

WORKS ON PAPER: AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM LECTURE

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What I think we've done here today is look at the creative range and aesthetic merits of folk art works on paper. What I would like you to consider further is the nature of the material itself and consider its special characteristics- especially its durability, or more accurately, its fragility, and how the material effects its visual and concurrent emotional properties. I want you to consider the significance of the works we have looked at to their makers and owners and the method of transference of meaning from them to us today.

When you work on paper, every mark that you make is evident in the final work. The fibers of paper absorb ink or watercolor and they become part of it. It is such a sensitive medium that an artist's moment of hesitation is mirrored in the mark that he/she makes. A brush stroke applies pigment and it sinks into the paper and is part of it indelibly.



Boy in blue suit by Rufus Porter

Therefore, because the artist remains so visible in the work through his/her recorded actions, works on paper are considered the most intimate, spontaneous and direct of all art works. This intimacy is further enhanced by the scale of most works on paper. In this period, only by joining multiple sheets of paper together could one get a large sheet, and thus, generally, works on paper are quite small. To look at them you can hold them in your hand, or if they are framed and on a wall, you have to stand close to them to see them properly.

Works on paper have always been common-meaning numerous- compared to, say, oil paintings. They are cheaper to produce in terms of the materials used and the time they take to make, in part because there are fewer layers to them, and they are not as elaborately finished with glazes and varnishes- all stages which also serve to obliterate the sense of the artist's hand at work.

Also at issue here is that in oil paintings the conventions of the day were more likely employed and refinements were added that were often in conflict with an artist's own

sensibilities. For the more academic artists, works on paper were the personal work they did in which they could express themselves freely, usually without concern for the opinion of a patron, as works on paper were most often not regarded as finished works or as valuable works. They were more likely regarded as preliminary sketches, training exercises, or experiments. For the folk artist, works on paper were an end in themselves.

For folk artists, the works they produced were images of what they knew to be, rather than a result of the visual process and, thus, were not a reproduction of what could actually be seen. The physical reality that is presented in these works is filtered through the mind and personality of the artists, resulting in a personal interpretation of 'reality', not a mirror image of it. And this more personal form of artistic expression establishes more direct contact with the viewer and allows the viewer to respond more intuitively, or conversely, less objectively.

American art in general, and more particularly American folk art, is described as about solidity, what is really there. Stylistically, it tends, as a result, to employ bounded forms, meaning those with defined edges- outlines. Yet in watercolors the subject matter so concretely portrayed is often things which are difficult to contain and keep- our fragile loves for another, family ties when faced with the certainty of death, and the knowledge of inevitable change over time. We have a cultural desire for knowing and certainty and live in a temporal reality- time produces change.



Selinda Hill by her sister, Caroline Hill

Works on paper record the likeness of a loved one, show the structure of families, are maps of what is known of the country or, on a smaller scale, one's farm. They show historical and patriotic figures, or grieving family members in the church yard- among many other possible subjects.

I have found generally that collectors begin collecting other things than works on paper- furniture, oils on canvas, ceramics, rugs... Works on paper are an acquired taste. I think it takes more sophistication to appreciate them. At first, to most people, they seem less significant, of less value. But, I constantly find that the collectors I have most appreciation for, basically because I find them more sensitive as people, collect works on paper.

I believe that we collect certain things, in addition to our aesthetic appreciation of them, because of the values we hold, be that love of family, respect for history, appreciation of

the land, or religious fervor, or- and often- a strong sense of longing for something that has been lost to us. Art that was created for the purpose of straight record keeping becomes over time an object for remembrance. Another emotional element has been added to it, and generations later we feel those things and we respond.

There's a beautiful statement written by John Demos, a collector and history professor, in the book, "The Art of Family".

He says, "Finally- after record keeping and beneath remembrance- lies a deeper, more emotional layer and the motive, in particular, of linkage. In the register (meaning family records), most of all, was this literally inscribed-with whole generations subsumed in a richly evocative iconography of hearts, flowers, chains, and elaborately branching trees. 'We are forever; and unbreakably, joined; we belong to each other; we are one.' "



Tebbets Family record, by George Melville

And we as collectors feel the power of those emotions in the works, and we desire to be connected to the objects that cause us to feel this way about them.