

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

SIXTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215 extension 224

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Washington, D. C. September 30, 1966. An exhibition illustrating a neglected, all-but-forgotten chapter of our nation's history will open Sunday (October 9) when 101 American primitive water colors and pastels begin their nation-wide tour at the National Gallery of Art.

The exhibition of early American art is from the extensive collection of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch. It includes the work of itinerant portrait painters, Pennsylvania German "Fraktur" artists, and 19th century American "schoolgirls."

John Walker, Director of the National Gallery, points out in the foreword to the catalogue of the exhibition that American primitive water colors and pastels in the collection of Colonel and Mrs. Garbisch have not been exhibited until now. He emphasized the intimacy and detail of these pictures and likened them to the letters and diaries of their day.

The total collection of Colonel and Mrs. Garbisch, numbering more than 2,500 paintings, is the largest and most comprehensive collection of early American primitive painting. In

1954 Colonel and Mrs. Garbisch decided to give a group of 300 paintings and 200 miniatures to the National Gallery. A number of major exhibitions of their American paintings have traveled throughout this country and Europe, and over the years other museums have received gifts of pictures from these generous benefactors.

The introduction to the fully illustrated catalogue for the exhibition states that there was more painting done in America, per capita, during the 19th century than at any other time in our history. Most of it was created in water color by unschooled artists. Before the start of the last century, the American market for art had been limited largely to wealthy urban patrons whose requests for portraits were filled by the few trained artists in the Colonies. But after 1800 the demand for portraiture became so great that untaught, so-called "primitive," artists began to make their appearance. These early limners worked simply, usually outlining their subjects and filling the spaces with bright, primary colors. Contrary to popular belief, they did not often paint headless bodies to which heads could be added later. Winter months appear to have been spent painting pictures of landscapes or national heroes such as George Washington. There are four versions of Washington in the exhibition.

The second category of American primitive art to be seen is Fraktur painting, the art of decorated manuscripts which reached its height of popularity from 1800 to 1835 in southeastern Pennsylvania. A German import, Fraktur painting was

a true folk art with an essentially religious origin. The most numerous examples are colorful birth and baptismal certificates which were preserved in family Bibles or hung on walls.

In contrast with the Fraktur artists and the itinerant portraitists were the 19th century girls of "good families" who created many of the so-called schoolgirl pictures to be found in the exhibition. For these young women of the leisure class, painting was a skill to be acquired for social enjoyment, like music or recitations. Schoolgirl art was the charming 19th century version of 18th century needlework and in some cases it had the same rigid conventions observed in the earlier art. Favorite schoolgirl themes were based on episodes from the Bible or from romantic literature such as "The Lady of the Lake" or "A Sentimental Journey," still lifes, landscapes and memorials to dead relatives or national heroes.

The 101 American primitive water colors and pastels from the collection of Colonel and Mrs. Edgar William Garbisch will be on view at the National Gallery in Washington from October 9 through November 20. After being seen in New York City at The Metropolitan Museum of Art they will embark on a tour of United States museums under the sponsorship of The American Federation of Arts.

The catalogue, with 15 color reproductions, is available at the National Gallery or by postpaid mail for \$3.25. Mail orders should be addressed to Publications Fund, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.

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Catalogues, black-and-white photographs and color transparencies on loan for purposes of publication are available from William W. Morrison, Assistant to the Director, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., Area Code 202, 737-4215, ext. 225.