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African-American Folk Art in Kentucky

Kentucky Folk Art Center • Morehead, Kentucky

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As the work of "self-taught" or "folk" artists attracted increasing attention in recent decades, several major exhibitions have been mounted which explore the work of self-taught African-American artists, largely from the deep South. These exhibitions generated important new scholarship which began a dialogue on the artists' work.

"African-American Folk Art in Kentucky" provides the first focused examination of work by self-taught African-American artists who were born and raised in this state, or spent the major part of their lives here. The exhibition offers a sampling of the very diverse creative expression of ten Kentucky artists.

To develop this exhibition, I made numerous trips across Kentucky, visiting and getting to know these artists, discussing their work and being graced by their hospitality. Taped interviews brought back the spirit of their words. New understandings I gained with each visit generally raised additional questions:

How do these artists approach their work, and what is its relationship to community? Does the artists' work reflect a shared consciousness, a cultural self-identity reinforced by a history of oppression as African-Americans? What traditions might have been inherited, and become imbedded in the cultural lives of these artists, dispersed as they are around Kentucky at the end of the twentieth century? Are symbols encoded in any of their work, conscious or unconscious, that relate back to any of numerous African cultures as they were at the time of the Middle Passage? If these connections could be made, how had tradition survived, in the face of concerted efforts to extinguish that heritage? How has it retained relevance and importance to the contemporary artist?

Many of these issues are addressed here by two very perceptive scholars in African and African-American art, Dr. Maude Southwell Wahlman and Dr. Amalia K. Amaki, whose provocative and revealing essays establish the basis for future discussion.

There is no one-size-fits-all among these artists. They were born between 1906 and 1963, from a coal camp in the eastern mountains to a rural community not far from the Mississippi River. They live in cities, small towns and out in the country. They have worked as housemaid, sharecropper, janitor, laborer, builder, social service supervisor, pro-basketball player and mortician.

The nine artists I came to know during this project (Willie Massey died in 1990, at the age of 84) have unique stories, faced unique challenges in their lives, and produced their work out of a very personal artistic vision. To draw similarities between them as individuals would superimpose on them a preconceived notion not supported by their personal history. My initial search was for self-taught African-American artists, a quest that yielded ten individual human beings. I was able to speak directly and gain invaluable perspectives from nine out of ten. I was also humbled by the warmth and courtesy of the artists who invited me into their homes, openly sharing their personal history, philosophy, and art.

Without exception, being African-American had a

profound, determining influence on the philosophy behind their creative lives as artists, and their individual choice of subject matter. As the inaugural show in our new museum facility, which has been made possible by Morehead State University, Kentucky Folk Art Center is honored to present this exhibition which represents ten very personal perspectives on the human condition. The scholars speak eloquently about issues relating to elements of ancestral cultures in this art. Above all, we are all blessed by the fact that these individuals' found their own unique voice as visual artists.

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Adrian Swain, *Curator*
Kentucky Folk Art Center
Morehead, Kentucky, 1998

Piano Lesson, 1995
Lavon Van Williams
Wood & Paint
27 1/2 x 23 1/2 x 11
Collection of James & Patricia King

Trace of the Hand, Track of the Spirit

by Dr. Amalia K. Amaki

"We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free from within ourselves."

Writer Langston Hughes penned this statement in 1926, speaking as one of the younger and central voices in the black artistic expression debate that took place during the New Negro era. Also referred to as the Harlem Renaissance because of the abundance and diversity of Black talent that converged in New York's Harlem community during the 1920s, it marked the first public discussion of expressive concepts surrounding black racial identity. At the heart of this exchange was attitudes towards a black folk tradition in America. Activist and historian W.E.B. Dubois and Howard University philosophy professor Alain Locke emerged as the two most respected, influential, and consistent contributors to the dialogue. Dr. DuBois proposed a politicized and figurative art style drawn from cultural references that could serve as verification of progressive Black life in America. Dr. Locke preferred the systematic development of an African-inspired, stylized, nonrepresentational art that exposed the ancestral legacy of African Americans. Presenting his argument in *The New Negro*, Locke also established the basis for the first formal distinction between the work of trained and self-taught artists within the African American contingent.[1] While he and DuBois held different theoretical points of view, particularly in regards to technical considerations, they both strongly rejected the notion of a black aesthetics rooted in a common folk idiom. Hughes, however, saw a hidden treasure in "the creative spirit of the so-called common element. . .those artists who still held their own individuality in the face of American standardization"[2]

By the 1960s, considerations of a folk tradition were no longer a part of the public Black art dialogue. The ideological dichotomy between Black nationalists and integrationists that prevailed in the larger African American population was mirrored in the Black arts community. With this came the tendency to associate folk ways with stereotypical connotations - something most African Americans during the period felt hindered advances in civil rights.[3]

In the meantime, the work of African American artists not academically trained was gradually charting a quiet history of its own. In fact, the first objects fashioned by Blacks in America were folk art forms. These objects, crafted by anonymous slaves beginning shortly after their arrival in the seventeenth century, included figurative woodcarvings, canes, vessels, and textiles. The evolution of folk forms can still be traced in the ceramic and basket weaving traditions in South Carolina and coastal Georgia, the wood carving traditions in Kentucky, Missouri, and Georgia, and the iron works tradition of Louisiana and the South Atlantic states.

There were also individuals whose successes contributed collectively over a period of time to the overall concept of a Black folk art tradition. In 1937, twelve limestone sculptures by William Edmondson were mounted at the Museum of Modern Art. This occurred more than thirty years before an academically trained African American artist would enjoy a solo opportunity at the institution. Edmonson's work was also shown at the Nashville Art Gallery (1941), the Willard Gallery

in New York (1964 and 1971), Tennessee Fine Art Center (1964) and numerous other venues up to the present time. In 1940, roughly one year after Bill Traylor began drawing, his work was displayed at the New South art center in Montgomery, AL and the Fieldston School in New York. In 1964, James Hampton's elaborate tin foil and furniture based assemblage, *Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly*, was placed on loan at the National Museum of American Art, becoming a part of its permanent collection in 1970. Joseph Yoakum gained recognition for his epic landscape drawings through shows at the Sherbeyn Gallery in Chicago in 1968, the Pennsylvania State University Art Museum in 1969, the Art Institute in Chicago in 1971 and the Whitney Museum of American Art the following year. Sister Gertrude Morgan exhibited her work twice in 1970, at the Borenstein Gallery in New Orleans and at La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. That same year, Jesse Aaron's wood carvings were displayed at the University of Florida at Gainesville.

By 1980, there occurred enough solo and group exhibitions supported by written material to confirm the work of self-taught artists as a legitimate manifestation of a distinct American art idiom. Although there was no substantial discourse within the African American sector, the string of subsequent exhibitions, including the highly significant "Black Folk Art In America: 1930-1980" held at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1982, broadened the audience scope of the work, and heightened awareness of the amount of work being done.[4]

At the same time, it exposed the need to pinpoint appropriate terminology around which to frame future serious discussion of the imagery. Against this backdrop, inclusive of a seldom noted history, and amidst the co-existent labels outsider, visionary, self-taught, and even vernacular, the artists continue to work.

The ten artists whose works are included in this exhibition are as profoundly different as their life experiences. Kentucky links them geographically, but they represent a spectrum of types in terms of age, family history, education, career, and ideology. They submit no accounts of supernatural callings or spontaneous urges to create. While a portion of the imagery is fashioned by the hands of believers, there is no overriding religious aspect. None of their objects are dependent upon must-hear stories for appreciation or understanding, in fact, one artist utilizes allegory itself as subject matter. Some of the work is clever, some playful, some poetic, and some quite thought-provoking in other ways. What they share most is an expressive nature. Not in the more literal, technical sense that one might customarily apply it, particularly in reference to art by self-taught individuals, but in terms of their consistent use of imaginative elements as springboards to explorations of the unfamiliar, the speculative, and the fantastic.

Little is known about Willie Massey (1906-1990), whose carvings and paintings reflected his unassuming lifestyle. But there are certain logical assumptions one might draw from such things as his having received some drawing instruction at school along with reading, writing, and arithmetic, and his legacy of hard

work - he milked 50 cows a day and worked the land with a mule team for years. He made utilitarian items for the house he lived in for 52 years, also managing to make portrayals of animals, birds, farm related objects, and later, mixed media pieces.

Tiger With Tree is a simple depiction of a tiger peering pensively at a white spotted bird that is perched on the limb of a dark tree springing from a huge black mound. The lesson here involves recognizing one's limitation, because the work truly is an episode about the tiger and the tree, for it is tree that supplies a safe haven for the bird. In *Adam and Eve* he refers to the unGodly nature of the first biblical couple as snakes in the grass, their black and white stripes possibly iterating this notion, and also symbolizing the choices put before them.

Massey's work does not appear to be intuitively made; rather, it seems to be the result of his resourcefulness, making use of things that were available.

The works of sculptors Lavon Van Williams, Jr. and Willie Rascoe possess characteristics that links them to the hand carving tradition that dates back to pre-civil war days. The surface treatment, simplicity of form, and posturing of the figure in both *Simply Mr. Johnson* and *Piano Lesson* by Williams repeat the fundamental properties of *Preacher*, the work of an unknown nineteenth century Kentucky-based Black carver.[5] The personality of their cuts is similar, as is the way in which both fuse torso and seat into a unified statement of mass. Although Williams pushes these qualities beyond his predecessor, the amount of detailed emphasis on such areas as hair, hands, and feet, as well as the figure's sober gaze, may be traced to the earlier work. However, Williams' personal touch comes through most emphatically in his ability to flatten his highly geometricized and angular free-standing forms to the limit, while maintaining the basic integrity of the subject. This, in turn, creates dramatic contrast between the linear side view and the more massive frontal and back views.

On the other hand, Willie Rascoe transforms driftwood into simple, serpent-like wall pieces reminiscent of the conjuring sticks and walking sticks made during the previous century. Responding to the innate properties in the retrieved wood, he allows ideas to come to him, and carefully studies the possible impact of adding stones, wire, or other objects before completing a work. The end products are haunting, mysterious sculptures that evoke thoughts of ritual, creatures, and other visions. *Within* for example, addresses the ambivalence of perception, and the dual phenomena of seeing and being seen. A vertical abstract reference of the outer oval to the human eye frames an eyeball positioned at the tail of a fish. This is perhaps Rascoe's commentary on how inadequately we see, or how differently, depending upon one's realm of existence. It also touches on the issue of who sees us - shallow swimming fish can be seen through the water. *Death/Life* is equally intriguing and ambiguous. Fashioned in a reptilian pose, flute-like forms extend from its elongated base like vertebrae, with a skull-like head hanging toward the left end as if the trophy from a successful hunt. Its shiny surface adds to the eerie aura, as does the downward angle of the right

end which makes it seem capable of crawling; this despite the likelihood that the bend was inherent in the wood.

Marvin Finn and Charles Williams construct elaborate objects using different methods, materials, and formats pursuant to different goals. Despite the fact that their work is so radically dissimilar, both project a sense of fantasy and whimsy that is embodied in the very nature of their constructions.

Finn's large scale mixed media engines and plywood animals offer a reverse scenario to childhood Christmases when he had no toys. Their most striking feature is the meticulous way in which he paints them, localizing distinctly patterned and solid areas to imply various physical features. The systematic use of color-based stripes, dots, and dashes against a white background are his personal decorative standardbearer. Having grown up around a father who carved walking canes and buggy wheels with spokes, Finn was compelled to make toys at a fairly early age, although, his father made things "straight out".

The mixed media works of Charles Williams are intriguing initially due to formal considerations - their unusual vertical thrust, the interaction of color and texture, and the congregating of writing instruments, tubing, and necklaces to expand the overall sense of a three-dimensional field. But these *Pencil Holders* are even more interesting when considered within the context of communicative functions. Designed in ways that resemble the configuration of wires, tubes and other items making up the inner mechanism of radios or other receivers, *Pencil Holder 3*, for example, also has an antenna extending two feet into the air, pushing the notion that the piece is a receptacle of signals in the airwaves. Similarly, he used round, metal-framed dressing table mirrors atop *Pencil Holder 6*, simulating small satellite dishes that are capable of receiving and transforming signals visually and audibly. At the same time, these assemblages call to mind work stations, with the spread of colorful organizers, clips, pens, rubber bands, tape, and gadgets commonly seen on the desks of many working Americans.

Joan Dance retrieves many ideas for her work from television. Fascinated with its portrayals of people, events and places, particularly Africa, she sketches while watching, and they eventually form the basis for her paintings and mixed media works. Her works are primarily in small scale, and are characterized by simple compositions drawn with a cartoon-like playfulness. Around this, she builds a story. In *Swing Down Sweet Chariot*, she offers a depiction of laundry day with a bit of an edge. With no person in sight, white sheets on a clothes line are being blown to the ground to the left of the image, as an animated, inverted line of clothes appear to dance on the roof of the house. The black pot, which facilitated the cleaning, boils unattended over a red ball of fire. Dance leaves the observer here to wonder about what has happened to the person, or what will happen in their absence. *Everyday Life* is a reenactment of her grandchildren's play-acting a faith healing on their grandfather after watching a Benny Hinn ministries faith healing broad-

cast. Mimicking a mimic, the piece reiterates Dance's attentiveness to character plays and exposes her tendency to reference the simplicity of popular comic-strip sequencing as a storytelling and time frame mechanism. By dividing the paper into four sections, dating each portion, and using captioned dialogue, Dance conveys the complete story in a single format, much like a newspaper comic strip. Through such specific references, she comments more broadly on her philosophy of life - that it is a game, the key to which is hidden in deciphering body language and visual expression.

On the surface, Mark Anthony Mulligan seems to make drawings and paintings of familiar communities, intersections, and thoroughfares that are appealing because of his expressive execution style. One might further conclude, too hastily, that his widespread use of signs indicates a simplified, perhaps even naive, attempt at social commentary - bemoaning the encroachment and impending invasion of commercialism on people's neighborhoods. Closer scrutiny quickly edits such brash interpretations, and opens up the possibility for readings centered around concepts of personal identity. For embedded in Mulligan's visual accounts of urban Kentucky scenes are poems about his relationships and feelings for them. In doing this, he circumvents nostalgia, and hones in on the essence of the place, commenting on the area's most central definers.

Chickasaw Neighborhood, for example, is not just a statement on the physical appearance of the place - it is a character reference - a notation that introduces the community to those of us who do not know it. *Greenbelt Highway* commands similar consideration. Divided roughly into two equal parts, imagery is drawn on the left side of the picture plane, with a poem to the former highway handwritten on the right. Mulligan's homage text is really a self-eulogy, as he speaks to his own mortality through a poetic monologue on the death of the roadway. The monochromatic push of the lone green color of the fading highway is more than a visual play on the name, it is also a metaphor for life, which Mulligan concedes is declining away.

The work of Helen LaFrance is closely associated with affection for her home place. Having satisfied childhood impulses to create by drawing in the dirt, this tendency, in retrospect, seems both appropriate and prophetic. In oil paintings that frequently depict people in outdoor settings, LaFrance subtly emphasizes the characteristics of the physical terrain, transferring her figures to a secondary position. Her tactics are not overt, and are best recognized when analyzing the considerable spaces in which she places figurative references.

Homecoming is a quasi-panoramic view of the breadth of activity and array of people that converge at a funeral sites. But in spite of the allusion, the true focal point in this painting is the land. The allegory is in its huge trees, its big sky, its expanse, and its tremendous daylight. By scattering the people throughout, defining them in dabs of color and gestures, LaFrance minimizes the overbearing potential of the spacial com-

ponent. The scene is also presented from her standard vantage point, namely, a distant perspective behind the backs of the majority of the people in the scene. This, too, allows the implications of space to become grander in subtle ways, and becomes an avenue for greater commentary on the character of the places portrayed.

O'Leary Bacon paints with just the opposite intent. Shaped to some degree by her twenty-four year career as a public welfare officer for the state of Kentucky, she focuses on situations that offer revealing data about the human spirit and the human condition. Extracting ideas from memory and news items, her stark portrayals of unspecified, but universally understood events gives her work an edge that is almost contradictory to the controlled, orderly style in which she paints. In *First Day*, a lone Black student hides behind a fixed gaze as she makes her way to school protected by armed soldiers, and being taunted by a mob of angry whites. Placing the faceless guards' backs in the foreground to the left, and reducing the mob to a sea of vague outlines of faces and gestures angled off to the right, Bacon contrasts the girl's dark isolated face with the space between the two guards' shoulders. Without tagging the episode, she creates a climate that strikes a familiar cord with almost any observer in America. *Was It A Dream or A Memory From The Back Of The Bus* has the same loaded impact. Here, however, Bacon uses a title that, in and of itself, sets up a number of ambivalent possibilities. How the question is perceived, and the subsequent answer contemplated, are dependent upon the time frame one applies.

Zephra May-Miller makes plastic clothes because, to her, people are two-face-ted. For that reason, her garbage bag creations are reversible, reflecting the dual nature of human beings. She further believes that the commonality of these everyday items tears down barriers between her and other people, "letting them into her space". *Hit The Mark* and *Fit To Be Tied* are two examples of her unusual designs. Riddled with double entendres, *Hit The Mark* is a multi-layered black and white ensemble with large bulls-eyes strategically located over the most vulnerable parts of the body. The complete outfit includes a second top layer, a hat and a matching purse, all targeted. In one respect, it is a blatant reminder of the amount of energy and effort put into protecting who we really are, and yet we remain extremely vulnerable. On the other hand, it's title plays off the phrase "to hit on", as in to flirt with, to woo - a situation in which the female is always the target as male attempts to "get" her. This creates a situation where players on both sides of the equation run the risk of being exposed. *Fit To Be Tied* alludes to similar ideas, its see-through weave signifying the ultimate futility of hiding, especially from oneself. Also, this phrase can be associated with a state of anger where one is out of control - in a position to, potentially show one's true colors - constituting yet another brand of vulnerability. The greater irony is the fact that May-Miller selects articles developed to be discarded - garbage bags - to simulate objects we attempt to preserve for an extended period of time, namely,

clothing. More broadly stated, clothes can be used to project a false self-image. Plastic garbage bags provide a strong analogy for the fragileness of such behavior.

And yet, in the final analysis, the work of Zephra May-Miller may emerge as the quintessential statement on American vernacular art; for that matter, the work of any of these ten might. Because with art, when the path of the hand leaves a definite trace, and that trace is on track with the spirit, anything can happen; something good generally does.

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Notes

[1] Prior to the 1920s, exhibitions of work by African American artists of varying degrees of training, backgrounds, and styles were mounted with no overt classifications being made. After *The New Negro* by Alan Locke was published in 1922, the dialogue it perpetuated raised the sensitivity of the art community in general towards both the subject matter and the manner in which art objects by African Americans were formed

[2] Hughes, Langston. The Negro Artist and The Radical Mountain in *Nation* (June 1926), p. 694.

[3] By the early 1960s, the term folk alone had become somewhat like socio-political dynamite within the context of African American life. The climate was such that many Blacks associated references to folk ways with (1) a stereotypical way of life, experienced by poor, uneducated Blacks of the rural south; and, (2) a throw-back to a past that was diametrically opposed to the objectives of the freedom movement.

[4] Many exhibitions that proved important to the careers of African American self-taught artists were not exclusively focused on Black artists. Naives and Visionaries, organized by the Walker Center in Minneapolis in 1974, and Contemporary Southeastern Folk Art, mounted by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem in 1986, are two examples.

[5] Located at the Art Institute of Chicago, *Preacher*, is believed to have been carved between 1850 and 1860, and is one of the most naturalistic examples by an African American from the era.

Kentucky African-American Vernacular Arts

by Dr. Maude Southwell Wahlman

In Africa and the New World, knowledge is often passed from one gifted or visionary individual to another gifted person, usually identified while a child by society elders. Thus cultural knowledge passed from the most knowledgeable person in a group to the person most likely to safeguard and enhance that knowledge. Knowledge in Africa may include knowing how to create medicine, music, stories, divinations, dances, costumes, masks, charms, sculpture, written signs and paintings put on walls, on the ground or on people. Knowledgeable people are priests or priestesses, healers, diviners, conjurers. In Africa the deeper significance of religious symbolism was usually revealed only to those who had earned titles. "Like the spoken word, the transcribed word must remain indistinct and allusive; knowledge may thus rest secure in the shadowy realm of the aged or the exceptionally gifted."[1]

Arts preserve cultural traditions even though the social context of traditions may change. When African religious ideas reappeared in the New World, they often took different forms and meanings and were sometimes transmitted in different ways. They survived because, as essential tools of survival, they were encoded in a multiplicity of forms: rituals, visual arts, songs, dance, and speech. Yet the encoding is not simple to decode. Thus, knowledge of ideas and techniques for making arts will not necessarily be transmitted within a family, nor will the deeper levels of meaning always be known to everyone in a community.

Because knowledge of folk arts is often passed from one generation to another by example, and often without verbal explanations for the religious symbols encoded in many forms, some African-Americans, and most Americans in general, may be unaware of the meanings underlying the forms used in African-American folk arts. Yet, African-American artists often revive visual images from the culture of their childhoods, for many grew up surrounded by symbolic visual forms which surface in their adult arts.

To conjure is to call upon spiritual or ancestral powers to activate a charm, to cure a sickness, or heal an emotional or physical wound. Thus in the United States, African-Americans with spiritual talents are sometimes referred to as conjuremen, conjurewomen, or hoodoo doctors.[2]

That so many African-American folk artists create art with visual ties to African and African-Latin-American religious concepts indicates that many artists may be consciously or unconsciously reviving and reformulating earlier cultural systems which valued these forms and ideas highly.

For example, personal religious visions, or spirit-possession, are an essential aspect of African-American religious traditions in certain communities; while in Africa, religious visions, in the form of possession by a god, are not idiosyncrasies but roles in religious ceremonies. Spirit possession was incorporated into African-Christianity and reinterpreted in Christian terms. Roger Bastide realized in 1971 that "If some traces of their African past survive, these manifest themselves, not in their day-to-day existence, but rather when the individual closes his eyes and drifts off into the nocturnal world of dreams."[3]

As we learn more about complex African religious

systems, we also learn that individual spirit diviners may know only a fraction of the system. "But immersion in a culture means that, in the end, all the pieces fit together and it is possible for an individual to perceive, if only unconsciously, how he or she relates to the society... The mere performance of ritual is in itself a prayer for the perpetuation of a complex reality."[4]

Young African men and women remembered aspects of various African artistic techniques and religious traditions when they came to the New World starting in the 17th century. But they may not have known the total religious systems of their cultures. The first Africans mixed and sorted aspects of their own traditions, then combined them with Euro-American and Native American ideas to create unique religions and art forms suited to the new cultures they faced. We call this blending of ideas, from various cultural traditions, creolizing. Tracing this creolizing process of cultural blending and the emergence of new art forms and practices helps us decode African-American visual arts and better understand the historical processes whereby arts preserve cultural heritages, even if unconsciously, in a new environment.

Another key to understanding African-American folk arts is the aesthetic principle of improvisation, an African and African-American contribution to American aesthetics. Improvisation is the principle of ever changing and ever evolving forms. Jazz and Blues are good examples for music. A good visual example may be an African-American quilt with 12 squares: one may be a reproduction of a standard Anglo-American quilt top pattern such as the "Cotton Leaf" or "Bear's Paw." In Euro-American quilts, usually all the other 11 squares may be reproductions of the first, with the same color, schemes, shapes, and arrangements. In an African-American patchwork quilt, the other 11 squares may all be very different from the first; they may be variations on a theme. Thus one ends up with 12 variations of the Bear's Paw pattern. Some squares have similar materials; many introduce new patterns or colors. Some follow the same arrangement of triangles and squares; other reverse the positions of some elements.[5]

Improvisation and evolution are essential to the history and the vitality of African-American folk arts. This makes for difficult, challenging, and exciting research. But if we understand that African-American folk arts were in many ways, basically religious forms of protection, then we can understand why constant innovation was important. Improvisation adds aesthetic features which give African-American arts their unique styles but also protect them from easy interpretation, copying, or predictability. By constantly changing their arts, African-American cultures cannot be predicted. If society cannot predict what Africans will do next, it cannot build any traps, cannot categorize the people or their arts into any boxes; African-American arts cannot be dismissed as primitive, simplistic, or "just folk."

Many African-American artists were inspired by visions and taught themselves to make the arts which satisfied the messages of their dreams. Some learned certain techniques as children from relatives, priests or priestesses (conjuremen and conjurewomen in African-

American cultures), or from friends, and then forgot these skills while earning a living and raising children, only to come back to the creative urge late in life. Their ways of learning are as just as legitimate as institutional ones. The important criteria should be creativity, and the creative vision, no matter how one is taught.

African-American vernacular arts preserve important aspects of African value systems, particularly writing systems and charm making traditions. We are however, in many instances, examining the disparate cousins in a large family of art styles whose ancestral forms no longer exist. One must assume some stability in the transmission of African ideas over the last two hundred years, but we must also be aware that we are comparing 20th century examples from Africa and the New World without access to the African forms which must have been remembered by Africans who came to the New World. What is so overpowering is the similarity between contemporary forms perpetuated by Africans and African-Americans who were, most often, separated by the Atlantic ocean for over 100 years.

The African-American arts from Kentucky which are featured in this exhibit are delightful examples of creativity and aesthetic vision, but they are also encoded messages full of information about African and African-American cultural values. The painters carry on the ancient African traditions of painting images on any material available - walls, the ground, bodies, and cloth. O'Leary Bacon, Joan Dance, and Mark Anthony Mulligan paint from memory, from dreams, and from a fascination with the beauty of nature and people. Mark Anthony Mulligan in particular seems to be continuing the tradition of secret African signs used to encode important concepts, in this case his personal religious interpretation of logos.

Sculptors are the charm makers, creating personal protective assemblages in a very African tradition, yet overflowing with African-American improvisation. Marvin Finn, Willie Massey, Willie Rascoe, Charles Williams and Lavon Van Williams are all telling us a lot about their values in their arts. And Zephra May-Miller continues the traditions of centuries of costume makers in her explosive textiles. Rather than explain how each artist fits into African and African-American cultural traditions of priest, priestess, conjuremen or women, I would rather let them speak for themselves, as they so eloquently do.

O'Leary Bacon

"I quit my job in 1991. I was feeling the need to get out there with this mirror and begin healing the souls of African Americans. That was my whole focus: healing the souls of African Americans. So in April I wrote a prayer to God, and this is the blueprint. I wrote that it is time for me to begin the healing process. So the next day I felt pretty comfortable about it. I looked at my assets. I had a nest egg that I thought I might as well use. So I said I will do this and see what I'm made of.

"In Cincinnati I had shown my work at various galleries, and they had the gall to throw me out because my frames were too much. They'd never seen anything like this. 'Look at that color,' I said, 'You will

wish, you will gnash your teeth before your hand, because I'm coming back.' And every time I got a rejection like that it fueled myself with the power to achieve, because I refused to be insulted.

"It was on my birthday, December 16th, 1989, and I had seen on the news, Bush in Czechoslovakia. They began, at the end of the ceremony, to sing, 'We Shall Overcome,' and Bush was looking terribly uncomfortable, and the people were very enthusiastic and I thought, Yeah, we should be over here cleaning up some of these liberties. So the next morning this thought comes to me and I'm seeing Miss Liberty mending the Liberty Bell. I could see in my mind's eye, two black guys, Miss Liberty would be up on a high hill, the black guys would be at the bottom pointing at her and laughing and slapping hands, and the whole idea was just tremendously funny. So I came home and I realize that it's not funny anymore, the masses are probably waiting for our county to show leadership. It's regrettable that people come here expecting liberty and don't find it. Freedom isn't what it ought to be here, and we need to be about the business of mending up this crack.

"My purpose in doing art is not only to lift up the esteem of black people but to depict us as human beings because in this country we have been robbed of it and are still robbed of it. Therefore when I paint, I paint my soul. When I paint my soul, I paint yours and everybody else's on the feeling level. That's where I draw on the social work part because social work aims at the feeling, the underlying thing that's causing the problem. I have some stuff that's really, really graphic that tells you exactly how I feel as a person to some of the things that happened to the great underdog. I'm about harmonizing."

Everyday Life, 1997
Joan Dance
Mixed Media
10x14
On loan from the artist

Joan Dance

"I think life is special. Every little thing that you do. Every day that you wake up it's a brand new day and you ought to be happy about it. Two maple trees, and in the fall, when you walk underneath them it's like being in a fairyland, almost. I took the kids to walk under them one day and I told them that this what they're supposed to get, when you look up through them you get that feeling and try to put it in your pocket so to speak, and keep it to keep you going on the dark days when things are bad. Things like that or maybe a starry night...anything that's really beautiful...just take that and try to get it on inside of

you and save it. A tree or sunset. And they're getting the hang of it because yesterday, after the storm, Brittany went and threw back the curtain and said 'Look, Grandma' and the sky was pink, and blue and a lot of colors. They could later put it into their life or into their paintings too, or whatever they try to do.

"All of a sudden I got the urge to do this church - my church I belong to. I didn't want to do it but it kept on and on. It was like I just had to do it or I would die, to paint or sketch the church. So finally I just went on and did it. After that I did some more churches and then I started putting people around the churches, and then I started drawing other things. I haven't stopped since. Strange... A church is just a building...we are really the church. There are all kinds of people in a church. A church is made up of what we would call 'good' people and 'bad' people and all colors of people and from different walks of life. It was strange because after I got that one church did, I felt relief, but then I started doing the other churches. I have sketched and drawn and painted every day since then. So I figured maybe the whole thing is some form of gift. Before I started painting, I was nervous, but when I'm painting I'm not nervous at all.

"Some of my paintings come from memories, and some from those African pictures. While I'm watching TV, I'm sketching whatever I see or I use that as a jumping off point to just paint something else that comes to mind. I just fill up the sketchbook. While I'm watching a program I might get 10 or 12 sketches, and then I transfer the sketches to the watercolor paper or board and paint it, that's it.

"It's like it has a mind of it's own once you start. Sometimes it's not at all like you wanted it to be. In fact, I'm not good enough just to say, I'm going to do this and then go on and do it. I would rather have it this way."

Helen LaFrance

"When I was just a little kid, when we was all at home, Momma used to buy us, well, she called them 'painting pencils.' We called them colored crayons, and I thought that was the best smelling thing I ever did smell. She would give us these old, think Big Chief tablets, you know, with real rough paper. I thought I was in seventh heaven, cause on rough leaf tablets your paint would be good on that, not slick like a good tablet. I would fill up mine...I had rabbits and horses and everything all over the trees. She'd hold my hand and show me how to draw something. She was always busy doing something. I'd ask her, I'd say, 'Momma come help me...' and she'd dry her hands or wash her hands, and come help me, then she'd go back to whatever she was doing. Sometimes we'd be out in the fields and we'd stop to rest. Well, I would draw things in the dirt, in the dust, when we would be under a tree resting.

"I used to make dolls for my sisters out of wood and tobacco stalks, or whatever would be handy. I just did it myself. I started carving when I was a kid. I guess it's something handed down from my Daddy's side, cause he could take a big ax, a double bladed ax,

and just hold a board in his hand and cut a circle just like that. The dolls, they all moved. You put a screw and a screw eye together and that doesn't wear out like a string would.

"I used to paint off and on when I got a little money, but a little paint, not all the time though. When I was 40 something. In 1986 I started painting full time, after they all died, and I didn't have anybody to talk to or go see, or have to come to see me. I had time, all the kids grown up, except the grandkids - they don't get in my way anymore, so I had plenty of time then. It gave me something to do, something I always wanted to do. Finally I had time to do it. Every night I dream about them. About my sisters and my Momma and my Grandma, and all of them. My Father was 82 or 83 when he died. When I sleep at night I think about things. I guess I dream about it. And sometimes things just cross my mind. I remember when we were kids and I used to go up on the hill and there were trees up there on the hill and I remember how the shadows looked and how the cows would stand under the trees in the shade. Like how Grandma used to hang all her clothes out on the line on pretty days and the wind would blow them up. All that comes back to me. It never leaves me, it's just in the back of my head all the time."

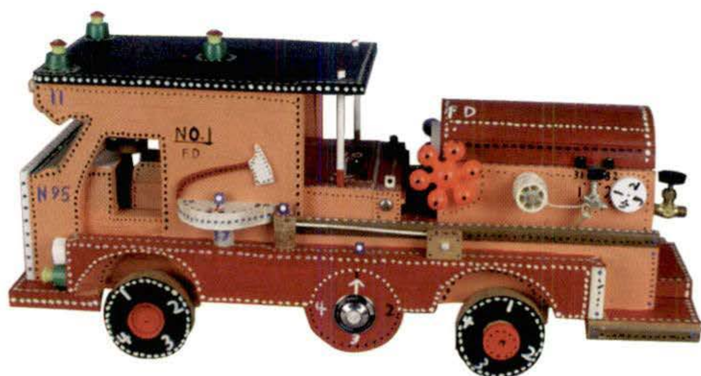
Mark Anthony Mulligan

"When I was about either five or four years old, I saw my first petroleum or chemical oil company sign. It was on Gibson Lane. To me Gulf looked like it's smiling at me, and to me Ashland is like it's laughing. And to me Chevron looks like this, kind of grinning. Marathon looks kind of like it's lonely, and needs a partner, I mean a girlfriend. And Exxon to me looks like it's dozing off...the double X, see. I don't only do petroleum signs. I do Interstate signs, grocery or supermarket signs, soda-pop signs like Pepsi, Coke, 7-Up. I try to do liquor signs, like Sterling beer, I can do that.

"Sometimes it's the shape, what it looks like, far away, or near me, and sometimes it could be the name or the colors, or the logo itself. For example, to me Ashland stands for ASk His Love And Never Doubt. Gulf stands for God's Unique Love Forever. And Mobil, to me that stands for MOre BIble Lovers. Exxon, well, this is crazy, this don't make no sense: Extra XerOx Novels! That don't make no sense. Now I don't like BP, it's too plain. To me it means Blood Press. Texaco, I think that stands for Texas Oil Company. It was the ugliest logo around, but I drew it anyway. I'm just crazy about these signs."

Marvin Finn

"I've had many a Christmas, man, I didn't even get a stick of candy, but toys, the older I got the more interested I got. I'd make something different every day. After I got laid off from this job back in 1963, I just went to the lumber yard, get me an armful of these sticks and things, and come on back and start work. I'd put all the ropes and things on (a large model crane) and I made the dipper where it'd work. I



Fire Engine, 1980's
Marvin Finn
Mixed Media
14 x 31 x 12 1/2
Collection of Shelly & Kenny Zegart

used to be fascinated working on the big machines there.

"When my wife was living, we lived in the West End. When Christmas come, I never did buy no toys, I made my own toys. If the kids didn't like it, we'd just have to go somewhere and make 'em some toys .

"That (giraffe) there, I made it where he went up to the ceiling when I got through with it. This thing here, that's a bull with bicycle handlebars on it for horns. I can see this big Caterpillar, I mean they don't make 'em no more, great big huge thing. I'd follow that thing all day, you know, to see how it works. Now that Eagle would stretch across that window there. Back in the country, look like I can just see them eagles now, flying in the woods, and all that stuff just stayed with me 'til I got to be an old man. I could still make the same thing, well, it might be something, might look real.

"My Dad used to make walking canes, made all kinds of things. He made buggy wheels, spokes. Well, I could do the same. I stayed up under him all the time, and I watched him. I could take a stick, and carve, and make any kind of walking cane I want. I put designs on mine.

"There was a man in Alabama - my Dad lived on his brother's farm - this guy had eight head of work ox. Man, I could follow them things all day, I'd go in the woods when he was cutting logs. Well, I said one of these days I'm going to make all that stuff. Fast as I'd make one of these big things somebody'd come along and talk me out of it. Now there'd be eight of them, I knew every one of them work ox's name. Well, if I wanted to, I could get rich off just these bulls."

Willie Massey

"Nothing but just took it up in my head. Just whatever I take a notion to make. I start on it and they just wind up what they will be. I just take it up and make any kind of color paint I want. I used to use a lot of walnut varnish.

"I had one (bird house) once out there (in the yard); bird had younguns in it. A big old chicken snake, he went up in there, he ate all of the little birds."

Massey was born in 1906 in Salem, Kentucky, and died in 1990. He had seven brothers and three sisters.

He went to school maybe one or two days out of the week and learned to read and write and figure. He also learned to draw in school.

He had been making things since the 1930s, but didn't work at it regularly until later. He milked 50 cows a day, for $50 a week and a house to live in. He made a lot of utilitarian things for his house, then began making sculptures, which he referred to as "tricks," after his wife died. He had worked the land with mule teams for years when he farmed. Over the years he carved mules and fashioned model plows, chairs, benches, and a wide variety of animals and birds. Asked if would continue making sculpture, he said: "As long as my hands don't get like my legs, where I can't use them. I hope they won't. One reason I do it is because I can't do nothing else. I guess if I could work I'd do it at night. That's when I do most of it anyway, at night. Most every night."

Willie Rascoe

"I start out with a piece of wood and then I react to it. Sometimes my mind goes into the wood and I bring it out. That just comes out automatically. It's just natural to me as far as making the faces like African faces. There has got to be a source. I know it comes from ancestors back and years ago. My native ancestors were from Africa so, in other words, it floated on down, and floated to Willie Rascoe, this knowledge, the attitude and the forms. It's unconscious. To me that's true art.

"I have all these component parts all laid out, and then I'll choose this one goes there or this one, or like copper wire would be good to make a band that would look appropriate for the piece, or these stones they would look good, and I have everything laid out, then I can choose from what I've got and see if it will correspond and fit the piece, and 9 times out of 10, I just don't start on it because I grabbed it and picked it up. I sit down and study it. I'll study it first. Sometimes I'll take a day. Thoughts come across my mind, and I'll leave it alone, until I feel like I'm satisfied with this part I want to add to a piece and I'll go from there. It gets kind of complicated in a way, then. It's not so complicated because everything is what Willie Rascoe is doing, there's nothing that has to be drawn down, that's the fun part. It's just a fun thing to express through your thoughts, through your imaginary vision, and to be able to use your hands, but not only to use your hands but to use your mind, to put it into the form. A lot of people work with their hands but they can't imagine.

"When I use these bones or stones or claws, all this stuff is just right out there in nature, and there's nothing that you have to go out and buy. It's something that you're the controller of it when you get these products in your hands. These elements that you're working with, when you put it together, it's just like a gift. You've got to wonder how rrt's packing this feeling here. Once you come up with that concept of how this can work with this, and how this can work with this, then you put it together, and it's satisfaction.

"I like to stay as close to nature as I can, and since

all this material around here is just out there. To me some of the greatest art comes from things that's already in front of your face, and you'll be the one that's chosen to get out the very true meaning of pieces that you work on, that's your gift. When I use stones, it seems like something that's inside that says 'combine this piece of bone, or combine this piece of stone,' seems like we're talking to each other a lot of concentration, a lot of study and sometimes you're debating with yourself. Do I want this? Or is this going to overload the piece? Deep down inside, when I finish a piece, nine times out of ten, I can feel, right there at the edge of finishing, whether I'm really satisfied with that piece or not. Seems like it's saying 'Thank you.' "

Charles Williams

"When I was a little boy, I used to dream of one day having a car, like the old man. So I would take an ordinary chair and sit on my porch and nail an old lard can top to the banister, with a piece of wood for gearshift. I made my own fantasy car. For a University of Kentucky art welding project I re-created that same thing, but with car parts, mirrors, ashtray, and a garbage can lid for convertible top. I found some motorcycle mufflers for it."

Williams grew up with his grandparents in a coal camp near rural Hazard, Kentucky. When he was a teenager he moved from the mountains to be with his mother in Chicago; a difficult adjustment, but he kept teaching himself to draw from comic books. After high school and Job Corps he moved to Lexington, and after several unsatisfying jobs took university classes and "went through a whole lot of art books." He remembers three teachers he learned the most from. Sketching from live nude models shocked him at first. Williams' progress, from painting on a flat canvas to sculpture, was a personal Renaissance: "You don't want it on the wall, you want it out there with you, where you can touch it, and make the audience get up, look at it closely, walk around it. It's there in three dimensions, like you."

Lavon Van Williams

"During the 60s they went so far back into African art, to the traditional African pieces, until they had forgotten the variations of African-American Art. They began to manufacture traditional African pieces so it killed a lot of African-American traditional stuff because people went too far back.

"When I was carving with my brother, he carved better than I did at the time, at least I thought he did. He always used to say, 'Well you know, you carve just as good as I do. You should just go ahead and do your own work.' When he carved for me it was like an awakening, because I could see a piece. Basically I didn't know what was going to happen because I put lines down, and so I could get something, you know, a great energy out of it. He would get in the middle of the thing and change it. He said however it hit him is what he did to it. And now I understand it.

"If you're trying to make a woman, you're not try-

Pencil Holder, 1997
Charles Williams
Mixed Media
Permanent collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center

ing to do the most beautiful woman in the world. You're probably trying to express the soul or the inner part or the personality of a person, more so than trying to capture the exact image, like a photograph would do.

"You want to try to be as expressive as possible, as explosive as possible. You're looking for a fantastic movement or a fantastic shape that comes in the piece, and that's the whole power to the piece. You're looking really for power to come out of the pieces. You want it to explode out when the viewer sees it or you want it to be calm, but yet you still want a powerful presence in the piece, so that it dominates or takes off."

Zephra May-Miller

"Ms. Jerry Ferguson first called me a "Bag Lady" because I'd always take food to everybody at the Cathedral. I'd give food to all these people sitting there, bring them a lunch.

"I was crocheting yarn and she entered me in the Kentucky State Fair in Fine Arts and Crafts. I ran out of yarn. I saw a garbage can, and I jumped up and grabbed a garbage bag, clipped it up, tied it up, and won the blue ribbon. I remember when Big Momma (her great aunt) used to make us mats and vests out of bread sacks, twisted up, rough with string and crochet, so it wasn't unusual for me. I believe in recycling and using what I've got.

"The reason why I create wearable clothes, two faced, is because human beings are two faceted - these are the shadow of people, people who have been mistreated. Everything I create come from deep within me; it's a very personal thing. I always felt that each person is unique, and that if we follow that spirit, that we can come out with what's bothering us, and not be so much influenced. I get focused.

"I just use it, my skill, as a vehicle to let our people to come into my personal space. People say, 'Can we touch it...that's not garbage bags!' 'Well, it really is garbage bags.' I say, 'I told you it was garbage bag plastic. And now that you have walked into my personal

space, how's your day? You have God on you.' Then we try to get a better understanding. We all people need to be reaching our hands out.

"Please let it be known that this is the bag lady of Louisville, Smoketown. Smoketown is an African-American community, and we're celebrating 131 years as Louisville's oldest African-American community, and this was our 6th annual Smoketown Festival, and we had over 2,000 attend from all over the state. God allowed me to design the Smoketown Community Monument," (abstracted boxing gloves about 12 feet tall fabricated out of textured sheet steel) "for our community, because of Mohammed Ali, and because of Jimmy Ellis and Rodale Stitch," (who all grew up there). "I gave the design; Jesus gave me the design."

Conclusion

One has to admire the courage of these artists; the depth of their feelings and creativity, as well as the originality of their arts. One can argue that with its sincerity and improvisation, African-American vernacular visual art is just as important an American contribution to world arts as Jazz or Blues.

Dr. Maude Southwell Wahlman, Fellow
W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research
Harvard University

Notes

[1] Sarah Brett-Smith, "Speech Made Visible: The Irregular as a System of Meaning," Empirical Studies of the Arts, 2, No. 2, 1984, p145.

[2] Hoodoo being a derivation from Vodun. However, many African-Americans shy away from that term due to the negative publicity that the media have attached to it.

[3] Roger Bastide, African Civilizations in the New World. NY: Harper & Row, 1971, p213.

[4] Lyall Watson, Lightenbird. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982, p79.

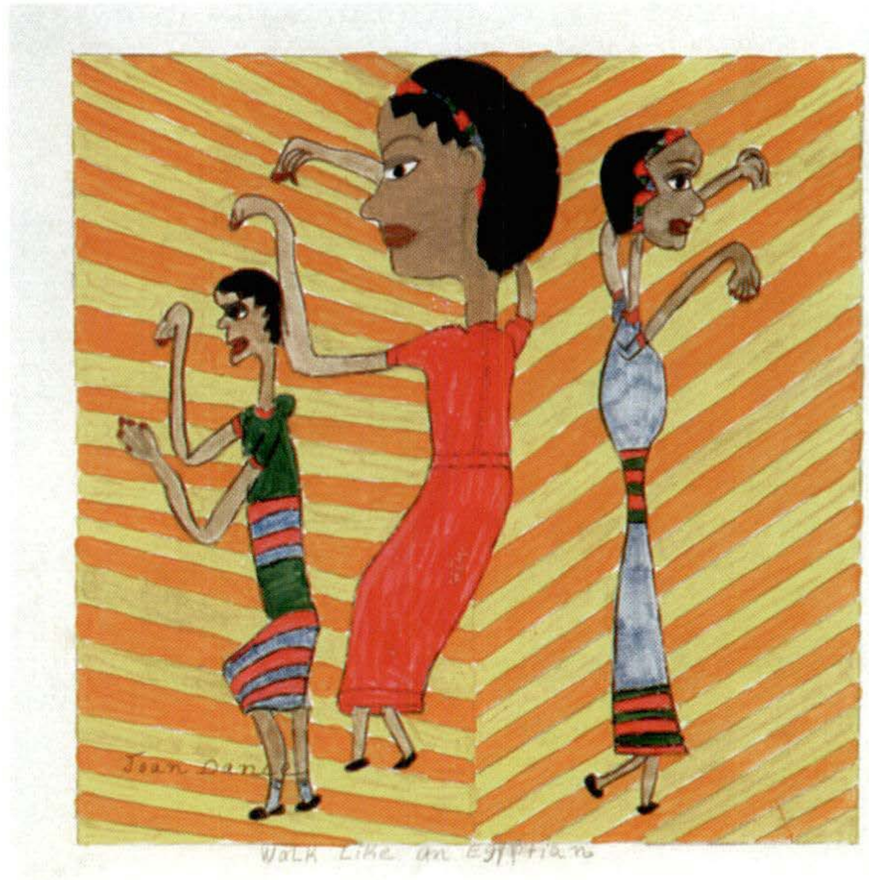
[5] Maude Southwell Wahlman, Signs and Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts. NY: Penguin, 1993.

Interviews with artists by Adrian Swain, 1993-1998, except Willie Massey, interviewed by John Blubaugh, 1989.

*Chitlins, Babe,*1986
O'Leary Bacon,
Oils
48x48
On loan from the artist

O'Leary Bacon

Born 1944, in Louisville, she attended school there, graduated from Kentucky State College, and later earned a Masters degree in Social Work from Loyola University. She worked for the state for 24 years, beginning in 1967, and became supervisor of a multi-county social service office. In the 1980's she taught herself to paint, and quit her career in 1991 to be an artist full-time. O'Leary Bacon lives in a studio/apartment in Cincinnati, where she paints daily and frequently conducts Harmony programs for groups of visiting school children and adults.



Walk Like an Egyptian, 1995
Joan Dance,
Acrylics & Markers
10x10
Permanent collection of
Kentucky Folk Art Center

Joan Dance

Born 1940, in Paducah, Kentucky, where she still lives. Joan, who has four grown children, wrote poetry for many years before becoming an artist. In 1994 she felt compelled to do a drawing of her church. She then drew more churches and began incorporating people in these compositions. She began painting and her work soon expanded to non-church subjects. Her work features new interpretations of scenes from everyday life, with special emphasis on children, children's games, and dramatic portrayals of common, interpersonal relationships.

Marvin Finn

Born 1917, in Clio, Alabama, he learned to carve as a child from watching his share-cropper father. Once grown, he moved to join one of his 9 brothers in Hazard, Kentucky, then migrated on the Louisville area around 1944. He has lived in Louisville, since the early 1950s, presently in the Smoketown area. Raising a family, Finn began making toys for his children, including intricate machines with functioning, moving parts. For many years now, he has made painted wood sculpture, and is probably best known for his brightly painted plywood roosters. He makes use of inexpensive or found materials wherever possible.

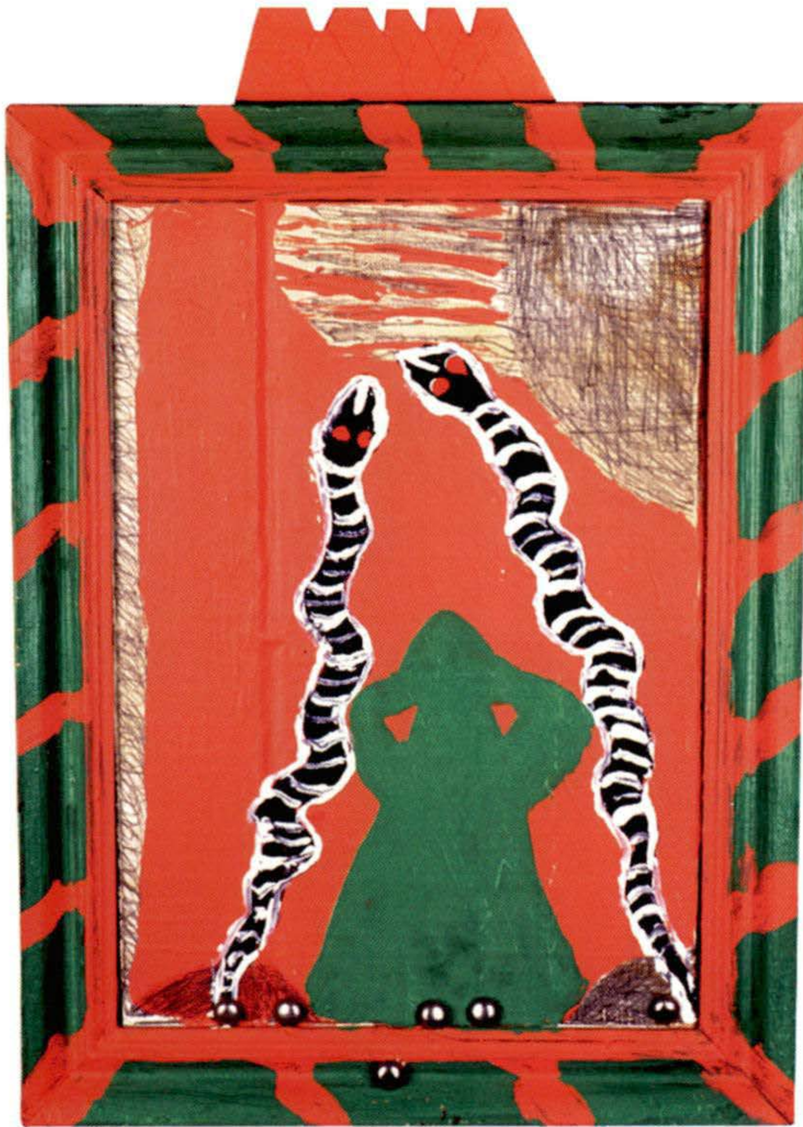
Three-Headed Goose, 1984
Marvin Finn
Painted Wood
53 x 20 x 8
Collection of Jacque Parsley & Tom Henrion

Saturday Night, Pete's Place, 1997
Helen LaFrance
Oils
21 1/2x33
On loan from Gus Van Sant

Black Woman, circa 1990
Helen La France
Mixed Media
20 x 8 x 6
Collection of John & Anne Miller

Helen LaFrance

Born 1919, in Boaz, a rural village in extreme western Kentucky, where she continues to reside. Helen loved to draw as a child when she also learned, by trial and error, how to make dolls out of readily-available materials. She made numerous carved wooden figures with movable limbs, and has painted for many years. She took up painting full-time after her sisters and parents had all died and her grandchildren were grown. She says that memories provide her richest source of subject matter.



Adam & Eve, 1989
Willie Massey
Acrylics
18 1/2 x 12 1/2
Collection of John & Anne Miller

Willie Massey

Born 1906, in Salem, Kentucky. Died 1990, Brown, Kentucky. As a farmer all his working life, he learned how to make things, to meet practical needs and also to satisfy his creative drive. Later in life, Massey began making sculpture and towards the end produced numerous paintings. His choice of materials was both practical and ingenious.

Snowflake, 1994
Zephra May-Miller
Plastic Garbage Bags
Modeled by Michelle Ruff
Permanent collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center

Zephra May-Miller

Born 1943, in Indianapolis, she has lived in the Smoketown community of Louisville, since she was a few weeks old. Married young, Zephra worked several years as a mortician, for her grandfather, a prominent local funeral director. She lived briefly in Spain when her husband was in the army. In the late 1970's she attended Jefferson Community College for a period of time. She discovered plastic bags as a raw material by chance, and credits her technique to watching her great-aunt "Big Momma" as a child.

Chickasaw Neighborhood, 1989
Mark Anthony Mulligan
Markers
22 x 28
Gorman/Linn Collection

Mark Anthony Mulligan

Born 1963, Chickasaw/Rubbertown area of Louisville, Mark Anthony learned to draw and paint as a young adult, while living on the streets. Fascinated since childhood by the ever-present commercial signs of his home community, these visual landmarks gave rise to his own unique urban landscapes, where actual corporate logos, and imaginary street and business signs are intermixed.

Within, 1995
Willie Rascoe
Wood,Copper, Animal Hoof & Paint
23 x 9
On loan from artist

Willie Rascoe

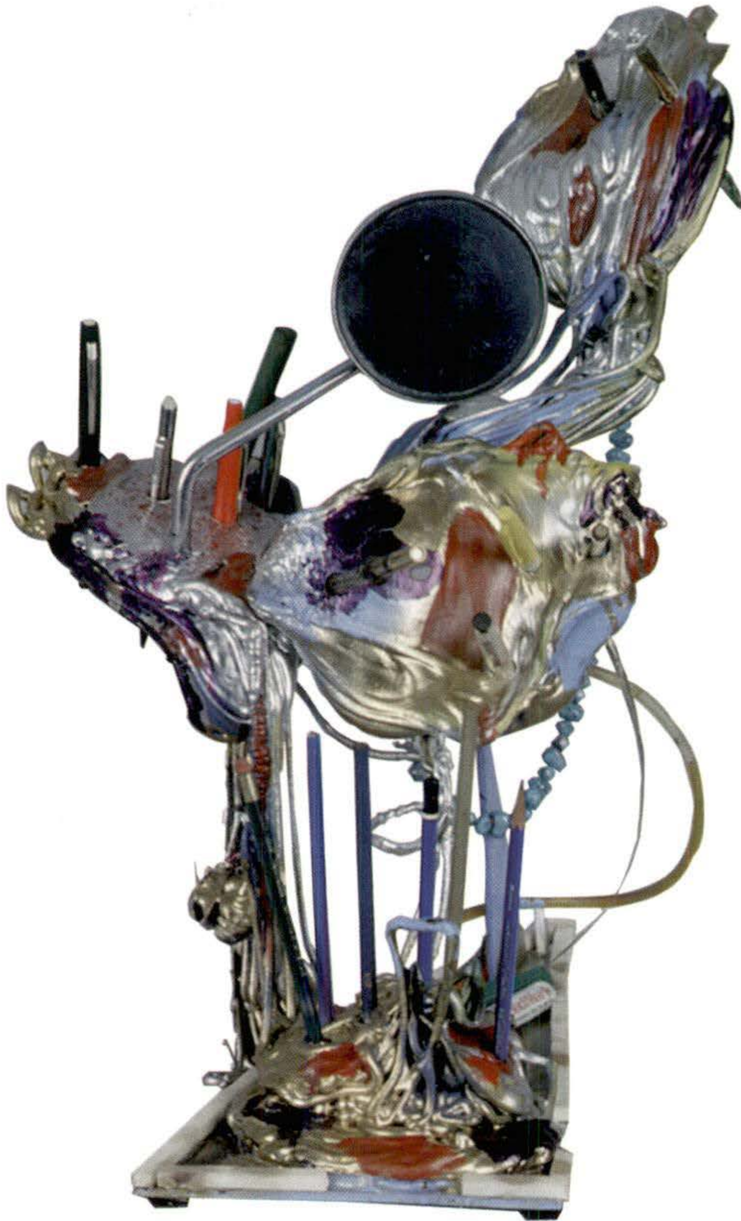
Born 1950, in rural Christian County, Kentucky, Rascoe lives in nearby Cerulean. He was in the 8th grade when local schools were integrated. After high school, he attended Hopkinsville Community College but was drafted into the army, where he became a translator. After the army he finished an Associates degree in general studies and went to work for his father as a builder. Rascoe's art is made entirely from found materials. He has presented numerous programs for school children.

Death/Life, 1991
Willie Rascoe
Wood, Bones, Copper & Paint
14x 39
On loan from artist

Koko, Slow Dance III, 1989
Lavon Van Williams
Wood & Paint
37 1/2 x 24 1/2 x 5
Collection of James & Patricia King

Lavon Van Williams

Born 1958 in Lakeland, Florida, he finished high school in Denver. Williams moved to Lexington in 1976, to play basketball at the University of Kentucky, and was a starter on the 1978 NCAA champion team. After college he played pro-ball in Italy and Japan, then worked for 3 years on the Chicago Commodities Exchange. Williams learned to carve from his older brother, Dave Wright (a.k.a. Dave Henry). Their great-uncle, Neely Williams, had taught Dave the intricacies of the carving tradition he brought with him to Florida from coastal North Carolina. Williams returned to Lexington where he has worked full-time as an artist since the mid 1980s.



Pencil Holder, 1997
Charles Williams
Mixed Media
Permanent collection of
Kentucky Folk Art Center

Charles Williams

Born 1942, in Blue Diamond, Kentucky, a now-defunct coal camp, he was raised by his grandparents until he joined his mother in Chicago during high school. He returned to Hazard, Kentucky, after high school, then joined the Job Corps in Western Kentucky, where his passion for comic-strips was fueled by work as a cartoonist on the Center newspaper. He moved to Lexington in 1970, where he worked at a variety of jobs. Along the way he took some art classes but was encouraged to retain his own aesthetic. Williams typically makes use of recycled and found materials in his sculpture.

O'Leary Bacon

1. The Homecoming, 1986, Oils, 30 x 24. On loan from the artist.
2. 1950 World Series at Home, 1995, Oils, 18 x 24. On loan from the artist.
3. Mercy, Mercy, 1993, Acrylics, 24 x 36. On loan from the artist.
4. Was it a Dream or a Memory from the Back of the Bus, 1994, Oils, 12 x 10. On loan from the artist.
5. Chitlins, Babe, 1986, Oils, 48 x 48. On loan from the artist.
6. First Day, 1986, Oils, 22 x 28. On loan from the artist.
7. Don't Let Them See You Cry, 1987, Oils, 22 x 28. On loan from the artist.

Joan Dance

8. Weaving Baskets, 1995, Markers on Muslin, 9 x 11. On loan from the artist.
9. Everyday Life, 1997, Mixed Media, 10 x 14. On loan from the artist.
10. Swing Down Sweet Chariot, 1994, Mixed Media, 9 x 11. On loan from the artist.
11. Africa to Market #3, 1997, Mixed Media, 19 x 11. On loan from the artist.
12. Lighthouse, 1994, Markers on Muslin, 13 x 16. On loan from the artist.
13. Squabs in an Old Church Loft, 1995, Acrylics, Markers & Pencil, 13 x 9. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.
14. Dem Bones - Dem Bones - The Backbones, 1995, Acrylics, Markers & Pencil, 10 1/2 x 10 1/4. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.
15. Walk Like an Egyptian, 1995, Acrylics & Markers, 10 x 10. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.

Marvin Finn

16. Pelican with Fish, 1990, Painted Wood, 13 x 12 x 10 1/2. Collection of Anne Smith.
17. Fire Engine, 1980's, Mixed Media, 14 x 31 x 12 1/2. Collection of Shelly & Kenny Zegart.
18. Railroad Engine, 1980's, Mixed Media, 14 x 52 x 10. Collection of Shelly & Kenny Zegart.
19. Three-Headed Goose, 1984, Painted Wood, 53 x 20 x 8. Collection of Jacque Parsley & Tom Henrion.
20. Giraffe, 1991, Painted Wood & String, 48 x 26 x 6. Collection of Jacque Parsley & Tom Henrion.
21. Rooster with Bottlecaps, 1996, Painted Wood & Plastic Bottlecaps, 35 1/2 x 28 x 12. Collection of Jacque Parsley & Tom Henrion.
22. Large Rooster, 1992, Painted Wood, 37 x 27 x 17. Collection of Jacque Parsley & Tom Henrion.
23. Hen, 1985, Painted Wood, 14 x 14 x 4 1/2. Collection of John & Anne Miller.

Helen LaFrance

24. Saturday Night, Pete's Place, 1997, Oils, 21 1/2 x 33. On loan from Gus Van Sant.
25. Country Store, 1997, Oils, 25 1/2 x 37. On loan from Gus Van Sant.
26. Circus, 1995, Oils, 14 1/2 x 23. Collection of John & Anne Miller.
27. Cotton Field, 1988, Oils, 20 x 30 1/2. Collection of John & Anne Miller.
28. Homecoming, 1988, Oils, 19 1/2 x 40 1/2. Collection of John & Anne Miller.
29. Uncle, Early 1980's, Mixed Media, 20 x 8 x 6. Collection of John & Anne Miller.
30. Aunt, Early 1980's, Mixed Media, 20 x 8 x 6. Collection of John & Anne Miller.
31. Black Woman, Circa 1990, Mixed Media, 20 x 8 x 6. Collection of John & Anne Miller.

Willie Massey

32. Mirror Frame with Buttons, 1980's, Painted Wood & Buttons, 23 x 23 1/2. Collection of Jacque Parsley & Tom Henrion.
33. Tiger with Tree, 1989, Mixed Media, 16 x 24. Collection of Anne Smith.
34. Pheasant with Tree, 1989, Mixed Media, 17 1/2 x 14. Collection of Anne Smith.
35. Doves, Circa 1990, Painted Wood, 12 1/2 x 34. Collection of John & Anne Miller.
36. Adam & Eve, 1989, Acrylics, 18 1/2 x 12 1/2. Collection of John & Anne Miller.
37. Bird House, Late 1980's, Mixed Media, 17 1/2 x 11 1/2 x 10. Collection of John & Anne Miller.

Zephra May-Miller

38. 40's Outfit, 1980's, Plastic Garbage Bags. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.
39. Snowflake, 1994, Plastic Garbage Bags. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.
40. Breastplate, 1995, Orange Sacks, Palm Fronds & Pantyhose. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.
41. Hit the Mark, 1990, Plastic Garbage Bags & Plastic Tablecloth. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.
42. Bellyn, 1985, Plastic Garbage Bags. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.
43. Fit to be Tied, 1997, Plastic Garbage Bags & Neckties. Private Collection.

Mark Anthony Mulligan

44. Waterside Ashland, 1991, Acrylics, 18 x 41. Gorman/Linn Collection.
45. Beeswax Junction, 1992, Colored Pencils & Pens, 9 x 12. Gorman/Linn Collection.
46. Mulligan Grove, 1991, Colored Pencils, 9 x 12. Gorman/Linn Collection.
47. Raccoon Ridge, 1996, Pencil, 11 x 17. Gorman/Linn Collection.
48. Green Belt Highway, 1991, Acrylics & Pencil, 23 1/2 x 28. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.
49. Fox Mills Subdivision, 1992, Acrylics, 18 x 24. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.
50. Stacey Daniels Land, 1995, Acrylics, Markers & Pencil, 33 1/2 x 41 1/2. Collection of Dick & Maggie Wenstrup.
51. Chickasaw Neighborhood, 1989, Markers, 22 x28. Gorman/Linn Collection

Willie Rascoe

52. Forbidden, 1996, Wood, Rock & Paint, 25 x 7. On loan from the artist.
53. Within, 1995, Wood, Copper, Animal Hoof & Paint, 23 x 9. On loan from the artist.
54. Standing Alone, 1994, Wood, Shells & Paint, 67 high. On loan from the artist.
55. Emptiness, 1993, Wood, Animal Bones, Rocks & Paint, 42 x 25. On loan from the artist.
56. Eye of the World, 1989, Wood, Copper, Shells, Turtle Claws & Paint, 22 x 8 1/2. On loan from the artist.
57. Death/Life, 1991, Wood, Bones, Copper & Paint, 14 x 39. On loan from the artist.
58. Harmony, 1992, Wood, Copper & Paint, 65 high. On loan from the artist.

Lavon Van Williams

59. Racine, 1989, Wood & Paint, 20 x 9 1/2 x 2 1/2. Collection of James & Patricia King.
60. Koko, Slow Dance III, 1989, Wood & Paint, 37 1/2 x 24 1/2 x 5. Collection of James & Patricia King.
61. Simply Mr. Johnson, 1989, Wood & Paint, 22 x 16 x 13. Collection of James & Patricia King.
62. Racine #2, 1989, Painted Wood, 35 x 18 1/2 x 6. Collection of James & Patricia King.
63. Leaving Her Home, 1990, Wood & Paint, 44 1/2 x 34. On loan from the artist.
64. Piano Lesson, 1995, Wood & Paint, 27 1/2 x 23 1/2 x 11. On loan from the artist.
65. Marvin Dance, 1990, Wood & Paint, 36 x 16. On loan from the artist.

Charles Williams

66. Pencil Holder, 1997, Mixed Media, 34 1/2 x 19 1/2 x 9. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.
67. Pencil Holder, 1997, Mixed Media, 15 x 10 1/2 x 8 1/2. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.
68. Pencil Holder, 1997, Mixed Media, 21 x 14 x 15 1/2. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.
69. Pencil Holder, 1997, Mixed Media, 10 x 13 x 14. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.
70. Pencil Holder, 1997, Mixed Media, 19 x 8 x 11. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.
71. Pencil Holder, 1997, Mixed Media, 13 x 10 x 9 1/2. Permanent Collection of Kentucky Folk Art Center.

African-American Folk Art in Kentucky

Kentucky Folk Art Center is a private, non-profit museum, affiliated with Morehead State University. KFAC was developed from a collection of expressive folk art, established at MSU in 1985, and presents exhibitions and other educational programs to promote public awareness and appreciation of contemporary self-taught art. KFAC celebrates the Grand Opening of its new facility, in June 1998, with presentation of this inaugural exhibition in its new second floor gallery for changing exhibitions.

1998

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