

Naïve charm

As a rare collection of British naïve paintings goes on show at London's Olympia, we uncover the beguiling qualities of this under-appreciated genre

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Gargantuan prize porkers, painstakingly painted homesteads showing every cabbage in the vegetable plot, or horses and carriages – these are the subjects typical of this country's naïve art. 'Many of the works are about status,' says Robert Young, folk art dealer and co-curator of a forthcoming exhibition on the subject at the Winter Fine Art and Antiques Fair at Olympia. 'The growing merchant classes of the 18th and 19th centuries commissioned people – be they housepainters, engravers or tavern sign painters – to capture what they held dear.'

The painters' lack of formal training means the results are unconventional. The works are not based on careful observation, but rather on the idea of a scene and so the compositions are simplistic, the proportions exaggerated and the perspectives skewed. And yet, rather than diminishing the work, this lends it a direct, accessible charm – the bold, stylised motifs provide a powerful, immediate snapshot of everyday life at the time, in a

way no contemporary Reynolds or Gainsborough ever could. 'In effect, this is English tribal art,' says Robert. 'It has such purity. In its best incarnations, naïve art is totally unaffected and unpretentious. It's about love or pride, a way of saying: "this is what my wife or mother did; this is how we lived!"'

In an agrarian economy, nothing shouts kudos like prize-winning breeding stock. Fuelled by the rise in agricultural shows, animal portraits (complete with enormous testicles or udders fit to burst) were big business and occupy a large part of the naïve art market today. Some works, such as those of disabled painter John Vine, whose fingers grew directly out of his shoulders, have great merit, but by the mid-19th century, these paintings were in effect a provincial commercial

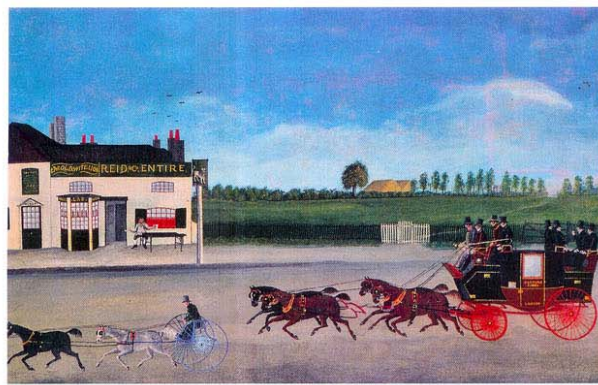
art and many were repetitive and formulaic.

Much more interesting are the genuinely unique works that capture the true spirit of naïve art – the untrained painters produced as a present or a private, one-off commission; the pieces that seem to celebrate the humdrum or the everyday – and it is on these that the Olympia exhibition focuses.

Among the 45 works loaned from a single, private collection, *The 150 Mile Race...* (see opposite) stands out for its almost comic book execution. Telling the tale of a race between one Mr Burke and his trotting ponies and *The Bedford Times* stagecoach from Bedford to London and back, it shows Burke in the lead. Though he did indeed win the outward leg, on the return he was arrested for whipping his horses. 'It's just like the local paper,' laughs Robert. 'Did Burke commission it to prove that he

Below: This hog, captured in profile in the 19th century, was one of the heaviest ever bred; the heaviest ever bred: Joseph Lawton's Midland Plum Pudding Pig. Opposite page clockwise from top: *The 150 Mile Race*, 1843, showing Mr Burke in a tandem cart; *Still Life with Mushrooms*, Bacon, Cheese and a Tankard of Beer, the tableware is thought to date from the 1840s; *A View of Groombridge Place*, East Sussex, c1754-60, presents a new perspective on life at that time.

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Where to see
 • **Simply British: A Private Collection of Naïve English Paintings** is at the Winter Fine Art and Antiques Fair, Olympia, London W14 from 12th-18th November. Call 0871 231 9218 or visit olympia-antiques.com
 • **Compton Verney**, a Grade I listed Robert Adam mansion in Warwickshire, houses the largest collection of British Folk Art in the UK. 01926 645500; comptonverney.org.uk

What to read
 • **Farm Animal Portraits** by Elspeth Moncrieff, Stephen Joseph and Iona Joseph (Antique Collectors' Club).
 • **British Folk Art** by James Ayres (Barrie & Jenkins Ltd)
 • **Folk Art** by Robert Young (Mitchell Beazley)
 All are out of print but available online or from antiquarian booksellers.

Where to buy
 • **Robert Young Antiques**, 88 Baiterslea Bridge Rd, London SW11. 020 7228 7847; robertyoungantiques.com. Specialists in fine British and European country furniture and folk art.
 • Paintings could crop up at any auction house or fair. They can be found in various **Christie's** sales; the next **Spring Art** sale is on 7 November at South Kensington. 020 7930 6074; christies.com.

was ahead at one point? One can't help but wonder.'

By contrast, *A View of Groombridge Place...* (above) is entirely un-selfconscious in its borrowing of elements from embroidery – the only visual art many people would have had access to at the time. 'The birds are almost exactly the same as those in needlework pictures of the same period,' says Robert, but despite this, the composition is entirely original.'

Another painting, *The Red House*, illustrates a different aspect common to much naïve art. 'It has a curious charm and immediacy. You can read it from a distance, and yet when you look up close there's an obsessive, worked-at quality – you can almost feel the artist holding his breath while he painted to get every detail right,' says Robert.

This is also true of *Still Life with Mushrooms...*, but it raises another question – why paint such an innocuous scene at all? 'This is a masterful painting of a very humble subject,' says Robert. 'It's a direct echo of mainstream still life, where people painted wonderful wine glasses and

feasts. What's important is that someone with no artistic training, and with only limited materials – we know that butter was used for the red colour – felt moved to record this scene, and that it has survived.'

The fact of survival is important. 'Because the value of these genuine untrained works was never perceived artistically, they had no financial worth to speak of. Therefore, as soon as they lost their immediate emotional attachment, they tended to be discarded,' says Robert. As a result, they are comparatively scarce. Prices start at £500-£600 for an average animal painting, though they're more typically £800-£1,200. For a good quality 1850s oil painting expect to pay £2,000-£4,000 at auction, rising to £8,000-£10,000 or more for the best.

Keen collectors will be pleased to hear, however, that this is a field in which great finds can still be made. 'It's definitely worth checking out your granny's attic,' says Robert. 'These works are hugely under-appreciated and you could find one just about anywhere.'