

Created by tailor George Smart of Frant, near Tunbridge Wells, Kent, *Goose Woman* (this page) and *Old Bright the Postman* (opposite, left) are both collages of felt, leather and paper, dating from the mid 19th century



FOLK *Revival*

As the first major survey of British folk art is prepared to open at Tate Britain, Rebecca Wallersteiner explores its timeless appeal



IMAGES BEAMISH MUSEUM (DURHAM, UK); MARCUS LEITH & ANDREW DUNKLEY/TATE PHOTOGRAPHY; TUNBRIDGE WELLS MUSEUM & ART GALLERY



ABOVE The Drunkard's Path quilt pattern, circa 1870-80, uses a traditional combination of curves BELOW This 1896 sweetheart pin cushion's message is picked out in pins



Although folk art has been established in many countries for a long time, in Britain the genre remains elusive. Maybe this is because, as Martin Myrone, the curator behind Tate Britain's forthcoming show *British Folk Art*, explains, 'it is usually anonymously made, either for everyday use and ornament, or for one-off special occasions'. It is also, he says, an art form that is rarely subject to fashion and changing taste. 'The methods used to make things were handed down from generation to generation, so traditional patterns and designs persisted with little alteration'.

Visitors will be able to see this for themselves at the ground-breaking show. Featuring over 100 paintings, sculptures, textiles and objects spanning the 17th to 20th centuries, the exhibition is set to open our eyes to folk art. Many contemporary artists have got there before us. 'A number, including Grayson Perry and Jeff McMillan, have long admired the



ABOVE FROM LEFT Sun trade sign; a ship's figurehead RIGHT A Crimean quilt
BELOW A patchwork bedcover made by James Williams of Wrexham between 1842 and 1852
OPPOSITE A tobacconist's sign in the form of a Highlander, dating from 1866 to 1900

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genre and have helped redefine it within a contemporary framework,' Martin explains. In collaboration with Jeff, a Texas-born artist who has worked extensively with 'outsider' art, he has spent five years combing personal collections and regional museums around the country, including Kettle's Yard in Cambridge and Compton Verney in Warwickshire, choosing interesting pieces for the exhibition.

Rarely considered in the context of academic art history, folk art is often regarded as part of social history or folklore studies, but this show, through these objects, explores the threshold between art and artefact, and challenges perceptions of 'High Art'. It unites an extraordinary selection of items, from leather Toby jugs to naïve portraits. 'Part of folk art's attraction is a primal quality that appeals to the child in us. The purity, naivety and immediate vitality contained in its strong sculptural forms, its bold use of colour, textural surfaces and patination all give it enduring appeal,' explains Robert Young, whose London gallery specialises in the genre. 'These are essentially functional things, created in the main for modest homes and made with a lack of pretension and an instinctive approach by untrained, albeit often skilled, craftsmen, reflecting their imagination, spirit and ingenuity.'

Folk art includes such wide-ranging objects as carved decoy birds, brightly-coloured ships' figureheads and carousel horses, alongside household items: baskets, storage boxes and textiles; toys, naïve paintings, pottery and furniture. The exhibition will delve into the long-forgotten uses of original pieces of folk art, highlighting the visual and tactile qualities that make them so cherished and collectable.

Opening the show is a section featuring giant street signs that have enormous sculptural impact. 'One of the key exhibits is an oversized teapot that has a magical, if slightly disorientating, Alice-in-Wonderland quality; it is likely to have hung outside a tea shop,' Martin tells me. When communities were small and close-knit, street numbers and signs were superfluous. As towns grew, however, so did the need to identify tradesmen's premises in a way that would be accessible to all – and many, of course, were illiterate. The solution was a visual symbol and in 1625 King Charles I granted



A ROADSHOW FIND

'I am often asked on the *Roadshow* to value objects that don't fall into any particular category,' says Adam Schoon. 'One of the most fascinating of these was a charming miniature butcher's shop, a classic piece of folk art that would have been used to advertise the business. The detail was extraordinary, featuring hand-carved cuts of meat hanging up and even a butcher's block. The upstairs windows were hung with tiny net curtains and a hand-made chandelier helped date it to the 1850s. I valued it at between £7,000 and £10,000, which astonished the owners who had known little about it.'



IMAGES: BBC PRESS OFFICE; MUSEUM OF LONDON; ST FAGANS; NATIONAL HISTORY MUSEUM; TUNBRIDGE WELLS MUSEUM & ART GALLERY



LEFT This locksmith's street sign, appropriately enough, is in the form of a padlock
BELOW This jug, dating from around 1838, would have been made to celebrate the end of harvest

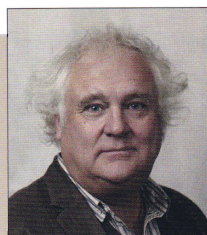
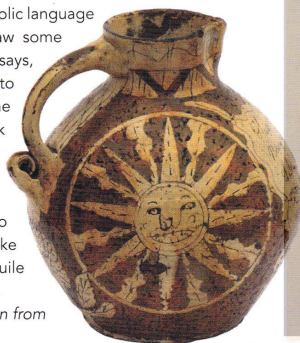
the citizens of London the right to erect signs to identify both private houses and businesses. Usually wooden, these signs were shaped and often hand-painted by skilled wood-carvers. Many took the form of huge outsize objects reflecting particular trades: a large boot for a shoemaker, a gilded fish for a fishmonger, a giant lock (left) or key for a locksmith and a feather plume for a stationer. For centuries, needlework, too, has given ordinary people an artistic outlet, whether in the form of personal samplers worked by girls at home, the elegant silk pictures that ladies of leisure painted with their needles, or as the colourful patchwork quilts, linens and clothes that were an everyday part of the working family's life. A key exhibit at the Tate show will be an 18th-century embroidered self-portrait by Mary Linwood, whose mother ran a school in Leicester. Unlike most folk artists, Linwood received great public acclaim and patronage in her lifetime.

Although needlecraft, knitting, spinning and weaving have traditionally been seen as 'women's work', men, too, have long expressed their creativity via the needle. Antiques dealer Robert Young has lent Tate Britain *Old Bright, the Postman*, a striking example of early collage from 1835 created by the entrepreneurial George Smart. A British tailor who advertised himself as 'an artist in cloth and velvet figures,' he sold his portraits of local characters to tourists. The small image in the show depicts a sturdy man in an overcoat leading a donkey; it is made of wool felt, leather and paper. Other gems include maritime embroidery sewn by fisherman John Craske, as well as intricately designed pincushions and a large quilt made by wounded soldiers during the Crimean war. Among the 20th-century works will be an imposing larger-than-life-size straw King Alfred. This extraordinary effigy, skillfully braided by master thatcher Jesse Maycock in 1960, was one of three created for the Commemoration Ball at Oxford in 1961. This leads to the question: why will there be so little 20th century folk art in the show?

'This is because we have chosen objects that have a "collecting history",' Martin explains, 'pieces which have been preserved and shown in the past as folk art'. One of the most touching historical folk art traditions must be the giving of love-tokens in rural farming communities. A young man who perhaps found it difficult to put his feelings into words would either make, or commission a craftsman to create, a love token to present to the young woman he desired, as a prelude to courtship. These were often decorated with initials, dates, hearts, rings and joined hands – the symbolic language of love. As *Roadshow* expert Adam Schoon, who saw some beautiful examples recently at the Gregynog show says, 'in Wales, a love spoon, or *llwyau caru*, would be given to a girl by her admirer and, in keeping with tradition, the young man is likely to have received a walking stick in return. Unsurprisingly, given their romantic history and high level of craftsmanship, love spoons are very popular with collectors today.'

It's just this sort of imaginative item that continues to hold such appeal, and anyone who appreciates work like this, and the history behind it, will find plenty to beguile and intrigue them at this much-anticipated show. ■

Catch British Folk Art at Tate Britain, Millbank, London from 10 June until 7 September; 020 7887 8888; tate.org.uk



THINKING OF COLLECTING?
 Dealer Robert Young's top tips if you're hunting for the best in folk art

'The UK market for folk art is growing because it looks equally good in both modern and traditional interiors. Antique weather vanes and hunting decoys are particularly collectable. An "Indian Chief" weather vane was bought at a Sotheby's auction by American folk art collector Jerry Lauren (brother of Ralph Lauren), for \$5.8 million (£3.4 million today) in 2006 – the highest price paid at auction for a weather vane.'

FINDING THE REAL THING
 The best decoy birds and trade signs are hugely collectable, selling for thousands of pounds. Quality, patina, freshness of spirit and originality are important. Paintwork should be historic and untouched. The slightly raw quality of folk art appeals to people's creative side. Look for original objects with spontaneity and soul. Fakes tend to be rough and clumsy in execution and are decorated with modern paints. Remember that genuine works were generally well made, which is why they survive.'

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR
 If you are thinking of buying a piece of carved and painted wood, check for paint in the cracks and covering worm holes, a giveaway sign of later application. Does the object feel naturally weathered? Dry, faded and crusty paint, as well as movement and shrinkage to the timber are all good signs.'

IMAGES: MUSEUM OF ENGLISH RURAL LIFE, UNIVERSITY OF READING; MUSEUM OF LONDON; ROBERT YOUNG

