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At the Spiritual Grassroots: An Analysis of Visionary Art & Artists

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Taft,

Ann C.

1986

"AT THE SPIRITUAL GRASSROOTS":
AN ANALYSIS OF VISIONARY ART AND ARTISTS

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Modern Languages and
Intercultural Studies, Programs in Folk Studies
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by

Ann C. Taft

November 1986

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"AT THE SPIRITUAL GRASSROOTS":
AN ANALYSIS OF VISIONARY ART AND ARTISTS

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"AT THE SPIRITUAL GRASSROOTS":
AN ANALYSIS OF VISIONARY ART AND ARTISTS

Ann C. Taft

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In this thesis I focus on an art form alternately described as "naive," "visionary," "environmental," "singular," "individual," or "grassroots." Not easily placed within established academic or popular art categories, such art usually lands by default in the folk art pile and is quickly cast to the peripheries of that genre. In this thesis, I am not concerned with inventing another label for these artists and their work. Instead, I explore the possibility that visionary art may be a separate genre, but one to which folklore analysis may usefully be brought to bear.

Chapter One is a historical and bibliographical analysis of visionary art. Beginning with an overview of the literature on the subject, I review the development of the definitional debate in the United States as well as in Europe and trace the gradual evolution of this art form into a loosely separate category.

Chapter Two consists of an analysis of visionary art. I construct a "behaviorist" model which draws not only upon the usual criteria of building styles or materials used but also examines such subjects as the artist's motivations, personal visions, life history and community role.

In Chapter Three I test this model using the work of Valenty Zaharek, an Arizona woodcarver and ceramicist. Zaharek's previously undocumented work, "Pecos West," is a three-dimensional carved depiction of Western scenes. It is aesthetically magnificent and falls along the borders of a variety of art forms--folk, visionary, popular.

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY OF THE STUDY OF VISIONARY ART

Introduction

The focus of this thesis is on an art form that I call "visionary." I have chosen this term because many of the artists that I refer to in the following pages exhibit a strong dedication to a highly personal artistic vision. Through the last five decades or so it has also been alternately described as brut, naive, environmental, outsider, isolate, grassroots, idiosyncratic, and sometimes folk art. Visionary art works are handmade creations fashioned by individuals who generally work outside the mainstream of art and often along the peripheries of society. The artists are often advanced in age, 50 or older, when they begin their creative output. The artworks in question are mostly made from found and discarded objects--bottles, broken pieces of ceramic, dolls, bottle caps, and the like--and usually take the form of entire sculptured environments. They are generally monumental in both intent and scale. As its varied nomenclature implies, this art phenomenon has

puzzled and fascinated generations of art scholars, collectors, historians, folklorists, and the general public, who are increasingly familiar with its existence.*

In this thesis, I explore the relevant issues pertaining to visionary art by examining the history of the scholarship; proposing a model which highlights the personal and aesthetic similarities among visionary artists; and, finally, using this model and one artists' work as a case study to ask questions about folk art and the boundaries thereof. When considering commonalities among visionary works one must go beyond traditional artistic criteria and consider such matters as creative intentions, experience, and life patterns among the makers. In sum, this thesis de-emphasizes the stylistic, categorical, and artistic perspectives on visionary art, pursuing instead a behavioral approach based heavily on interpretation of human behavior and psychology. There are expressive similarities that unite visionary artists, for instance, the use of bottles in construction or the integration of memorabilia into an environment. But perhaps even more striking are the mental impulses shared by its makers.

*

Broad public awareness of visionary art is partly due to the prominent display of James Hampton's Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millenium General Assembly at the Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Several scholars have influenced my approach to visionary art. In 1980, Kenneth Ames wrote a critical essay in Perspectives on American Folk Art entitled "Folk Art: The Challenge and The Promise." He questions the method of inquiry within folk art studies, claiming that researchers too often take a "centripetal" approach, meaning that they focus too narrowly on the artist or his work, to the exclusion of historical and contextual information. Ames suggests that a more appropriate technique would be for researchers to adopt a "centrifugal" approach "characterized by questions which move outward from small issues to larger, more encompassing and more fundamental concerns." A centrifugal approach to visionary artists is particularly useful because it allows the investigator to consider questions about human nature, the therapeutic role of artistic activity--particularly among older individuals--and universal human impulses.

I have also been influenced by Michael Owen Jones' works dealing with human behavior, particularly The Hand Made Object and Its Maker and his essay "L.A. Add-ons and Re-dos: Renovation in Folk Art and Architectural Design" in Perspectives on American Folk Art. Jones eschews traditional concepts of art, folk, and culture in favor of looking at human behavior and the motivations behind what people make and do. The individual and the event

are of primary interest to the behavioralist; how and why certain kinds of behavior are exhibited and the motives and rewards inherent in such behavior supersede questions of origin or function. A behavioral analysis of visionary artists is particularly appropriate because it focuses so keenly on the individual and the context in which his art is created.

Other perspectives that have been useful to me include the concepts of adhocism, recycling behavior, and theories on the psychology of art. By adopting a model based on human behavior (coupled with a centrifugal approach) rather than functional or other objective aesthetic criteria, I hope to explicate what Simon Bronner calls "the diversity of human processes, identities, and expression"² while at the same time accounting for similarities in artistic behavior.

Folk Art and Visionary Art

Before discussing in greater detail the characteristics of visionary art, I would first like to analyze its relevance and relation to folk art. In recent years, folk art has often served as a reference point for the study of other types of non-academic art. Because visionary art does not easily fit into the academic or popular art realms, it often lands by

default in the folk art pile and is quickly cast to the peripheries of that genre. This somewhat random categorization has caused contentious debate among folklorists and others.

Why do so many observers impulsively place visionary art in the folk art category? Certainly, the Watts Tower (which was hailed by The Eleventh International Assembly of Art Historians as "the paramount achievement of folk art in the United States"³) or Tressa Prisbrey's Bottle Village are not examples of American folk art in the traditional sense, because they conform to none of the standard criteria developed by folklorists over the past several decades: there are no direct precedents for visionary art, the creations are not representative of a longstanding art form which has been handed down through several generations of artists, nor are the artists' skills learned in the communal manner that uniquely characterizes folk art. Several reasons, many of them misconceived, may explain why visionary art is often grouped with folk art: because these creations are "handmade," because they are obviously not the work of trained artists, because they seem to spring from individuals outside the mainstream of society, simply because they have a "folk quality" about them.

The interpretive methods of folklore can be very useful in an analysis of nontraditional art forms of all

sorts. However, in current folklore usage the term "folk art" describes a specific and relatively narrow category of artistic undertaking. Overly broad--even promiscuous--descriptions of what folk art is have often become a source of frustration for folklorists.

Just the same, the definitional debates raging at the borders of folk art play a useful--perhaps indispensable--role in that they clarify our thinking about art's relation to its makers and to its social context. By forcing folklorists to sharpen their definitions, to sift and sort and appraise, these debates on the margin tell us not only what is not folk art, but they also suggest more clearly what is.

I believe that folklorists are uniquely qualified to study visionary artists. In the most practical sense, folklorists are specially trained in documenting people's lives and work, giving them an advantage over most other art scholars. By studying visionary artists, folklorists can gain a fuller picture of some of the dynamics of traditional and rural communities--as well as urban communities--including the impulse to idiosyncratic, non-traditional forms of expression. After all, not all art produced among folk groups is folk art.

Visionary Art: A Definition

Most people are familiar with one or more of the

many visionary art works that exist in the United States. Many at least recognize Simon Rodia's Watts Towers, and some may have had contact with one or more additional works in their community or in their travels. It is particularly intriguing how lay audiences, without any prompting, link these seemingly dissimilar art works together.

Recently, I was listening to a local radio talk show when a caller began discussing some cars in Washington, D.C. that had been decorated by a man who calls himself "Mr. Money." The caller finished the discussion by stating, "these cars are akin to the altar pieces that are in the National Museum of American Art." Not needing any further hints, I knew immediately that he was referring to James Hampton's Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millenium General Assembly, an altar-like construction consisting of pulpits, shrines, lecterns, and wall tablets covered with silver and gold foil. In what way are these works akin? One, the Throne, was created in seclusion, under intense religious inspiration, was made with old furniture, light bulbs, cardboard, and aluminum and gold foil, and was immobile. The car, on the other hand, was a functional object decorated for public display, was worldly, not religious, was created with a wide variety of objects, and was mobile. The only obvious connection was that both of the

creators were black males with strong, unconventional artistic visions, who lived in Washington, D.C. Despite their important differences, these works, as the anonymous caller understood, were created by kindred⁴ spirits.

Art activist Seymour Rosen and his cohorts at SPACES (Saving and Preserving Art and Cultural Environments), an organization in Southern California whose goal is to document and protect visionary artistic creations, have compiled a useful set of characteristics common to what they refer to as "folk art environments." They write:

Folk art environments break new ground in the art world, and do not conform in materials, form or approach to the more traditional definitions of painting, architecture or sculpture.

Folk art environments are handmade personal spaces, generally with a component of accumulated objects . . . not traditionally considered as materials for the production of art.

These spaces are almost always associated with the creator's home or business and have developed organically without formal plans. They are produced by people who have not formerly been thought of as artists and have generally not considered themselves to be artists.

The sites tend to be immobile, monumental - either in amount of components or in scale - and are almost always full-blown inventions of their makers.

Most sites in this country have been developed by people who are in middle to old age, [live] in isolate areas, and [their art] represents a life's work.⁵

Although I prefer not to use SPACES' term "folk art

environments" for reasons I have explained previously, I believe this description is generally accurate. Still, it is difficult to sum up in just a few words the vigor and ingenuity that characterizes visionary art. No one artist completely fits the description above nor is this definition fully inclusive of the tremendous range of works that could be considered visionary. I would like to expand on this definition.

Probably the single most important characteristic of visionary artists--which is implied but not stated in the definition above--is the artist's dedication to a fantastic personal vision. Often, their vision is religiously inspired. The best examples of these kinds of works are James Hampton's Throne, mentioned earlier, and S. P. Dinsmoor's Garden of Eden in Lucas, Kansas. I would also argue that not all environments "have developed organically without formal plans." Many visionary artists do seem to have specific plans for their environments which may evolve from dreams, religious experiences, or simply an active imagination--a point to which I will return in Chapter Two. Another factor which is not included in the above definition, but which I have found to be generally true, is that many visionary artists are more interested in the process of creating art than in the final product. They continually transform their art by adding to it, and appear to

rejoice in the process of gathering materials and creating as a means rather than an end. I will elaborate on this theme in the following chapter.

Historical Antecedents: Europe

In order to shed some light on the contemporary study of visionary art, I would like to turn to the history of the study of this art form. Some of the first collecting efforts and scholarship related to visionary art came out of France in the 1940s. In 1945, Jean Dubuffet, the French artist, began collecting art largely from psychiatric institutes, old folks' homes, and prisons. He called this Art Brut (translated as "raw art"), and it was later described by Michel Thevoz, Dubuffet's successor at the Compagnie de l'Art Brut--where the collection is currently housed--as being characterized by "personal inventiveness and freedom from cultural norms."⁶ Dubuffet and his followers did not perceive Art Brut as a genre or school of art. Art Brut, they claimed, defied easy categorization and ought to be conceived, not as an established niche in the art world, but rather as "directions, aspirations, tendencies."⁷ In other words, Art Brut "is the name given to what cannot be bound by a definition. It is an upsurge of singularities and intensities of unknown origin."⁸ Dubuffet once spoke of Art Brut as follows:

We mean by this the works executed by people untouched by artistic culture, works in which imitation--contrary to what occurs among intellectuals--has little or no part, so that their makers derive everything (subjects, choice of materials used, means of transposition, rhythms, ways of patterning, etc.) from their own resources and not from the conventions of classic art or the art that happens to be fashionable. Here we find art at its purest and crudest; we see it being wholly reinvented at every stage of the operation by its maker, acting entirely on his own. This, then, is art springing solely from its maker's knack of invention and not, as always in cultural art, from his power of aping others or changing like a chameleon.⁹

According to Dubuffet, brut artists were nonconformists, highly creative, and somewhat pathological--three characteristics which he viewed as closely linked. Art Brut was seen by critics as the most exaggerated form of an art expression which also included works variously categorized as fringe art, marginal art, grassroots art, the singulars of art, outsider art, art extraordinary, and other works "whose imperviousness to culture [was] not so extreme."¹⁰

Like Holger Cahill and others who began collecting folk art in the United States in the 1930s, Dubuffet and his cohorts collected and wrote about Art Brut from an artistically elite perspective. The individual artists, along with their backgrounds and motivations, were of secondary importance to the aesthetic impact of the work of art:

The work should be envisaged in its productive effects rather than its causes . . . an art work deserves its name . . . only to the extent that it stands on its own and cannot be reduced to the motivations that fathered it.¹¹

Many years later in England, Roger Cardinal, in his work Outsider Art, expanded upon Dubuffet's research. Unsatisfied with the term Art Brut, Cardinal coined the phrase "Outsider Art" to describe what he referred to as a "primordial artistic expression, the primitive, indeed the savage qualities that make for art that is not subservient to the cultural norm."¹² Like Art Brut, outsider art was defined in relation to academic art. Cardinal, like Dubuffet, viewed outsider art from an aesthetic orientation. He writes:

what matters above all is the distinctive impact of the works themselves upon our senses . . . it validates itself to the extent that it is compelling and fascinating and obliges us to acknowledge its singular intensity, its effect of high voltage.¹³

The early cataloguers of outsider art distinguished it from other types of nontraditional art forms. Roger Cardinal distinguishes outsider art from six other types of art--European folk arts, naive paintings, prisoners art, child art, primitive art and the art of trained artists who went mad (such as Van Gogh). Although outsider works often resemble other forms that exist outside the mainstream of art, the characteristics of the latter group--lack of social comment, desire to please audiences, use of traditional techniques, the tendency to

copy from life, or lack of change--exclude them from the realm of the outsider.¹⁴

Although outsider artists shared a plethora of characteristics--in style, technique, motivation and material--most of the early writers and critics believed that the only direct connection between them was their rejection of societal norms. Michel Thevoz claimed that there is "no organic connection between them, nor interaction of any kind."¹⁵ Roger Cardinal suggests that their only connection is that "all are distinct from the cultural mainland."¹⁶

Hans Prinzhorn, a German psychiatrist, was probably the first person to suggest the possibility that there might be an "organic connection" among Brut artists. He believed that shared instincts emerged as "pre-rational" impulses. In his classic 1922 work on the mad, Bildnerei der Geisteskranken, Prinzhorn suggests there may be certain forms of expression, including visual formulations, that are nearly universal among men. The isolation from cultural influence that often characterizes mental illness or imprisonment may well unleash these creative urges.¹⁷

Historical Antecedents: The United States

Interest in visionary art was minimal in the United

States until 1968 when the subject was given its first prominent attention in Art in America (September-October issue). In a landmark article by Gregg Blasdel entitled "The Grass-Roots Artist in America," American readers were given their first comprehensive glimpse of visionary art and artists. The resurfacing of interest in this art form was accompanied by the coining of a new term-- "grass-roots art," and the demarcation of a slightly different range of works for consideration. Blasdel wrote strictly about outdoor environmental works, whereas Cardinal and Dubuffet concentrated more on drawings, wood carvings and the like, than on outdoor environments. Blasdel did not emphasize the Europeans' supposition that grass-roots art was primarily a product of societal rejection and rebellion. Instead, he claimed that it was "singular" yet rooted in somewhat predictable economic and social situations. Like his European predecessor Dubuffet, Blasdel uses the term "grass-roots" as an umbrella and claims that it is in no way representative of an art school or movement despite similarities among the artists and their work.

Exhibition catalogues, however large or small, are excellent sources of information about art and artists and often serve as forums for debating art categories and definitions. Several exhibitions add significantly to our knowledge of visionary art. The most important

exhibition in the United States on the subject was entitled Naives and Visionaries and premiered at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1974. This exhibition featured large color photographic panels and detailed text about nine visionary artists and their work. In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, museum director Martin Friedman places himself firmly in the non-genre, idiosyncratic tradition of analysis. These "hand-made universes created by elderly individualists," he writes, are "unique and isolated from each other." They "are not folk art," he maintains, "they are individualistic, not collective expressions."¹⁸ Nonetheless, he acknowledges, the artists featured in the exhibition share certain important characteristics--many began their works soon after leaving jobs as manual laborers, most had no art training, many identified their projects with life prolongation, most were obsessive about their work, and several were religiously motivated.

Another exhibition which further brought visionary artists to public attention was "Transmitters: The Isolate Artist in America" shown in Philadelphia. The exhibit preparators described the works in the exhibition as "isolate"--a term which "marks a withdrawal to a place nestling somewhere between the rigidity of Brut and the capriciousness of Outsider."¹⁹ One of the more important aspects of this exhibit is the suggestion that many of

these works may not have been produced for aesthetic reasons. Catalogue essayist Richard Flood argued that the process of creating may have "offered the artists a means of catharsis rather than an avenue for aesthetic expression."²⁰

Finally, in a planning proposal for a major exhibition on southeastern visionary artists under preparation at the Georgia Museum of Art in Athens, there is evidence that the spirit of Hans Prinzhorn is still alive. The exhibit will be designed to highlight black visionary artists and to focus on cross-cultural influences; the researchers aim to trace the sources of Haitian and African motifs in a search for universalities. The exhibit preparators acknowledge that common characteristics between visionary artists are not accidental, "that the connection may go beyond any direct sources and may indeed be universal in nature."²¹

The Folklorist's Perspective

In the 1960s folk art began to be studied in earnest from a folkloristic perspective. The approach of folklorists was vastly different from that of the art collectors, curators, and critics who first began looking at folk art in the 1920s. Although the early collectors were interested primarily in the beauty or otherwise aesthetic qualities of folk art, folklorists concentrated

more on the artists, artistic traditions, and the cultural environment in which the art was produced. Folklorists resented the broad inclusions under the general rubric of folk art, favored by the early collectors, and viewed with particular disdain the inclusion of outdoor environmental works. The collectors' perspective continues to some extent in the present, as for instance in the writings of museum director Robert Bishop. In American Folk Sculpture, Bishop includes several environmental sculptural works under a chapter on "The Religious Object." Bishop claims that "the most powerful religious art created [in the United States] is that of its folk artists." ²² Among his examples are James Hampton's silver and gold foil Throne and S. P. Dinsmoor's Garden of Eden which is a vast stone sculptural garden depicting various Biblical scenes.

Gradually, however, problems began to develop on the folklorists' side of the battle. While some folklorists were refuting the older definitions and categorizations of folk art, some of their colleagues working in the public sector were increasingly discovering artists who did not fit the strictest definition of folk art but nonetheless could not be ignored. Folklorists Marsha MacDowell and Kurt Dewhurst came across just such a set of artists in their statewide survey of Michigan folk artists. They wrote that these "vital, innovative

expressions of creativity,"²³ although difficult to place in the stream of art history, could not be ignored simply because they were not traditional. By ignoring them, they stated, "the folklorist thereby ignores a valuable link in our knowledge and appreciation of art

material."²⁴ Thus, in 1978, in their published survey of Michigan folk artists, Rainbows in the Sky: The Folk Art of Michigan in the Twentieth Century, they included among Michigan's folk artists an individual who had made a bottle house, someone who painted murals on the walls, pipes, meters and columns in his office at an underground pumping station, and a man who recreated prehistoric reptiles and mammals. They categorized these persons as

folk artists who derive from a vernacular tradition in the arts and are characterized by 'individual expression'. . . . This group of folk artists is frequently comprised of first-generation visual artists.

Folk artists who have experienced the most significant influence from the popular arts and whose folk art has been somewhat transformed by the introduction of technology, media and an expanding audience into a 'popularized' version of the individual artist's folk expression.²⁵

Even earlier, the Georgia Council for the Arts and Humanities had published an exhibition catalogue entitled Missing Pieces: Georgia Folk Art 1770-1976 that featured a variety of traditional arts and crafts--ceramics, basket-making, weaving, quilts--as well as a handful of primitive paintings and environmental works. They grouped these two categories under a common rubric, as

"works produced by people with little or no academic training as artists, people who are working outside the mainstream of art."²⁶ John Burrison, a folklorist who contributed to the exhibition, explained that the exhibit emphasized

not the concept of an inherited tradition but rather the idea of a grassroots art created by the common people and distinct from 'fine' art, but including the work of untrained idiosyncratic artists as well as true folk artists.²⁷

This approach is in keeping with the attitude of the early collectors and exhibitors of folk art. The authors justify this grouping on the basis that both idiosyncratic artists and traditional craftspeople derive their aesthetics from daily patterns of work, home, and survival. Anna Wadsworth states:

what is affirming about folk art is its intermingling with the barbering, banjo playing, fortune telling, gardening, sermonizing, and growing old of the people who make it.²⁸

Taking a somewhat different approach in Missouri Artist Jesse Howard, folklorist Howard Marshall critically addresses the issue of folk art and what he refers to as "idiosyncratic art." Marshall argues that Howard's art, which consists mostly of handpainted signs in his front yard, "shares more with academic and experimental art than with what we have come to think of as folk art. . . . Jesse Howard is a modern artist."²⁹

Although Marshall recognizes that Howard is clearly a member of "the folk"--he lives in a farming community, embraces traditional values, learned his skills as a craftsman in a traditional manner--he argues that Howard's art reaches beyond tradition and becomes a means for him to communicate with his fellow citizens, to vent personal passion.

The vacillating debate over folk art and visionary art continues in a more recent publication, Personal Places: Perspectives on Informal Art Environments. This volume brings to the reader a variety of viewpoints on visionary artists and acknowledges that it "will not put an end to confusion over whether these environments constitute a genre of art or of folk art."³⁰ The issue of shared characteristics seems to be an important one for several of the essayists. In "The Folk Environment: Some Methodological Considerations," Stephen Foster claims that classifying visionary works by shared traits "robs it of its authentic significance and singular integrity."³¹ Others, such as Tom Stanley, find it hard to ignore common characteristics. In his search for "environmental folk art" in South Carolina, Stanley noted several "common denominators" with regard to vocations, religion, leisure, and ethnicity.³² Another essay deals critically with the question of motivation and how the process of recycling may be closely tied with peoples'

values and life experiences.

As this accumulation of scholarship suggests, questions are increasingly being raised about the place of visionary art within folk studies. In addition to broadening their definitions of folk art, some folklorists are also widening their scope of study; they are not only analyzing folk art but are also studying the range of artistic expressions within folk groups. One such individual is folklorist Steve Siporin. In an unpublished essay entitled "The Whittling Edge and The Cutting Edge: Folk Art and the Idiosyncratic Genius," Siporin analyses an "idiosyncratic" wood carver using the folk artist as an idealized type. His subject, E.H., shares many characteristics of folk woodcarvers and draws subject matter from his own folk tradition. However, in Siporin's view, E.H. is clearly not a folk artist. Folk artists are considered bearers of tradition and thus are viewed as "insiders" in a community. Visionary artists, on the other hand, are thought of as "outsiders." Although E.H. is not a folk artist, Siporin argues that he is also not an outsider:

I cannot call E.H. naive, visionary, or even outsider. His perspective is that of an alienated insider, a member of the folk group who for some reason--perhaps just genius--does not fit. But he fits even less in the world at large. He and others like him will always lie beyond the edges of society, our disciplines and probably our full understanding. For E.H., staying home, in the society he grew up in, retains great importance. That in itself is an

indication of the power his own folk culture has had in the formation of his art.³⁴

That the move of folklorists into this area has some substantial justification is indicated by the recent scholarship suggesting that some of these visionary works may be folk-derived. In the first issue of Folklife Annual published by the American Folklife Center two of the nine articles deal with visionary artists--Simon Rodia and Howard Finster. In "Watts Towers and the Giglio Tradition," I. Sheldon Posen and Daniel Franklin Ward discuss parallels between The Watts Towers in Los Angeles and an Italian religious folk celebration. The second essay is about Howard Finster, whose Garden of Paradise clearly falls within the realm of visionary art. Yet, Finster also boasts many other talents which easily fall within the "folk" category--banjo playing and preaching, for instance. His life, his traditions, and even his idiosyncratic impulses overlap in a way that makes it hard to pigeon hole him. He is, as Alan Jabbour points out, a man "without a clear tradition."³⁵ These two essays testify to the appropriateness of folklorists studying visionary art. The study of visionary art will be richer through folklorists' involvement, and the study of folk art will surely gain from this symbiosis.

Conclusion

What, then, does this brief survey of visionary art tell us? For one thing, there has been a general rejection of the notion that visionary art works might constitute a genre or school of art. A myriad of terms have been used to describe these artists and a different variety of art forms have been included under each term. Such a disparate range has caused misconceptions about what this art really is.

There has been a gradual inclusion of visionary art within folk art studies, mostly because of folklorists' increased activity in the public sector. Largely as a result of folklorists bringing their analytical tools to bear on this art, there has been a shift from looking at visionary works from an art oriented perspective to one concerned more with the individual, his background, motivations, and the context in which his art takes place. However, it must be remembered that the inclusion of visionary art within the realm of folk art (whatever its benefit to the study of visionary art) has caused further misunderstandings about folk art and artists.

Furthermore, there is increasing evidence that researchers are looking more closely at the shared traits of many of these artists. Alan Jabbour was aware of this when he wrote:

Though they have no contact with one another, many other grassroots artists have come to our attention in recent years, and there are haunting similarities in some of their artistic techniques and subjects. The similarities go well beyond what can be explained away by coincidence; one must assume shared experience, vision, and values at some level--some profounder cultural connection at the spiritual grassroots.³⁶

The question of shared traits and universal impulses will be taken up in the following chapter.

NOTES

1

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CHAPTER TWO

A MODEL FOR ANALYZING VISIONARY ART

Introduction

In 1975, Michael Owen Jones published a watershed study of a Kentucky chairmaker. The Hand Made Object and Its Maker was an important contribution to the study of folk art. In a significant shift away from looking at the object, Jones focused on the process and the event of creating art. Jones examined the many factors which influenced the making of chairs: "tools, materials, techniques of construction, designs learned from other producers, customer preference, mistakes, accidents, and especially the craftsman's beliefs, values, and aspirations."¹ This approach represented a radical departure from previous studies of folk art which tended to value the art object more than the individual artist.

One of the underlying concepts in Jones' study of the Kentucky chairmaker, which he subsequently applied to home remodelers and from which my model is derived,² was

a belief that folklore was not so much a specific body of material but a method of analysis, a particular way of looking at human existence and creativity. Most recently, in American Material Culture and Folklife: A Prologue and Dialogue, Jones claims that the goal of folkloristics is to examine "the continuities and consistencies in the behavior of anyone anywhere at any time."³

Jones' approach is particularly relevant to the study of visionary artists for several reasons. The individual and the event are of primary interest to the behavioralist; how and why certain kinds of behavior are exhibited and the motives and rewards inherent in such behavior supersede questions of origin or function (which are less important in visionary art than in folk art). The behavioralist, according to Simon Bronner, is interested in "recording, in natural context . . . the dynamic processes of creating, distributing, using, and adapting or eliminating objects relative to an individual's experiences, attitudes, and perceptions."⁴ The art of the visionary artist forces observers to broaden their notion of art, and more importantly, requires a close look at the individual and the context in which the art evolved in order to discern its true

nature.

The case of visionary artists poses interesting "boundary" difficulties and for this reason Jones' approach is highly suitable. One, visionary artists are often popularly perceived as folk artists and it is imperative that folklorists help confirm or dispel these notions. Two, even academic researchers are beginning to make connections between these artists, their work, and elements of tradition. It is unclear at times whether or not visionary artists are indeed "true" folk artists.

In this chapter I will outline a framework of analysis for viewing visionary artists using a behavioral perspective. My central thesis is that visionary artists exhibit striking similarities with regard to their lives and their art and that the affinities they share deserve close scrutiny. I will develop a model for studying visionary art and artists, focusing on such topics as motivations, community attachment, private versus public artistic displays, approach of artists to their work, aesthetics, materials and techniques, and the notion of recycling. Specifically, I will study motivations and detail some of the artists' reasons for producing art. I will examine the reactions and attitudes of the general public towards

visionary works. I will discuss whether this art is produced for personal pleasure or for public consumption. Finally, I will attempt to separate visionary artists into loose categories, those whose approach is "non-schematic" and those whose approach is "preconceived." Appendix A demonstrates the applicability of this model to each of the sixteen artists I highlight in the following pages.

General Characteristics

The following characteristics generally apply to many visionary artists:

1. Begin work after retirement
2. No academic training in art
3. Obsessive about their work
4. Process-oriented
5. Intuitive sense of design
6. Use salvaged materials
7. Desire to immortalize themselves through their art
8. Religion often an important ingredient in their work
9. Art is often used to communicate ideas
10. Art sometimes used as a way of making contact with others
11. Artists not well liked or understood in community

One outstanding feature of visionary art is the particular time in life when the makers begin their ambitious projects. Formal education and training in the arts are rare occurrences among visionary artists. Most of the artists I encountered in my research were men who had been engaged in occupations requiring manual labor--masons, carpenters, brick layers, tile setters.

(Masonry is a particularly common medium for visionary artists.) Most of them began their creations around the time of their retirement. Thus, visionary art serves an important role as a therapeutic device--of helping to fill hours previously spent elsewhere. In addition, however, visionary art (like many other types of creative endeavors) may also serve as a means of catharsis.

Folklorist Verni Greenfield has documented Tressa Prisbrey's motivations for building the Bottle Village and has argued that Prisbrey's creativity was directly related to the loss of loved ones. Greenfield states:

If artistic accomplishments lead to pride and satisfaction, positive identification as a creative person or successful artist may help to offset the ambivalent perceptions and conflicting emotions that mourning may bring.⁵

Psychologist Howard Gardner has also commented on the therapeutic aspects of art. In The Arts and Human Development he states: "Art has the singular potential

for bringing man closer to other men, by highlighting their common traits, and so its use as a therapeutic mechanism can readily be appreciated."⁶

Zeal and persistence guide the visionary artist in his work. According to museum director Martin Friedman, the visionary artists represented in the 1974 exhibition Naives and Visionaries shared "an unwavering sense of mission, an ability to ignore conventions and proceed, undeterred, to realize their heroic visions. Each artist⁷ believed that he was destined to create great things." This sense of mission is summed up by Clarence Schmidt, the creator of a complex assemblage environment in Woodstock, Vermont: "There's a lot of things that I have to do, and after all, I'm not dying yet." Schmidt's unconquerable determination to create, in his words, "the eighth wonder of the world" remained despite two destructive fires and legal actions which prevented him from covering an entire hillside with his rambling structures.⁸ Simon Rodia's dream was to "do something big" and he certainly did.⁹ Today, the Watts Towers are probably the best known visionary work in the United States. For Wisconsin artist Fred Smith, the determination to create a spectacle is reflected in his assertion that his front yard concrete animals and

figures are "the best Goddamn decoration on Highway 13 in
 the country."¹⁰ A burning desire to create a sensation
 did not motivate James Hampton to create The Throne of
 the Third Heaven of the Nations Millenium General
 Assembly, yet his statement: "That's my life. I'll
 finish it before I die" suggests a strong determination¹¹
 to realize a dream.

In Artists in Spite of Themselves, Ronald Carraher
 states that the naive (or visionary) artist "is often
 more interested in his own creative process than in the
 finished product."¹² It is clear that the process of
creating a private, and sometimes public, universe is
 an important aspect of these artists' work. An
 indication that process is so important to these artists
 is that they are continually transforming their art by
 adding to it. The process of salvaging materials and
 incorporating them into their environments is never-
 ending. For example, in describing Grandma Tressa
 Prisbrey's Bottle Village, Esther McCoy states that
 Prisbrey "has a passion for all discarded objects and
 shows a willingness to provide them all, equally, a place
 in her scheme . . . her art is one of inclusion." The
 integration of memorabilia--for instance, a heart, a
 diamond, a spade, and a club which Prisbrey brought home

from a trip to Las Vegas--was easily embedded into her environment of houses, gardens and walkways.¹³

Are these inventive, imaginative, or otherwise inspired environments created for aesthetic or utilitarian reasons? In almost all the environmental creations I encountered aesthetic ends predominated. The simple fact that many of these constructions are not lived in or used extensively indicates that they were created primarily for the sake of beauty and not utility. Utility does have its role, though usually minor. In a symbolic, philosophical sense, though, they are extremely functional. They provide relief from boredom, an outlet for creativity that was possibly never realized, or a means of catharsis.

"Intuitive" and "innate" are the two most common expressions used to characterize the visionary artist's aesthetic sense. Gregg Blasdel asserts that "the constructions of the grass-roots artist display an intuitive sense of color, form, design and space relationships."¹⁴ These artists rejoice in pattern and symmetry and boldly execute their artistic abilities by the clever use of materials.

The effect of natural light upon bottle houses, mirrors, and other aspects of visionary art partially

makes up the aesthetic palette of the visionary artist. Grandma Prisbrey's bottle houses are noted for the brilliant light they capture. Simon Rodia collected tinted glass, shells, tiles, "and almost anything else that would make a pattern or catch the glint of the sun."¹⁵ Materials were used in such a way that the sun illuminated, enlivened, animated, or made holy the total environment. It is difficult to say whether design or chance influenced this brilliant effect of the sun upon these artistic works. Clarence Schmidt, in talking about his environment, speaks of the desire to create a glowing atmosphere which changes with the height of the sun: "when the sun gets off down there, you should see the reflections."¹⁶ Howard Finster used all kinds of materials that were enhanced by light and the sun. Bottles and broken pieces of mirror are seen throughout his garden, including on the underside of houses. He once remarked that he was the only person who would buy broken mirrors.

Visionary artists vary slightly in how and where they obtain materials, but the pattern of using mostly salvaged materials is consistent. Local quarries, city dumps, and neighbors' trash bags serve as sources for building materials. What is the appeal of found

objects? According to Esther McCoy, Grandma Prisbrey had "a passion for all discarded objects."¹⁷ Others had little say in their choice of materials. Clarence Schmidt reported, "I can't buy a lot of things and there are things I get for nothing, and I capitalize on it."¹⁸ In writing about Jesse Howard, the sign painter, Richard Rhodes states that "Howard uses discarded materials because his sensibility was shaped at a time when scarcity decreed that nothing be junk until it fell apart, and sometimes not even then."¹⁹ The materials most commonly recycled by visionary artists include metal foils, mirrors, Christmas tree lights, dolls, bottles, bottle caps, tires, venetian blind slats, wheels, glass, ceramic pieces, tiles, barrel hoops, bed springs, wire, and many more things other people no longer have any use for.

Visionary artists are doing what Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver call Ad hoc. In Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation, Jencks and Silver define ad hoc as "'for this' specific need or purpose."²⁰ Human beings, they argue, have needs which are often difficult to realize because of the complex nature of our society. Thus, adhocism emerges as a democratic response to bureacracy: "A purpose immediately fulfilled is the ideal of

adhocism."²¹ Most visionary art is ad hoc in the extreme. As Jencks and Silver suggest, adhocism provides an open arena:

The characteristic ad hoc amalgamation contains much that is inessential, much that is fortuitous and redundant. But if it is not as refined and precise as other kinds of purposeful action, then at least it is more open, suggestive and rich in possibilities.²²

The visionary artist is in the recycling business--transforming discarded objects into exciting new forms. "They take ready-made cliches of industrial society or bountiful nature and disconnect them from their habitual context. . . . Used in a dislocated way they become refreshed

through juxtaposition."²³ In an article on folk builders, William Ferris states that "what appears to the Middle American as litter lying on the lawn or hanging from a wall, is to the folk artist an object merely awaiting the time and place when it will be recycled into a new role."²⁴ What others envisage as having single functions the visionary artist recycles and reshapes into a complex environment, thereby endowing those objects with new functions and new meanings. Dave Woods collectively expresses the attitude of the visionary artist towards cast-off objects: "I take something old and make something new. Well no, it isn't new, something

different."²⁵ Utilizing familiar objects and denying their primary function by giving them new shapes and new meanings is at the root of the visionary artists' aesthetic vision.

Some visionary artists accept the temporary nature of their environments, expecting them to decay. In his introduction to Naives and Visionaries Martin Friedman states that "decades often separate the early parts of their environments from the later ones, and erosion and disintegration are inherent in them."²⁶ Impermanence is part and parcel of Jesse Howard's environment; he must repaint his signs because of theft and the effects of the weather. Howard Finster, creator of the Garden of Paradise, has a Cadillac parked in his back yard; years ago he started painting it with portraits of famous characters. Unfinished, the car still sits in his yard, and the paintings have faded considerably. Finster, like some others, is nonplussed about this deterioration; in fact, he seems to anticipate future restoration. In his public talks he draws particular attention to his deteriorating fixtures--cars, rusting refrigerator murals--and blithely accepts the decay as part of his mission.

More often, however, visionary artists aspire for

permanence and indestructability in their works. In addition, there appears to be a correlation between the degree of permanence in an environment and the maker's desire for immortality. Dinsmoor overbuilt massively because he wanted his message to endure. And endure it did! In Dinsmoor's words, his concrete flag "has stood the test of storms for . . . years without falling and without a flaw." Dinsmoor's garden has actually endured sufficiently to provide him with a permanent resting place; he and his first wife are interred in a Mausoleum²⁷ that he completed in the 1920s. Louis Wippich's wish to remain linked to his handcrafted environment is clearly indicated by the durability of the materials he used, such as concrete, granite, and sandstone. Believing, as he did, in the powers of reincarnation, Wippich may have expected to return to his Molehill. Some local residents of Sauk Rapids, Minnesota insist that "he is the dove that flutters about that high granite tower."²⁸ The desire for immortality or the wish to leave a permanent record is summed up by Herman Rusch who states that "a fellow should leave a few tracks, and not just cancelled welfare checks."²⁹ These artists seem to have grasped intuitively Lewis Mumford's contention that "man truly lives only to the extent that

he transforms and creates out of the raw materials of life a world whose meanings and values outlast his original experience and transcend its limitations." ³⁰

Motivations

Religious inspiration is a major impetus for many visionary artists to create handmade environments. James Hampton's religious visions were manifested in his handcrafted tin foil throne. Hampton believed that God came to him each night with instructions on how to build his throne; Hampton promptly recorded these visitations on small pieces of paper which he later attached to portions of his elaborate throne. ³¹ Howard Finster was a Baptist preacher for most of his life until one day when he had a vision that instructed him to preach through art: "it come to me to build a paradise and decorate it with the Bible." ³² Finster's Garden of Paradise in Summerville, Georgia is filled with walkways made with broken pieces of glass, bottle houses, paintings, and sculptures. Verses from the Bible are interspersed throughout the garden. The inspiration and the entire content of S. P. Dinsmoor's Garden of Eden in Lucas, Kansas is of a religious nature. The point, however, was not theological accuracy but inspiration: "If the

Garden of Eden is not right," said Dinsmoor, "Moses is to blame. He wrote it up and I built it."³³

Another reason why many of these artists create is to communicate to others their deeply felt beliefs, which are often religious in nature. Their art serves a didactic purpose. Howard Finster once said:

I'd rather put one sermon out in art than fifty out of my mouth. The main thing about my art is to have a message. Preaching does very little good. But I find by doing it in art, a man will see it, and the message will be printed on his brain cells.³⁴

Another example of someone who is interested in educating his fellow citizens is Jesse Howard, a Fulton, Missouri sign painter. His roadside messages are full of comments on such topics as politics, poverty, and religion. Although James Hampton worked on his Throne secretly, he wished to make others aware of its existence and significance. He once "expressed the hope that the entire world, not just Washington, ought to know about his work. It is alleged that Hampton contacted local churches regarding the use of his altar and throne for educational or religious purposes."³⁵ S. P. Dinsmoor's Garden of Eden is rife with social and moral lessons; his creation, according to Gregg Blasdel and Philip Larson embodies "a 19th century literal-moralistic view of the Bible, and a 20th century social-political liberalism."³⁶

Not all of these creations, however, can be accounted for by their divine, or otherwise religious, inspiration. Boredom motivated many artists into action. Clarence Hewes, an employee of the Cedar Street Pumping Station in Lansing, Michigan, began decorating his office to fill the many hours of boredom in his job. He painted the walls, pipes, meters and columns, and even the daily log book with religious scenes, names and portraits of workmates, pictures of ships, and verses to accompany these drawings and murals. One of Herman Rusch's goals in building the Prairie Moon Museum and Garden was to

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"kill old-age boredom."

Other reasons exist as to why these artists are inspired to create fantastic environments from discarded objects. Grandma Prisbrey's ambitious creativity sprang from her desire to build a house for her enormous pencil collection. After the Pencil House was completed she just kept on going.

A desire to make people happy motivates other visionary artists to build and create. Ronald Carraher writes, "the naive artist often values his art as a means of making social contact with others. He doesn't

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hesitate to put his work on display." Many visionary artists delight in public attention and possibly create

these elaborate environments in order to entertain, amuse, or befuddle any passersby. Both Herman Rusch and Fred Smith derive considerable satisfaction from visitors to their sites. Furthermore, some of these works, whether intended or not, have become regional tourist attractions. Cole Cummings' decorated car is an attraction to all who walk the streets of northeast Washington, D. C. because it is virtually an exhibition on wheels. One might call this the "pied piper syndrome" since many of these people enjoy bringing neighbors, and particularly children, to their work. Cummings decorates the roof of his car with a wide variety of discarded objects, such as big wheels and clocks. When asked why he did this, he responded "I thought it needed some sprucing up. I likes it and the children likes it . . . I help people. I gives them rides home and my car makes them smile." ³⁹ Pleasing others was also a motivating factor for Creek Charley to paint his house with red, white, and blue polka dots. Charley once remarked that he created his environment "to make youngsters laugh." On Sundays, Charley donned his polka dotted suit and received visitors at his home. According to his brother, "he loved for people to come to his house. He said there is no place like his house in the

whole world."⁴⁰

The reasons for creating these handmade environments vary, yet each artist exhibits an extraordinary devotion to a creative vision whether inspired by religious, social, or personal values. This steadfast dedication to a creative dream persisted over many years of these individuals' lives. Ed Root from Wilson, Kansas "devoted nearly half of his ninety-two years to creating dozens of concrete yard sculptures, light fixtures, plaques, and planters."⁴¹ From about 1950 until his death in 1964 James Hampton worked on his magnificent gold and tin foil throne in a rented garage. Herman Rusch's dedication approached obsession. He often worked "relentlessly, ignoring visitors and laboring late into the night to avoid wasting a freshly mixed batch of cement."⁴² Whether to realize a religious inspiration, relieve boredom, educate others or to make people happy, the common thread that links these artists to each other is their use of art, for therapeutic, communicative and expressive purposes.

Community Attachment

Visionary works may be found in urban, rural, and suburban areas. The numbers, however, may be tipped

slightly in favor of rural areas. And despite Gregg Blasdel's statement in 1968, that "the grass-roots artist is a phenomenon of a particular social situation in time that is rapidly approaching its close" visionary works are still being created.⁴³

General public reaction to visionary art ranges from amusement to nonchalance or irritation. Most of the artists are viewed as eccentrics. Jesse Howard's front yard is filled with hand painted wooden signs which proclaim his political and religious views; Howard is not one of Fulton, Missouri's favorite citizens. In fact, some "local purists" once attempted to have him committed to the state mental hospital. Many resent having these idiosyncratic structures, sometimes described as "front yard junk," in adjacent lots. Others artists, such as Fred Smith, are simply ignored.

Visionary artists generally do not share the same type of community ties enjoyed by folk artists. In fact, many are isolated from their communities. According to Gregg Blasdel, "the grass-roots artist is reclusive, by choice, circumstance or castigation, from any community group."⁴⁴ James Hampton allegedly had few intimate friends and spent many creative hours alone in his garage after his night janitorial job. Hampton's late night

clandestine activities were virtually unknown to his neighbors. Clarence Schmidt pursued a "hermit-like existence on a wooded mountain top" in Woodstock, New York.⁴⁵ Although his choice was to remain apart from mainstream society, he inevitably came into contact with the local community because of his rambling construction methods. While, as some earlier examples suggest, some artists have very social aspirations for the finished environment (such as those that are intended as tourist attractions), the creative process remains a fairly lonely one. A reclusive existence--almost by necessity--requires that each individual work alone, and some, like Dinsmoor, "insisted on constructing every part of the elaborate scheme alone."⁴⁶ Whether by choice or circumstance, most of these artists labored solitarily on their creations.

However, there are excellent examples of visionary works consciously displayed for the public, such as the yard art decorations in Newfoundland documented in

Flights of Fancy: Newfoundland Yard Art:

The countless yard displays here in Newfoundland ultimately speak about the concern of the resident with those outside. Be they stranger or friend, the yard plays to an audience, speaking partly about the individuality and creativity of the owner, educating the viewer, inviting the passer-by

perhaps to accept more personal forms of hospitality.⁴⁷

Folklorist Gerald Pocius suggests that the Newfoundland creators are unlike creators of yard art in other areas of North America, contending that the latter are "much more idiosyncratic. . . . [and may be] considered alienated cranks."⁴⁸ Yet, it appears that the type of individual motivated to create yard art in Newfoundland is really not unlike these other, "more idiosyncratic" individuals. "Often," states Pocius, "it is the retired male who assembles and creates yard art, and his common explanation is simply, 'it gives me something to do' or 'it passes the time'.⁴⁹"

Approaches

One approach used by many of these artists is what I call the "non-schematic" and highly additive approach. This outlook requires little advanced planning in constructing an environment from salvaged materials and, as Clarence Schmidt admits, "everything is ad-lib." Schmidt is a prime example of an individual who creates by adding to what was accreted before with no overall plan in mind.

[His] box-like additions were filled in and added to, suggesting an overall random composition of interconnecting three-dimensional facades. . . . Schmidt would tie a simple post and lintel wood frame skeleton into an existing part of the house, and then 'fill-in' the skeletal structure.⁵⁰

Cummings is another example of someone who operates in this manner. He decorates "his car in almost any way that fits his expansive moods." His only restriction to expanding vertically is judged by his ability to "get under bridges and overpasses."⁵¹

A second approach in creating such assemblages is the "preconceived" or schematic approach. This outlook is one in which the artist has preplanned the appearance of the environment before it is built and works without blueprints. Ideas may evolve from dreams, religiously inspired visions, or simply a lively imagination. James Hampton believed that God visited him "every night, instructing him in the step-by-step fabrication of an array of glittering intricate objects."⁵² David Butler's yard in Patterson, Louisiana is filled with whirligigs, Biblical scenes, and animal forms made out of metal. Butler states that "he usually receives his ideas fully formed in dreams."⁵³ Herman Rusch visualizes his creations before he builds and "only after a mental image is formulated" does he obtain his materials.⁵⁴ Louis

Wippich was guided in his creation of the Molehill not only by "changing metaphysical visions" but also by the materials he had on hand. He did, however, dream "of what he would do next, planning the structures in his head two to ten years before actual construction."⁵⁵

Life Prolongation

I cannot help but believe, however, that there is something more than shared aesthetics or the particular use of materials that is common to these artists. Seymour Rosen states that "what these builders seem to have in common is whimsy, independence and tenacity."⁵⁶ Yet, I believe there is something linking them that penetrates even deeper than any of those human qualities and that the answer lies in Herman Rusch's affirmation that "Beauty creates the will to live."⁵⁷ Most visionary artists begin their creations after their retirement, a time when many people believe they have no real reason to continue living their lives. By creating a beautiful environment which enables the artist to make additions, changes, and expansions at whim, and in which the process of gathering materials and creating is more important than the finished product, the artist creates a new reason for living.

According to Martin Friedman, "all of these artists identify their ambitious building projects with the prolongation of their lives." ⁵⁸ The process oriented and additive approach of this art allows the artist to create with the idea that he or she could create forever (with the concomitant feeling that they could live forever). The link to immortality manifests itself differently with each artist. Some of these artists, such as Louis Wippich, built their environments to provide themselves with a "permanent utopia" for the life hereafter. For artists like Herman Rusch, creating sculpture means leaving a permanent record, more permanent than "cancelled welfare checks." For others an environment becomes a place in which to take root before one dies, as it was for Grandma Prisbrey. After leaving the Bottle Village in the hands of a dentist, Prisbrey returned to putter around and end her days amidst her bottle houses.

The optimism embodied in these creations is also linked with the theme of beauty and life prolongation. If these individuals are sincerely interested in prolonging their lives, it seems entirely appropriate that they would create hopeful, optimistic, whimsical environments. It is to be expected, too, that religion is a pervasive theme of many of these creations.

Hampton's Throne, Dinsmoor's Garden of Eden, and Finster's Garden of Paradise are entirely religious in nature while others simply incorporate religious elements into their carefully crafted environments. Many of these artists were inspired by, and created their environments according to, strong religious visions or philosophical beliefs. It is possible that these creations provided them with a concrete link between life and death. For people reaching ages where questions of the hereafter become pressing, creation of a religiously oriented environment can qualify as a "good work," a means of doing God's deed, a means toward salvation.

The model I have just outlined pertains to many visionary artists, yet I do not presume to think that all visionary artists embody all of the characteristics I mention. I believe, however, that this model is a useful starting point to a clearer understanding of these works which often seem to defy categorization. In an effort to further clarify and refine this model I will use it to examine Valenty Zaharek and his life's work, Pecos West. Zaharek's creation classically falls along the borders of folk, popular, and even visionary art.

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- 23 Ibid., p. 27.
- 24 William Ferris, "Don't Throw It Away: Folk Culture and Our Dwindling Resources," Yale Alumni Quarterly, 37 (1974), p. 21.
- 25 Dave Woods quoted in Blasdel, "The Grass-Roots Artist," p. 28.
- 26 Naives and Visionaries, p. 11.
- 27 S.P. Dinsmoor, Pictorial History of the Cabin Home in the Garden of Eden quoted in Carraher, Artists in Spite of Art, p. 104; Naives and Visionaries, p. 33.
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- 30 Dewhurst and MacDowell, Rainbows in the Sky, p. 13 citing Art and Technics, n. 36.
- 31 Naives and Visionaries, p. 13.

32

Howard Finster quoted in John Turner, "Howard Finster: Man of Visions," in Folklife Annual 1985, ed. by Alan Jabbour and James Hardin (Washington: American Folklife Center, 1985), p. 158.

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Howard Finster quoted in Turner, "Howard Finster: Man of Visions," p. 158.

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Naives and Visionaries, p. 15.

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39

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Creek Charley quoted in Elinor Lander Horwitz, Contemporary American Folk Artists (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1975), pp. 125, 124.

41

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42

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43

Blasdel, "The Grass-Roots Artist," p. 24.

44

Ibid., p. 25.

45

Naives and Visionaries, p. 43.

46

Ibid., p. 33. Emphasis mine.

47

Gerald L. Pocius, "Newfoundland Yard Art," in Flights of Fancy: Newfoundland Yard Art, ed. by Patricia Grattan (St. Johns, Newfoundland: The Art Gallery, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1983), p. 11.

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49

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- 51
Sherwood, "Country's car," p. 1B; Cole "Country"
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- 52
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71.
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CHAPTER THREE

A CASE STUDY: VALENTY ZAHAREK AND PECOS WEST

Introduction

In an article entitled "The Whittling Edge and the Cutting Edge: Folk Art and the Idiosyncratic Genius," folklorist Steve Siporin uses an "idealized folk artist type as a reference point"¹ in studying the life and artistic endeavors of E. H., an untutored, idiosyncratic woodcarver. Siporin states that "we might better be able to classify and understand the artist's relation to tradition by more precisely describing his conformity or lack of conformity to an idealized type."²

Just as Siporin uses a model of a folk artist for analyzing an artist whose work is borderline "folk art," I will use the model presented in Chapter Two of an "idealized" visionary artist to analyze an artist's work which is also borderline "folk." However, I am not interested in analyzing the visionary artists' "relation to tradition." Instead, I am interested in exploring the visionary artists' relation to other visionary artists.

I have chosen a particular artist, Valenty Zaharek, because of the unusual ambiguity of his work. I do not wish to unequivocally prove that Valenty is a visionary or to suggest that he fits my model perfectly. Rather, I am using his borderline case and my generalized model to ask questions about visionary art and folk art.

In the following chapter, I will look at some of the most important characteristics of visionary artists and use Valenty Zaharek as a testing ground for my model. I will focus on how retirement or some form of life crisis affects the work of visionary artists. I will look at how the characteristic persistence and obsessiveness of visionary artists is manifested in Zaharek and his work. I will examine the motivations behind Zaharek's dreams to build Pecos West as well as look at how he was perceived by friends, relatives, and members of his community. Finally, I will discuss Zaharek's skills as an improviser, as someone who makes do with what is at hand, and how this personality trait relates to other visionary artists.

Valenty Zaharek's panoramic sculpture of the American West, "Pecos West," may be described as idiosyncratic. It is one man's fantastic vision. Pecos West consists of hundreds of wood carvings of scenes

of the west--cattle herding, train robberies, traditional Indian house styles. The ornamentation and assemblage is highly original. Yet, Pecos West is not entirely unprecedented. The individual scenes displayed on the rotating carousel are similar in style, for instance, to some Scandinavian-American carvings. In addition, Pecos West contains some elements of popular culture, including likenesses of famous movie stars. Valenty Zaharek's chief creation, Pecos West, is difficult to categorize and impossible to ignore. Studying individuals like Valenty Zaharek will, I believe, sharpen our definitions of folk art and help us to better understand the art that flowers along its borders.

Valenty Zaharek: Background

Valenty (sometimes referred to as Walter) Zaharek was born in 1909 in Crivitz, Wisconsin. After completing the eighth grade, he went to work full time on his family's farm. He left the farm in his late 20s to start a hardware business. Then World War II came and he was drafted. Soon after he was drafted it was learned that Valenty had a small .22 calibre bullet in his knee. He refused to let the army surgeons operate because they wanted him to sign a form indicating that if his leg was

defective after the operation, the Army would not be held responsible. Valenty was then sent to Fort Lewis, Washington to work as an orderly in a Veterans Hospital for mentally disturbed veterans. It was in Fort Lewis that Valenty first started woodcarving. Woodworking was being used at the hospital as therapy for the veterans. Valenty met Carl Evers, the wood sculptor instructor, and learned how to carve. From Fort Lewis, Valenty was sent overseas where he served as a surgical technician. His primary job was making casts for casualties.

Valenty was released from the service in the mid-1940s and returned to his family's farm in Wisconsin. Soon after, he and his younger brother Johnny took a logging job; Valenty hoped to start another business with his earnings. At this time, according to Johnny, Valenty started making his own woodcarving tools. While Valenty was scouting around for a location for his next business, he contracted polio. He was then 38 years old.

In 1947, Valenty was discharged from the hospital in Minneapolis where he was recuperating from his illness. By this time, his health problems were further compounded by asthma. The following year he took a car and trailer and headed west to look for a place to settle

down for good. After traveling through the Western deserts--Death Valley, the Grand Canyon, Zion National Park and Bryce Canyon--Valenty decided to make Sedona, Arizona his home. According to several relatives, Valenty liked the hills and the colors surrounding Sedona and believed he could be happy there.

By this time, Valenty was beginning to carve in earnest. When he arrived in Sedona, he bought some land and a house and began to earn his living by making and selling his woodcarvings. Later on, he manufactured a variety of ceramic items--plates, ashtrays, sugars bowls, creamers. In addition, he sold Indian jewelry and rugs. Valenty eventually sold his original property and bought some more land where he started his first store. He later bought another piece of property in Sedona where he erected what he later called The Winged Arts Building, designed and built by him specifically to display his panoramic sculpture, Pecos West. The Winged Arts Building might be classified as a modified Art Moderne structure. It consisted of two circles--one inside the other. Pecos West was featured in the inner circle while Valenty's other items--jewelry, carvings--were displayed along the outer circle. Living quarters also comprised part of the outer circle.

Pecos West

Pecos West was originally entitled "Project 30," because it was to take 30 months to construct, would have 30 light bulbs for special effects, and consist of 30,000 pieces of wood. It was later renamed Pecos West, after a song by the same title. Valenty's sister-in-law Stella Zaharek stated:

There was a song that was out about Pecos Bill and about Judge Bean, and about the Pecos River. I believe it's a river in Texas. And the western stories were situated around in that area, it was supposed to be tough and rough and the people were mostly hardy people that you know would be cowboys.⁴

His nephew, Gerald Zaharek, confirms this theory:

The carving depicted the Pecos country. That's where he came up with the name, you know, Pecos Bill, the song about him digging the canyons and all of that. And this country with your red rock and canyons was what he considered Pecos Bill's country.⁵

Pecos West is a three-dimensional panoramic carousel consisting of wood carvings which depict scenes from the American West, such as cattle herding and Indian weaving. There are approximately 250 wood carvings made from pine and redwood. The carvings are painted in

fluorescent reds, greens, yellows, and browns. When viewed under black light, the carousel takes on a rich glow. Blinking lights inside the clouds in the center of the panorama simulate thunder storms and lightning. The effect of sunrise and sunset is also achieved by special lighting effects. The entire carousel rotates to the sound of taped western music. According to Valenty's closest friend, George Latka:

He had specifically painted in iridescent color tones so that using the black lights he could simulate the evening, and still get the color play back using the black light because he wanted to simulate that the desert was beautiful at night, just as well as during the day time. And as the movement of the table went around he simulated even clouds coming in and the colors were just terrific with the black light on it. It gave the mountains a backup hue like you even see today, with the reds and the crimsons and everything.⁶

The size of Pecos West--1 1/2 tons, 18 feet in diameter, 8 1/2 feet tall--limited its viewability. Yet Valenty had plans to display his masterpiece to the public. As mentioned, he built a building specifically designed for displaying the cyclorama. He installed Pecos West even before the living quarters of the building were finished and set to work on the music and the lights. His nephew, Gerald Zaharek, helped him with the music:

We would run the display and then we picked songs or part of songs from records and we would tape them, fade them in and out, to kind of match the scene as best we could, like the part where somebody, a guy was being thrown from a bucking bronco, we had a section about a guy riding a bronc and some of the desert scenery we had the Whispering Sands song, and Walter [Valenty], he basically decide the ones he liked for the scenery.7

The cyclorama was set up like a theater. An admission fee was charged and people would come in and sit and watch as the curtains were slowly drawn back and the lights and music began:

As far as the lighting goes we would start off with it entirely dark and he had the lights arranged so that there were red lights along the back wall and he would slowly bring up the light intensity to make it look like a sunrise coming up. The back wall would look just like a sunrise. I think, did he have scenery painted on the back wall? (Someone in the background said "yes"). Mountains and that. That all added to the effect of the carving. We had blue lights that he would control to shine on the mountains and make it look like nighttime.8

Pecos West was displayed in Sedona during a three-year period. It was also shown at the New Mexico State Fair in Albuquerque in 1964 and at the Sedona Town Hall. Valenty Zaharek's dreams to have Pecos West seen by millions were never quite realized, a point to which I will return later. Valenty died in 1979 at the age of seventy.

Valenty Zaharek and Visionary Art

Many visionary artists begin their work after retirement and in some cases after a loss or crisis. Contracting polio at a relatively young age greatly altered Valenty Zaharek's life plans. In addition, his asthmatic condition somewhat dictated where he should spend the rest of his life. Valenty's cousin Frank Zacharek has indicated that if Valenty had not contracted polio he would not have made Pecos West, suggesting that Valenty used woodcarving as therapy--as a catharsis. A statement made by his brother Johnny suggests that he might have been happiest when working on Pecos West:

I wouldn't say that he was despondent, because he took interest in his work, very much interest. Now he was naturally despondent; I imagine he had the blues a lot of times. Of course, toward the end where he was taking kenalog shots, then I would say he was a little despondent, not while he was working or while he had that cyclorama.⁹

In my model I conclude that many visionary artists begin their work after retirement. This characteristic might be stated more generally, affirming instead that many visionary artists begin their work as a response to a major life change and possibly to a crisis. Of course, retirement may be viewed as a kind of crisis. Visionary artists create to reestablish purpose in their life.

Their art may be part of a search for new meaning, a cathartic response to trauma, or simply a way to fill empty hours.

As with many visionary artists, Valenty went about his work with a tremendous amount of energy and persistence. Because of his polio, it was not easy for Valenty to get around. He used a wheelchair a good deal of the time and designed a pair of crutches which enabled him to move about easier. Despite his disability, however, he managed to accomplish a tremendous amount in his lifetime. In addition to his ceramic making and woodworking, he built several buildings--from a wheelchair. George Latka, who lived with Valenty for a short time, described his friend in this way:

There was no wasted time with Walter. It seemed like he just couldn't get enough to do. It was a desire to do and to create something, or to finish something. I've seen him at times finish doing some glazing, firing, and going across the basement to the other room and pick up something to start whittling and carving. I mean there was no limit to his preparation of art.10

Valenty's determination and obsession with Pecos West is partly indicated by his working title, "Project 30." This kind of strict accounting--30 months, 30 light bulbs, 30,000 pieces of wood--is not uncommon with visionary artists. Howard Finster, the Georgia preacher

and artist, keeps strict records of how many paintings he has made as well as a detailed accounting of sermons,¹¹ funerals, marriages, and weddings he has performed.

The nervous energy and the refusal to be sidetracked are telltale signs of the visionary artist's drive to create. The determination displayed by most of these artists, coupled with the kind of strict accounting mentioned above, suggests a desire to establish, or reestablish, control over one's life. For individuals who have left a job of thirty years or who have suffered a serious injury, there is a feeling of powerlessness and a need for order, familiarity and purpose. By setting up a universe which unambiguously functions by their own rules they can maintain a measure of control over the remaining years of their lives.

One of Valenty's motivations for building Pecos West was educational. He was eager to build the Winged Art Building so that Pecos West could be shown publicly. His attention to detail and accuracy indicate that he wanted people to learn something about western lifestyles and values from viewing Pecos West. He wanted to communicate through his sculpture the mythic, larger than life qualities of the West. His brother Johnny pointed out that:

His intentions were to show what the Pecos West country was like, it was tough. That's probably why he named it that. He tried to depict in his carvings the Pecos West train robbers and all that stuff.¹²

Although Valenty did hope to make some money by leasing Pecos West for exhibit it is clear that financial gain was not one of his primary motivations for making the cyclorama. Two things point to his lack of interest in monetary gain. First, he lavished tremendous amounts of time, money, and energy on Pecos West beyond any hope of recompense. And second, the disappointment he ultimately expressed was not financial, but over the lack of acceptance and recognition for his work.

Valenty was an outsider in Sedona. He was not native to the area, and his physical disability probably further distanced him from the local community. Valenty lived alone and apparently never married. Valenty was especially unpopular with some of the local business people because of his iconoclastic building styles. Sedona is a traditional western town and Valenty's buildings, particularly the Winged Arts Building, were the antithesis of western and traditional.

Using my idealized visionary model, Valenty's approach to his work could be characterized as "schematic." He had a very clear idea about how

he wanted Pecos West to look while he was in the process of making it. Wanda Benzie, Valenty's cousin, noted that Valenty would take trips out to the country where he got the images for Pecos West: "He would park different areas and he would get a different view and somehow or other in order to remember it. I think that's how he got started in wood carving."¹⁴ According to Stella Zaharek:

He already had the carvings pretty much set up. He knew what he was going to do and how he was going to do it, and he had a lot of the small carvings done, the trees, the men, the animals, he had the stagecoach made, the horses, he had the big wood carving of the stage coach robbery.¹⁵

Valenty paid careful attention to the interconnected aesthetics of Pecos West, particularly with his paints and with the special lighting and music effects. He was very selective about his coloring methods and often used unconventional materials like shoe polish to get the effect he wanted. In addition, Valenty developed stylistic features which were quite unusual. Three-dimensional blossoms protruding from gun barrels represent shots, and clouds and dust are depicted by billowy blocks of wood floating above the earth. Toothpick spikes simulate metallic sparks. These depictions of gunshots, clouds, dust, and sparks--which are rarely given concrete form in three-dimensional art--

are highly original.

Valenty Zaharek is unlike many visionaries in his use of certain materials. He did not, for instance, recycle refuse like old bottles or dolls. Yet, he is typical of many in his use of conventional materials-- such as shoe polish, toothpicks and fluorescent paints-- in unconventional ways. Just as many visionaries use bottles as bricks, Valenty used shoe polish as paint. And while not strictly a recycler, Valenty did have an ad hoc method of acquiring materials. George Latka recalled that:

He would pick up some of the woods on his trip, but a lot of them were local. . . . He managed to pick up a lot of the woods in this area either through the lumber yard or perchance while he was out in his specially rigged car for driving, and he would see something by the side of the road and he would stop to pick it up.¹⁶

Valenty was not unfamiliar with the idea of "making do" with what was at hand. Many visionary artists look at things freshly, unpolluted by traditional notions of what something is and is not useful for. Valenty was a creative, independent fellow and in his personal life, as well as with some of his artistic endeavors, he showed a great ability to improvise. Gerald Zaharek once stated that "he would contrive things, he would invent little things at the moment to accomplish a task."¹⁷ Some of

this ability may have been gained while he was serving as a surgical assistant in the army:

He would mention a lot of times how he would prepare makeshift gadgets and instruments to use because without prepared instruments certain doctors, or whoever it was, couldn't complete an operation so there was Walter dragged in to do makeshift implements and materials in order for them to do an operation or whatever they were doing, medically.¹⁸

A further example of his personal ingenuity is relayed by Wanda Benzie: "He had problems naturally. No matter what he had he would always try and fix it himself because it was hard for him to get out."¹⁹ Benzie goes on to describe how Zaharek even made an effective false tooth for himself to replace a missing incisor.

Valenty Zaharek clearly wanted recognition for Pecos West. He was very disappointed with the small number of people who came to see it, and many of Valenty's friends and relatives attribute this to the location--it was off the major highway--and to the lack of publicity. He went to great lengths to try and acquire a permanent home for it. When this failed he asked that it be destroyed when he died. Like many visionary artists he used his art as a way of immortalizing himself. Toward that end, Valenty made great plans for Pecos West--hoping to make a mark on the art world. He wanted to be remembered for his work.

When it turned out that Pecos West was not positively received, he wished to eradicate his link with it. His wish to have Pecos West destroyed was never made formal and so, several years after his death, his cousin Frank Zacharek purchased it from his estate.

Conclusion

Valenty Zaharek and Pecos West clearly fall between the cracks of a variety of art forms--folk, popular, visionary. To the average person Pecos West would qualify as folk art. Yet, to folklorists, it is most definitely not folk art, exhibiting few of the requisite characteristics--shared aesthetic, tradition, and informal transmission. Once again we have an ambiguous case to wrestle with.

Folklorists are continually trying to understand artists like Valenty Zaharek who capture the imagination but are difficult to place within the art world. Using a variety of analytical methods such as idealized models of folk artists, models of visionary artists and life histories, folklorists are looking closely at individual artists, the nature of folk production, and the role of tradition in their idiosyncratic creations. By studying artists who are not easy to categorize, folklorists will

ultimately enhance the study of folk art and visionary art.

Several different approaches have been taken by folklorists looking at these borderline cases. Using an idealized folk artist model, Steve Siporin concludes in his analysis of an idiosyncratic woodcarver that E. H. draws upon his folk culture in producing his art yet is not a full member of his folk group. He is, according to Siporin, an "alienated insider," not an outsider as many visionary artists are portrayed. Steve Ohrn, in Passing Time and Traditions: Contemporary Iowa Folk Artists, examines the work of Paul Friedlein and demonstrates that his "landscape of cement, stone, and flowers"²⁰ has a strong connection with Franciscan traditions. Friedlein was familiar with several grotto builders in the Midwest, Franciscans who had emigrated to the United States from Germany, and frequented their sites. Thus, his work springs from a folk tradition yet has the appearance of a visionary work.

Valenty Zaharek is not an alienated insider, nor does his work have any known connection to a folk tradition. He is more an outsider and a visionary. By using criteria that reach beyond tangibles (such as the particular use of materials) to explore values, hopes, motivations, aspirations, or predisposition of the

artists, we will be better able to unravel the ambiguous and difficult cases which are perceived by the public as folk art.

I have touched on several themes in this thesis--immortality, catharsis, crisis, age, alienation, community, and so forth. In so doing, I hope to bring us closer to a study of visionary art from a less mechanistic standpoint. Any analysis that points in these directions will help both the study of folk art and of the art forms that fall between the cracks.

NOTES

1 Steve Siporin, "The Whittling Edge and the Cutting Edge: Folk Art and the Idiosyncratic Genius," Mimeographed (Boise: Idaho Commission on the Arts, 1985), p. 4.

2

Ibid.

3

All general information regarding Valenty Zaharek is gleaned from interviews conducted by Alfred Schorsch with friends and relatives of Valenty Zaharek during the month of May, 1985. Information was also gathered during private conversations I had with Frank Zacharek in Suitland, Maryland, January-July, 1986.

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Stella Zaharek, private interview at her home conducted by Alfred Schorsch, Tucson, Ariz., May, 1985.

5

Gerald Zaharek, private interview at his home conducted by Alfred Schorsch, Eugene, Oreg., May, 1985.

6

George Latka, private interview at his home conducted by Alfred Schorsch, Sedona, Ariz., May, 1985.

7

Gerald Zaharek.

8

Gerald Zaharek.

9

Johnny Zaharek, private interview at his home conducted by Alfred Schorsch, Tucson, Ariz., May, 1985.

10

George Latka.

11

John Turner and Judith Dunham, "Howard Finster: Man of Visions," in Folklife Annual 1985, ed. by Alan Jabbour and James Hardin (Washington: American Folklife Center, 1985), p. 160.

12

Johnny Zaharek.

13

Gerald Zaharek.

14

Wanda Benzie, private interview at her home conducted by Alfred Schorsch, San Bernadino, Calif., May, 1985.

15 Stella Zaharek.

16 George Latka.

17 Gerald Zaharek.

18 George Latka.

19 Wanda Benzie.

20 Steven Ohrn, ed. Passing Time and Traditions: Contemporary Iowa Folk Artists (Ames: The Iowa State University Press for the Iowa Arts Council, Des Moines, 1984), p. 131.

APPENDIX A: APPLICABILITY OF MODEL TO SIXTEEN
VISIONARY ARTISTS

| | Began work late in life | No academic training | Use salvaged materials | Obsessive | Process Oriented | Religious |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------|---------------------|-----------|
| Dave Butler | CP | CP | CP | P | CP | P |
| Osiek Charley | P | CP | CP | CP | CP | N |
| Cole "Country" Cummings | CP | CP | CP | CP | CP | N |
| S. P. Dinsmore | CP | CP | CP | CP | CP | CP |
| Howard Finster | CP | CP | CP | CP | CP | CP |
| James Hampton | CP | CP | CP | CP | CP | CP |
| Clarence Hesse | P | CP | N | U | P | N |
| Jesse Howard | CP | CP | CP | CP | CP | CP |
| Dressa Prishney | P | CP | CP | CP | CP | N |
| Simon Rodia | P | CP | CP | CP | CP | PP |
| Ed Root | CP | CP | CP | P | P | N |
| Herman Rusch | CP | CP | CP | CP | CP | N |
| Clarence Schmidt | P | CP | CP | CP | CP | N |
| Fred Smith | CP | CP | CP | P | P | N |
| Louis Wippich | CP | CP | CP | CP | P | CP |
| Valenty Zahavak | N | CP | N | CP | CP | N |

CP—clearly present
P—present
PP—possibly present
NP—not present
U—unknown

| | Way of making contact with people | Use art to communicate ideas | Not well liked or understood | Intuitive sense of design | Humor in work | Use to immortalize themselves |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------|
| Dave Butler | P | U | P | CP | CP | N |
| Crack Charley | CP | U | U | CP | P | N |
| Cole "Country" Cummings | CP | N | N | CP | P | N |
| S. P. Dinsmoor | P | CP | P | CP | P | CP |
| Howard Finster | CP | CP | P | CP | CP | PP |
| James Harpoot | P | CP | P | CP | N | PP |
| Clarence Hayes | N | P | N | CP | U | U |
| Jesse Howard | P | CP | CP | CP | CP | N |
| Theresa Prishney | P | N | U | CP | CP | PP |
| Simon Rodia | U | PP | CP | CP | N | P |
| Ed Root | U | U | U | CP | U | N |
| Herman Rusch | CP | U | U | CP | P | CP |
| Clarence Schmidt | N | CP | CP | CP | N | P |
| Fred Smith | CP | PP | CP | CP | U | CP |
| Louis Wippich | U | P | CP | CP | N | CP |
| Valenty Zaharek | CP | CP | CP | CP | CP | CP |

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