled beef joint and a T-bone steak, possibly made by the butcher himself and used for display purposes in the shop window when he was closed. There is also a pot-bellied harvest jug decorated with traditional sgraffito motifs, including delightfully stylized images of the sun in splendor and a cockerel, together with an incised inscription including the name John Prouse, date 1838, and a motto relating to harvest time. These are brave and diverse inclusions and a definite departure from anything traditionally exhibited at Tate Britain. As Myrone says, "The exhibition arises in (and takes advantage of) a moment of instability in museum culture."

After such a long history of being neglected and marginalized, a national exhibition of British folk art is long overdue, and while it cannot satisfy all who are interested in such works, I believe it benefits from the creative freedom and subjectivity of the curators. There is no deliberate narrative running through it, and it makes no claims or statements; it is simply curated as a visual "proposition," put together and installed in the heart of London with the stated hope of opening up British folk art as a source of pleasure and provocation. Better late than never.

British Folk Art is on view at Tate Britain until August 31. The accompanying catalogue is published by Tate Publishing.

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Fig. 14. *The Yacht Sunbeam in the Solent*, woolwork picture by Gunner Baldie, 1875–1880. Wool and silk on canvas, 15 by 18 ¾ inches. Compton Verney, Warwickshire.

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Fig. 15. Bellamy quilt by Herbert Bellamy and Charlotte Alice Springall, c. 1890–1891. Pieced and embroidered velvet backed with cotton, 8 feet 2 inches by 11 feet 5 inches. Norfolk Museums Service, Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery.

Fig. 16. *The Blue Ship* by Alfred Wallis (1855–1942), c. 1934. Oil paint on board on wood, 17 ¼ by 22 inches. Tate Britain, London.

Fig. 17. *A Bird's Eye view of the Market Street Wymondham and its vicinity*, c. 1850. Oil on panel, 17 ¾ by 23 ¾ inches. Robert Young Antiques.