



## Remembering art's folk heroes

THE TATE GIVES BRITISH FOLK ART ITS ACADEMIC BREAK, WRITES ANNA BRADY

### SO WHAT DOES THE TERM BRITISH FOLK ART MEAN TO YOU?

For too many of us, perhaps, it still conjures up images of corn dollies and livestock portraits in the dusty corners of 'how we used to live' museums.

While America has proudly cherished its folk art heritage, in the UK folk art has lingered in the shadow of fine art – the stuff of social rather than art history. As a result it has not been afforded a large survey exhibition at a major cultural institution in this country.

But helping to redress the balance is *British Folk Art: The House that Jack Built*, Tate Britain's main summer show running from June 10 to August 31. The display includes nearly 200 paintings, sculptures, textiles and objects from across the country, spanning folk art's myriad incarnations from the 17th to the mid 20th centuries.

Such is the breadth of the subject, the question of "what is folk art?" is almost impossible to answer exhaustively.

As the London folk art dealer Robert Young says: "There's no chronology, no formal literature, no established measures of quality, barely any makers' names. You can't cross refer or contextualise. Its appeal and worth are entirely subjective. It is very hard to put into words, which makes it a



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difficult subject for curators and academics to discuss."

A folk art dealer and committed champion of the subject for the past 30 years, it's no surprise that Robert feels the Tate exhibition is long overdue. "It is wonderful that the Tate should feel that the subject warrants a major exhibition. Just think back through our professional history, those fraught early years convincing the sceptical that these things had cultural and artistic merit and deserved to have a

place in the overall art historical narrative." He has been involved in the evolution of this show since Tate's *Folk Art and the Art Museum* seminar series in 2010.

Tasked with curating the exhibition are Tate Britain curator Martin Myrone, assistant curator Ruth Kenny and the artist Jeff McMillan.

So how would Martin Myrone describe folk art to the uninitiated? "Everyone has their own idea of what folk art means – but the common ground would be that it's

Above: *The Four Alls* by D.J. Williams, on loan from Gwynedd Museum and Art Gallery to the Tate Britain's summer exhibition *British Folk Art: The House that Jack Built*.

Right: a patchwork bedcover made by James Williams, Wrexham 1842-52, on loan from St Fagans: National History Museum.

Left: a heart pin cushion by an unknown maker, on loan from the Beamish Museum in Durham.

created by people without an academic art education, working outside of the mainstream art world."

Martin has had a personal interest in the subject for some years, sparked by visiting collections across the country where he has come across "all sorts of material which falls outside the understanding of conventional art history but which might be considered folk art".

He explains that some sort of folk art show has been on the cards for many

years – Tate held single-room displays in 2005 and 2009, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded a research network in 2010 which helped with thrashing out some of the theoretical difficulties in tackling the subject.

But still, Martin says: "We've only really been able to scratch the surface – there are some great, but really specialised studies we can draw on (on figureheads, or French prisoner-of-war art) and our colleagues around the country have been a great

help too. But there is clearly much more that can be found out about many of the objects and genres we're representing in the show. It feels like fresh, largely unexplored territory."

Why does he think it has taken so long for folk art to be recognised with a major exhibition in the UK? "This is a fascinating and important question – and not at all easy to answer. When the idea of folk art

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TATE BRITAIN CURATOR MARTIN MYRONE

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first took shape in the late 19th century it was strongly associated with ‘peasant’ cultures – and the assumption has always been that Britain lacked a peasant culture because of the Industrial Revolution.

“An alternative idea of folk art, centred on the idea of individual expression, took shape in America in the early 20th century, but this remained pretty marginal in the UK. There hasn’t been the state/ institutional framework or – with a few exceptions – the individual collectors to push an idea of folk art as there have been in other countries.”

Does he think folk art has traditionally been looked down upon by some quarters of the art world? “Paradoxically, yes. One of the reassuring myths about British art is that it’s down to earth, commonsensical, humorous – that’s why Hogarth is seen as the father of British art, and why the more severe sorts of Modernism have been seen as a bit alien to British culture.

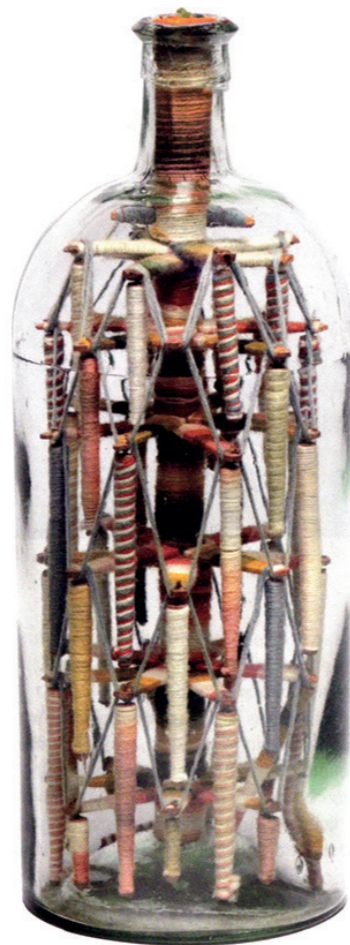
“At the same time there’s traditionally been a sense of insecurity, as if British

artists never quite match up to their more academic European counterparts. British art history has had quite a narrow focus on a canon of major painters, with a lot staked on the ‘big names’ of Hogarth, Gainsborough, Turner, Constable and so on, and this has meant that the wider material culture – including what can be termed folk art – has been overlooked.”

The Tate has plumped for a diverse, sometimes contrasting, overview of the subject, encompassing ships’ figureheads, a pin cushion made by wounded soldiers during the Crimean War, a watchmaker’s shop sign in the form of an over-sized pocket watch and a pair of giant shoes.

Martin says the involvement of the artist Jeff McMillan has been really important in trying to organise the sprawling umbrella term of folk art into a coherent, manageable exhibition. Jeff has, he says, “looked at the material with fresh eyes and isn’t caught up too much with the problems around definition, or the political baggage that comes with the term folk art in Britain”.

It’s telling that the objects have been



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sourced largely from social history, rural life or local history collections rather than ‘art’ collections. “There are some great, and well-documented collections (Beamish, St Fagans, the Museum of English Rural Life for instance), but often we’ve had to rely on visiting the stores and exploring with an open mind,” says Martin.

While most folk art is anonymous, the work of a few well-known makers and artists is recognised in the show.

They include a larger than life-size thatched figure of King Alfred by master tailor Jesse Maycock, from 1960, cut-felt collage pictures by George Smart the tailor of Frant, embroideries by Mary Linwood, paintings by Cornish fisherman and painter Alfred Wallis, and a maritime embroidery by the Norfolk fisherman

John Craske (1881-1943), who turned to painting and embroidery after a brain abscess left him virtually housebound.

And the curator’s personal favourite exhibit? A pair of leather Toby jugs, from Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery: “They are extraordinarily odd and thought-provoking. On the one hand the Toby jug is a cliché of conventional Englishness, yet these leather jugs look alien, like ‘ethnographic’ curiosities. They are dark and old-looking, very rustic and ‘authentic’, but are almost certainly fakes, created sometime around 1900.”

The exhibition *British Folk Art: The House that Jack Built*, will move from Tate Britain to Compton Verney, Warwickshire, from September 27 to December 14.

For tickets and more information see [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)

**Above:** on loan to Tate Britain’s summer exhibition *British Folk Art: The House that Jack Built* is *Goose Woman* by George Smart, c.1840, a cut-felt collage picture from the Tunbridge Wells Museum and Art Gallery.

**Left:** *God in a Bottle* by an unknown maker, on loan from the Beamish Museum, Durham.

**Top left:** from the Tate’s own collection, *The Blue Ship* c.1934 by Alfred Wallis, oil paint on board on wood.