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New Deal Artists' Extraordinary Renderings Presented with Original Objects in "Drawing on America's Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design" at the National Gallery of Art, November 27, 2002 -- March 2, 2003

Washington, DC--**The Index of American Design** helped hundreds of artists through the Great Depression and produced a pictorial survey of Americana that may never be surpassed. This winter, the National Gallery of Art will celebrate the 60th anniversary of its 1943 acquisition of the Index with the exhibition *Drawing on America's Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design*. On view in the West Building from November 27, 2002, through March 2, 2003, the exhibition includes 80 of its finest watercolor renderings of American folk, popular, and decorative art, along with a selection of nearly 40 of the original objects they represent--reunited for the first time since the 1930s. The objects range from quilts, weather vanes, and hand-carved toys to carousel animals, tavern signs, and cigar-store figures.

"The Index renderings document our common cultural identity and have an uncanny power to make us to see the all-too-familiar articles of ordinary life with unaccustomed clarity," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "This is the first major exhibition on the Index since 1984 and the first to be accompanied by a comprehensive, scholarly exhibition catalogue. We are indebted to the Henry Luce Foundation for providing the generous support that allowed us to realize this exhibition and its catalogue."

Organization and Support

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington. The exhibition and catalogue were made possible by the Henry Luce Foundation.

"We are delighted to help bring this exhibition to the National Gallery of Art," said Ellen Holtzman, program director for the arts at the Luce Foundation. "Our sponsorship of the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue underscores the foundation's commitment to innovation and scholarship in the field of American fine and decorative arts."

A vast pictorial archive of American folk, popular, and decorative art from the time of European settlement to around 1900, the Index was produced by a government-supported, New Deal art project between 1935 and 1942. The more than 18,000 watercolor renderings in the Index portray such archetypal Americana as weather vanes, quilts, figureheads, toys, and cigar-store Indians—the humble arts and crafts of Americans' ancestral "common man."

Although the Index of American Design documents the nation's material past, it was not intended to be an antiquarian project. Its creators were dedicated modernists who found evidence of an American cultural identity in the simple, abstract design of Index artifacts. During the Great Depression, the project offered employment to impoverished artists who recorded images of fragile works in imminent danger of loss. Moreover, it was the goal of the Index founders to familiarize Americans with what was then a little-known part of their cultural heritage. They believed that widespread recognition of a national style of design in these objects would lead to the development of a distinctly American modernism. The new art they aspired to promote would be highly democratic, breaking down the barriers between the fine and the industrial arts to create inexpensive, manufactured items serving as modern art for the everyday life of all Americans.

The Index renderings are not only accurate documents but compelling works of art in their own right. To achieve their intense realism the artists minutely contemplated the objects' tactile qualities, luminosity, and most subtle gradations of color, texture, and form, and then employed all their extraordinary technical skills to represent this data in the challenging medium of watercolor.

The New Deal art projects, including the Index of American Design, came to an end when the United States entered World War II and unemployment was no longer the country's preeminent problem. Many of the original objects have been lost or damaged since they were depicted in the Index. Even more important, the Index succeeded in familiarizing Americans with their country's folk art and with the idea—still current today—that America's true cultural identity might be discovered in these artifacts.

The Exhibition

This exhibition reunites—for the first time since the 1930s—80 of the Index renderings with nearly 40 of the original artifacts they represent. In the first introductory room, the magnificent Angel Gabriel Weather Vane, now in a private collection, appears alongside the rendering that made this object a true icon of the Index of American Design. Also on display is a "demonstration drawing" indicating the step-by-step process the artist used to create this rendering. Period photographs show Index artists at work on two of the watercolors displayed in this room. Additional renderings reflect the wide scope of the project, from Southwestern Indian baskets and African American ceramics to both German and Hispanic works from Texas and New England Shaker textiles.

The second room is filled with watercolors of toys, carousel animals, a sled, roller skates, a little girl's dress, and a comical Quaker whirligig. A real carousel rooster from a private collection strides through the center of this space, accompanied by a toy horse, a partial set of nine pins, a carved poodle, and several other items that will delight children, all paired with their original Index renderings.

The third and largest space displays renderings and objects meant for the domestic realm. Fabulous quilts and crewel embroideries from the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Wadsworth Atheneum are installed beside renderings of them made by some of the finest Index artists, as well as furniture, Pennsylvania German ceramics, early stoneware, a sampler, and other artifacts borrowed from private collections and the Bucks County Historical Society, the Philadelphia Museum, and the New York Historical Society.

Shop, tavern, and inn signs, figureheads, decoys, and a steamship's paddle wheel

cover occupy the next room, both in the form of rendered images and actual objects. A Civil War drum, lent by the Chicago Historical Society, stands beside its painted portrait, and a unique and highly inventive carved gate with agricultural tools, now the property of the Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury, Connecticut, is reintroduced to its 1940 Index rendering. A secular Madonna of Liberty, carved and painted by an Italian immigrant and borrowed for the show from the Shelburne Museum in Vermont, compares with its watercolor image.

A concluding space pairs three outstanding, late 19th-century cigar-store figures with their 1930s Index renderings. The pompous Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines, from a private collection, is stationed beside a baseball player—possibly a portrait of Mike "King" Kelly—and Dapper Dan, both promised gifts to the American Folk Art Museum in New York.

Curator and Catalogue

The curator is Virginia Tuttle Clayton, associate curator of old master prints for the National Gallery. In a fully illustrated catalogue accompanying the exhibition, scholars explore issues of folk art, national identity, and modernism, and explain the history and lofty ambitions of this intriguing New Deal project. The catalogue is published by the National Gallery of Art and is available for \$25.00 (softcover), \$45.00 (hardcover) in the Gallery Shops, from the Web site (www.nga.gov (<http://www.nga.gov/home.htm>)), and by phone at (202) 842-6002 or (800) 697-9350.

Sunday Lecture

Drawing on America's Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design

December 15, 2002, 2:00 pm
East Building Large Auditorium

Virginia Clayton, exhibition curator and associate curator of old master prints, National Gallery of Art

Film Programs

January 2 through March 2, 2003

East Building large auditorium

A selection of government-sponsored films about American life, made between 1935 and 1942 include **The Plow That Broke the Plains** (1936), **The River** (1937), and **Power and the Land** (1941). For a complete schedule, see the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov (<http://www.nga.gov/home.htm>) .

Sunday Concerts

Concertgoers are admitted (first-come, first-seated) to the West Building, West Garden Court at 6:00 p.m.; concerts begin at 7:00 p.m. The entrance at Sixth Street and Constitution Avenue, NW, remains open until 7:00 p.m. and the Garden Café remains open until 6:30. For information, call (202) 842-6941.

The 60th American Music Festival: December 1--15

Presented in honor of the exhibition

December 1

Philip Quint, violinist

Music by Cowell, Corigliano, Foss, and Gershwin

December 8

Washington Men's Camerata

Frank Albinder, director

Music by Conrad Susa and other American composers

December 15

American Chamber Ensemble

Music for clarinet and strings by Peter Schickele, George Kleinsinger,

Nancy Deussen, and others

Tours of the Exhibition

For dates and times, please consult the Web site at (<http://www.nga.gov/home.htm>) www.nga.gov (<http://www.nga.gov/home.htm>) or call (202) 842-6706. Tours by special appointment may be arranged for adult groups of twenty or more by calling (202) 842-6247.

Family Workshop

Drawing on American History

January 5, January 19, and February 9, 2003, 1:00 -- 3:00 pm

Explore toys, carousel animals, weather vanes, and other objects from daily life long ago through a tour of the exhibition. After the tour participants will create drawings that capture the spirit of modern American design. Led by artist and educator Kathy Pedersen. Advance registration required; call (202) 789-3030 (ages 7-10 with an accompanying adult).

Teacher Workshop

Saturday, January 25, 2003, 10:00 am -- 3:00 pm

Space is limited. To register or receive more information please call (202) 842-6796. If this workshop is oversubscribed, a second one will be offered February 1, 2003.

Surveys of American Crafts and Folk Arts from the Index of American Design

Packages of 27 slides and texts on each slide in printed and audiocassette form, available from the Gallery on the following crafts and folk arts:

Pennsylvania German Folk Art, Shaker Crafts, Folk Arts of the Spanish Southwest, Pottery, Woodcarving, Costume, Textiles, Furniture, Toys, Metalwork, Dolls

These are free learning materials. To request, send an e-mail to Edresources@nga.gov, or fax to (202) 842-6937.

Web Feature

Exhibition-related links on the Gallery's Web site: www.nga.gov/exhibitions/iadinfo.htm

A selection of works from the Index of American Design in the Gallery's permanent collection organized into thematic Web tours: www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/iad.htm
(<http://www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/iad.htm>)

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General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit www.nga.gov/renovation (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>).

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and on Twitter at twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

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