



# You may not believe this, but California has a folk art tradition

By Hunter Drohojowska

Until recently, folk art, like its mainstream counterpart, was widely believed to exist exclusively from the East Coast to Midwest. What ever was being produced by California artists, folk or otherwise, was traditionally dismissed by those who ran galleries, published journals and wrote history back East. In the last 20 years, Californians have broken down some of those biases, at least in contemporary art. Now, an exhibition titled "A Cat and a Ball on a Waterfall," at the Oakland Museum through Aug. 3, examines 200 years of folk painting and sculpture from California.

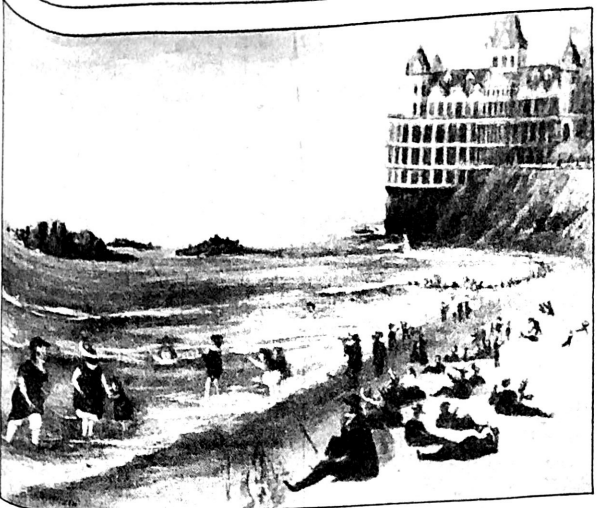
mythology from UCLA who did research for the show, decided to simultaneously expand and contract the definitions of what constitutes folk art. They included waltzes made as recently as 1983 by artists living in such civilized areas as Beverly Hills, and they excluded crafts like quilts and whirligigs that are commonly termed folk art.

"What we have done is stretch 'What were people's perceptions of what constitutes folk art," said Jones. "I don't care to look into the Society of Folklorists' approach to the issue. By and large, the purist definition didn't allow for the kinds of things we see here today. There is a sense of individual expression over community values here. We opted for a definition more related to contemporary art in general."

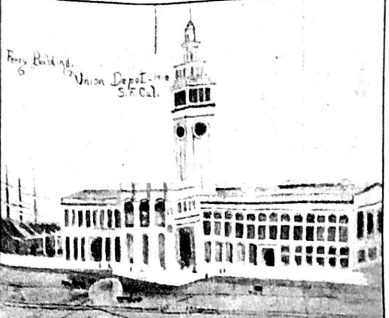
Among the 150 works in the show are partially re-created envi-

ronments well-known to folk art enthusiasts, such as Sanford Darius's Santa Barbara home covered with paintings of his South Seas journeys, the painted wooden flowers and figures that adorn overalls at the front yard of Romano Gabriel's Eureka home, and the wooden, costumed dolls from Calvin's Ruby Black's Possum Trot environment in Yermo.

But there are many works by lesser-known or anonymous California artists, dating from paintings of crucifixions by the San Gabriel Mission Indians done in 1778, a fact, a painting of San Francisco's Cliff House by Pilot Thompson done around 1900, along with some 19th century views of San Francisco by Carrie Van Wie, were discovered in the Oakland Museum's permanent collection by Jones and his



Peter Allegraert's "Rosebud," above left, Pilot Thompson's "Cliff House," above, and Carrie Van Wie's "Ferry Building — Union Depot, 1905," left, are among the works in the Oakland Museum exhibition. "A Cat and a Ball on a Waterfall" examines 200 years of folk painting and sculpture in California.



included the bizarre fantasies of Carlos Cortez Coyle, such as the 1934 painting of a man carrying a woman-turned-serpent, divorce and alimony papers clutched in her hand. Ursula Barnes' undated painting of a cat and a ball balancing precariously on a waterfall

work for themselves. Their personal messages take precedence over community concerns. Yet much of the work refers to spiritual inspiration and transcendence.

scattered and unidentified," Jones said. "The L.A. organization called Spaces is involved with saving a lot of folk art environments, but it's a small voice. They have to raise funds, circulate petitions, do what is necessary to have a place rated as a landmark."

According to the curators, the greatest supporters of folk art are mainstream contemporary artists. One of the lenders is ceramist David Gilhooly. Painter Charles Garabedian owns works by folk artist Marcel Cavalla.

"Mainstream contemporary art bears a look culminated from folk art, a sense of returning to the non-academic approach to imagery, to communion with nature, but it's a small voice. They have to raise funds, circulate petitions, do what is necessary to have a place rated as a landmark."

perfect quite a bit of the exhibition is devoted to works from the last two decades. Jack Forbes' vision of UFOs arriving, bordered with a biblical phrase, is from 1980. Martha Louise's hooked rugs of such scenes as a pig in suit and tie hitchhiking to the fair is from 1969; Marlene Zimmermann's cockeyed view of Beverly Hills is dated 1984.

Jones wanted to point out that folk art is not passé or historical, but is being created today by active artists.

"Usually, in Eastern folk art exhibitions, painting is limited to that done in the late 19th century, the 1920s," Jones said. "There is a great emphasis put on the antique. They don't integrate the older anonymous folk art with that done in the late 20th century, the folk art environments. We didn't deal with any utilitarian objects as a way of saying, 'Yes, folk art has been produced and continues to be produced in our culture.' The labels are breaking down."

Despite that urge, many of the folk art environments are in constant danger of being demolished, relegated to the trash. Joseph Chologian's towers of Babel, peopled with dolls and toys, were standing on the sidewalk with other trash while his house was being cleaned out and sold after his death. A passerby recognized their value and salvaged as many as possible. A private dealer saved the paintings of Sanford Darling. Similarly, the Watts Towers often have come close to disaster.

"If someone doesn't come along with the money and space to save them, they're demolished. That's why so little early folk art survived. Fifty or 60 paintings by someone's great aunt just get thrown out,

making abstraction. There's a cross over between their work and the new expressionism now enjoying a vogue."

Jones believes there is a benefit to be gained in such a direction in art. "There is a directness of expression and less concern of how it's done. It just attempts to tell a story, everything here is narrative. It all pertains to an emotional experience that an unchoseled approach can have. A power obscured by a more self-conscious hand. I don't know if other artists are being influenced. I think they are just beginning to perceive the advantages to not drawing in a historically advanced sense."

"Certain kinds of distortion can be very expressive. Folk artists are not concerned with copying or an approach of wanting to do it correctly. They seem to know they have all the means necessary to say what they want to say. Few had aspirations beyond doing it for themselves."

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.

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## Question for art buffs: Are you going to San Francisco?

There are four good reasons this spring for the culturally minded to flock to San Francisco, including two blockbuster exhibitions that will not be coming to the Southland.

Spring is the season for flowers, and you won't see more anywhere than in a show of impressionist paintings by Monet, Cezanne, Renoir and Degas, as well as lesser-known, Caillebotte, Zandomenghi, Morisot and others.

This partial recreation of the first eight impressionist shows organized by the rebellious young artists between 1874 and 1880 offers us within the fold of commercial galleries only six years after their break with the academy. The scathing criticism by writers of the period provides comic relief.

"The New Painting Impressionism 1874-1886" is on exhibit through July 6 at the M.H. De Young Memorial Museum, Golden Gate Park. San Francisco. Call (415) 833-4444 for tickets and information.

Spring is also the season for

thundershowers, and you can take refuge among the stormy emotions of Franz Kline. This survey of 100 paintings and drawings offers insight into the authority on the abstract expressionist gesture. Splashy early portraits and landscapes give way to huge slashes of black paint on white that nearly engulf the viewer.

"The Vital Gesture: Franz Kline in Retrospect" is on exhibit through June 8 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 401 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco. Call (415) 863-8800 for tickets and information.

For lighter-hearted fare, the indigenous art of unfettered Californians is available in Oakland. (See accompanying story.)

"A Cat and a Ball on a Waterfall: 200 Years of California Folk Painting and Sculpture" is on exhibit through Aug. 3 at the Oakland Museum, 10th and Oak streets, Oakland. Call (415) 273-3401 for tickets and information.

In more contemporary vein, photographs by John Baldessari and sculpture by British artist Tony Cragg are on view through May 25 at the University Art Museum, 2626 Bancroft Way, UC Berkeley. Call (415) 842-1438 for tickets and information.

— Hunter Drohojowska