

Chipping Away at the Layers: Revealing the Mysteries of Tramp Art

An Exhibition at the
San Francisco Airport Museums,
curated by Bonnie Grossman.

Through March 2004



During the period between 1870 and 1930 an obscure form of folk art blossomed in America. It became known as tramp art. Wood from cigar boxes or produce crates was chip-carved and layered, and these pieces of wood, sometimes with added decorative elements, were fashioned into frames, jewelry boxes, sewing caddies, and even full-sized furniture such as dressers, beds, and cupboards.

Common wisdom had it that these unusual items were made by tramps, who used them for barter and trade. In this romantic version, the makers went door to door in hopes of exchanging their creations for a meal, lodging, or a hot shower.

Logic leads us elsewhere. It is unlikely that these varied objects could have been made by itinerants while they were tramping through rural America. How could the tools and materials be carried by a transient? How could all the bits and pieces be accumulated, carved, and assembled by someone on foot? And the



70B/08V02 Tramp Art 12 Drawer Box, chip-carved cigar boxes, 11.25 x 7 x 7"

larger pieces, such as bedroom furniture and cupboards, could not have been carried around for barter. Moreover, from an economic standpoint, why would the talented makers of these often extraordinary objects be willing to trade them for what in those days would have been worth only 10 to 25 cents?

A more likely explanation is that immigrants from Austria and Germany brought with them the talent and skills to create these exceptional pieces. Tramp art can still be found in European countries. In the United States, these chip-carved and layered items have been uncovered in Pennsylvania, New York, Texas, and other areas with significant Austrian or German settlements. Contrary to ideas that prevailed until recently, notch carving was not an indigenous craft. Just as our ancestors found a new homeland, tramp art was adapted from European traditions to become an American folk art form.

A probable scenario is that the journeyman, who had served his apprenticeship as a carpenter or other building craftsman, used

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THE
AMES
GALLERY



Est. 1970

Ames News

Ames Notes

The World of Harry Lieberman (1880–1983)

It's been 20 years since Harry Lieberman's death at the age of 103...but his fame lives on, and his work continues to attract admirers.

A small show of Lieberman pieces will open the new KS Gallery in the recently rebuilt Jewish Community Center in San Francisco. It was our pleasure to curate the exhibition and, of course, we hope you can visit this new facility and see the show.

We think Lieberman's life and career as an artist are a real inspiration, and we're very pleased to see that many others agree.

Harry Lieberman died in 1983 at the age of 103 after nearly thirty productive years as a painter. Far from being a new discovery, Harry Lieberman's work has been eliciting enthusiastic responses since he first started painting at age 76.

The list of exhibitions, catalogs and books in which Lieberman has been included is long and distinguished, starting with *Twentieth Century American Folk Art and Artists*, by Herbert W. Hemphill and Julia Weissman in 1974 and continuing with virtually every comprehensive book on American folk art since. More recently, Stacy Hollander, Curator of the Museum of American Folk Art in New York City prepared an extensive catalog for its one-person show, *Harry Lieberman: A Journey of Remembrance* (now out of print).

Depicting both biblical tales and episodes from Lieberman's own life, and often accompanied by a written commentary, his paintings used a naive style to express complex and sophisticated concepts. Lieberman painted familiar scenes in unfamiliar colors; time stopped as he compressed the events of a story into a single scene. He used buildings

without walls to show us many dimensions of a story at once. His flattened perspective solved technical problems in a way that created a dynamic sense of immediacy and movement. Though the paintings illustrate the rituals of Eastern European Jewish life, there is something in Lieberman's work that belongs to Everyman.

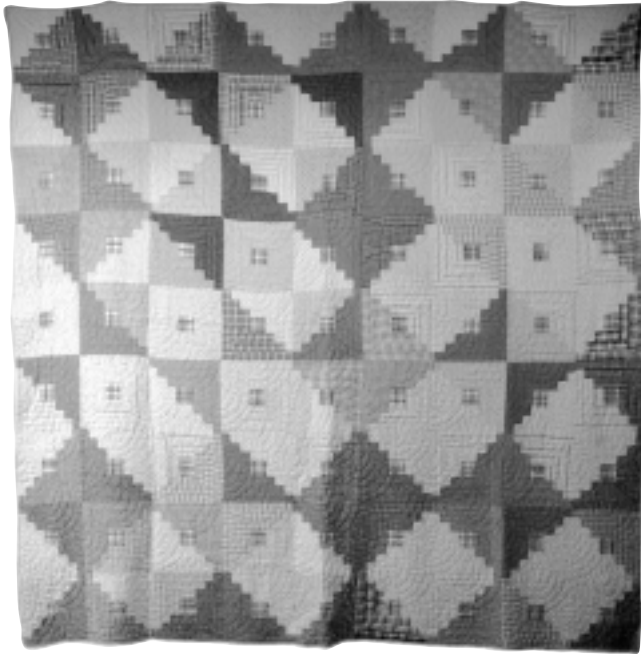
Although Lieberman is best known for his acrylic and oil paintings of biblical tales and Jewish tradition, the JCCSF show includes some of his mixed media sculpted pieces.

The work in this exhibit is lent by The Ames Gallery of Berkeley in cooperation with the artist's grandchildren, David Blake and Elinor Blake.

Harry Lieberman continues to live on through the legacy of his art. He said of his paintings, "This is my hereafter. I don't ask for more." ■



HL 012 Harry Lieberman, *Her Uncovered Hair*, 1964, oil on canvas, 26 x 24"



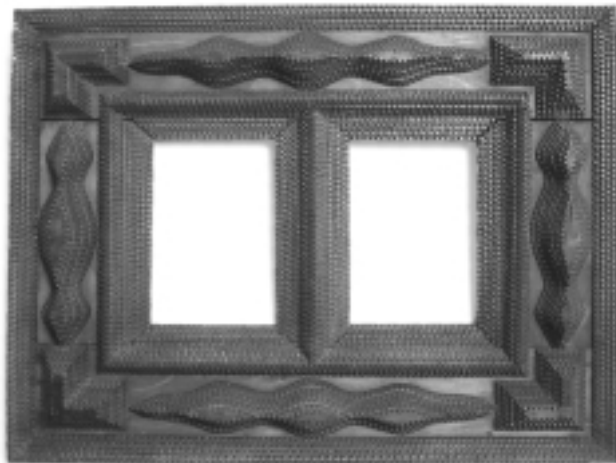
50/4202 Log Cabin Quilt: Pastels, 88 x 88.5"

reusable parts of worn garments. Similarly, tramp art sometimes was made from factory spill (bits of wood left from the construction of cigar boxes) but most often incorporated wood from used boxes or produce crates. Both the wood and cloth were cut into shapes: squares, triangles, circles, and/or diamonds. In each case, the geometric shapes were pieced together to produce pleasing, often quite sophisticated and complex designs. Although

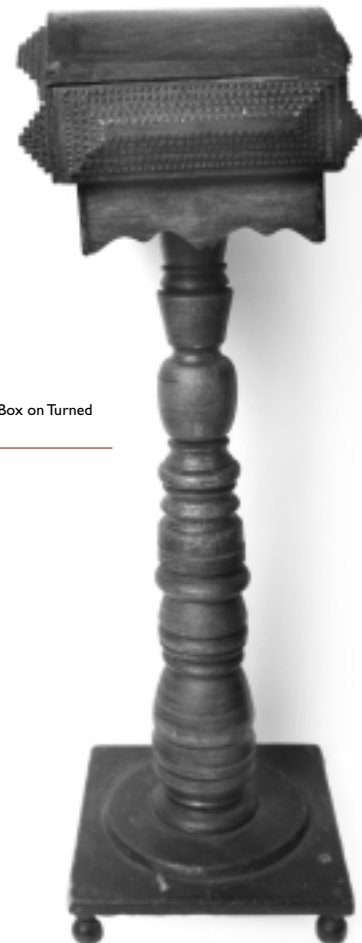
there are some known makers, tramp artists, like quilters, were most often anonymous. And both quilts and tramp art represent a creative embellishment of the utilitarian. Tramp art may be thought of, then, as wooden quilts.

In 1975 the inaugural exhibition of tramp art was curated in New York by Helaine Fendelman, and her accompanying book¹ was the sole publication on the subject. Since then, interest in and love for this challenging area of folk culture have burgeoned. Now, almost 30 years after that first show and book, two more works have appeared, devoted to the history of tramp art. One is a new book by Fendelman,² and the other is by Clifford Wallach.³ Both are good resources for information on this subject. ■

1. Fendelman, Helaine, *Tramp Art: An Itinerant's Folk Art*, E. P. Dutton and Co., New York, 1975
2. Fendelman, Helaine, and Jonathan Taylor, *Tramp Art: A Folk Art Phenomenon*, Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 1999
3. Wallach, Clifford, *Tramp Art, One Notch At A Time*, Wallach-Irons Publishing, New York, 1998



71/5403 Double Tramp Frame, 18.25 x 23.75"

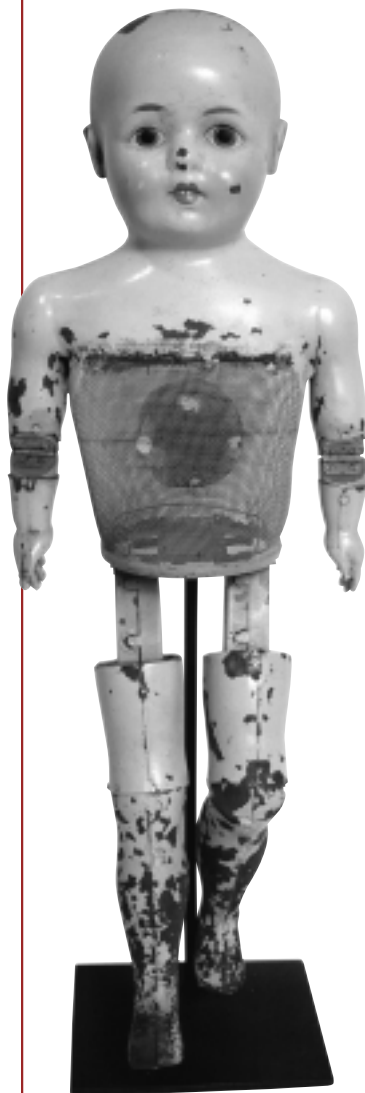


70B/5294 Tramp Box on Turned Post, 28 x 9 x 9"

THE AMES GALLERY



2661 Cedar Street (at La Loma), Berkeley
 The gallery is open by appointment and chance. Our small staff is present most weekdays from 10:30 am to 3:30 pm, and it is easy to arrange an appointment for evenings or weekends. A call ahead is always advised:
510-845-4949.



20P/05103 Steel Articulated Doll, c. 1890-1900, metal, 27 x 9"

Out & About

In 2004, we find ourselves doing even more shows away from Berkeley and The Gallery. This newsletter's Calendar is devoted to those "Out & About" shows and events.



January - March Chipping Away at the Layers

San Francisco
 Airport Museums
 North Terminal
 San Francisco International Airport
 Burlingame, CA

A show of tramp art, curated by Bonnie Grossman

January 28 and 30

SPARK: The Fine Art of Collecting

A KQED TV (San Francisco) Channel 9 production

January 28 at 7:30 pm; repeats January 30 at 11 pm. Features Bonnie Grossman's collections.

January - February The World of Harry Lieberman

K S Gallery
 Jewish Community Center
 3200 California Street
 San Francisco, CA

February 12 - 15

The San Francisco Tribal & Textile Arts Show

The Festival Pavilion
 Ft. Mason Center
 San Francisco, CA

Preview:
 Thurs., February 12
 6 - 10 pm.
 Music by Sy Grossman's quintet, "Just Friends"

Show Hours:
 Fri. & Sat., 11 am - 7 pm
 Sun., 11 am - 5 pm

Show info: 310-455-3624
 Preview info: 415-750-3624

January 22 - 25 Outsider Art Fair

The Puck Building
 New York, NY

Opening Preview:
 January 22, 5:30 - 9 pm

Show Hours:
 Thurs. & Fri., noon - 8 pm
 Sat., 11 am - 8 pm
 Sun., 11 am - 7 pm

212-777-5218

Website Update

Our website (www.amesgallery.com) has been a wonderful asset to both our patrons and The Gallery.

We try to keep it updated with our latest acquisitions, so that clients will return often to see what's new. It also serves as a colorful and in-depth introduction for those who are new to The Gallery.

We have plans to make some of our newsletter articles available on the website—ones that maintain their interest over time, such as "Bottle Whimseys," "Embroidered Flour Sacks," "Recycled Art," and "Artful Mends."

After you've visited our website, we encourage you to send us feedback on your experience, both pats and pans. ■



09/00E02 Burl Bank, wood burl, c.1885, 9" tall

SAVE the Date:

Please keep checking our website Events section at www.amesgallery.com for further information about these and other events.

May 28 – 31

Memorial Day Weekend

Wine Country Antiques Show

Chardonnay Pavilion
Napa Fairgrounds
Napa, CA*

June 10 – 13

Santa Barbara Antiques and Fine Art Show

Santa Barbara
City Club*

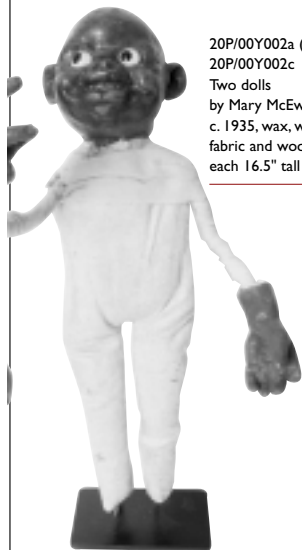
July 2 – 4

Santa Fe Antiquities Show

Sweeney Center
Santa Fe, NM*

*Music by Sy Grossman

20P/00Y002a (left),
20P/00Y002c
Two dolls
by Mary McEwen,
c. 1935, wax, wire,
fabric and wood,
each 16.5" tall



March 26 – July 9

The Eyes Have It: A Look at California Visions

California State University
Library Gallery
Sacramento, CA

Paintings, drawings, sculpture, and sites created by artists of the Golden State. Co-curated by Bonnie Grossman and Steve Vanoni.

April 30 – May 2

Los Angeles Antique Show

Barker Hangar
Santa Monica Airport

Opening Preview: April 29
Music by the Sy Grossman Quartet, featuring legendary jazz flutist, Sam Most

Show Hours:

Fri. & Sat., 11 am – 8 pm
Sun., 11 am – 5 pm

310-455-2886

Continued from Page 1

the carved and layered decorative objects to showcase his skills. Moving from place to place by wagon, he sold them to generate income between jobs. For the home carver and whittler, it appears that chip-carving scrap wood was an inexpensive way to embellish otherwise simple furnishings.

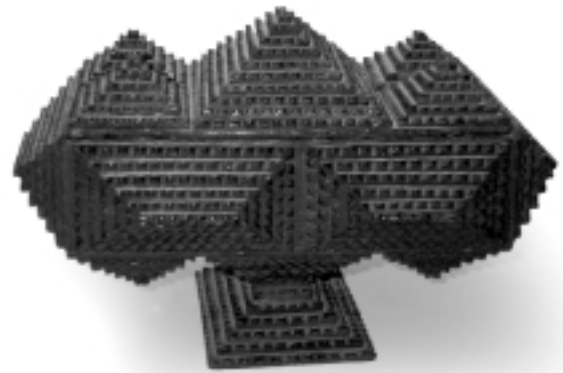
Simple tools and materials were needed to make tramp art. A pocketknife, a V-gouge, tacks and a hammer, glue, and cigar boxes or other empty wooden crates provided the basics.



72/5303 Part of 2-Piece Dresser Set, 14 x 8.5"

Chip-carving demanded a wood that was soft enough to cut and gouge, and the cedar and mahogany used to make cigar boxes was ideal. Fortuitously, in 1865, a law was passed prohibiting the re-use of these boxes for repackaging tobacco, providing a wealth of material for this popular craft.

Fabrics, such as velvets in various colors, were used to embellish objects, to line boxes, cover pin-cushions, or creatively add texture to the surface of a frame in the form of cloth inserts. Scraps of wallpaper brightened the interiors of some boxes or covered the advertising or



70B/0301 Tramp Box with Pedestal, 7.5 x 12 x 9"

imperfections that might otherwise detract from the finished item.

Other decorative elements included ring pulls or handles, bits of metal trim, milk glass "buttons," and brass upholstery tacks.

There are provocative similarities between tramp art and patchwork quilts. The two art forms share a vocabulary. Both are made from salvaged scrap materials that have been cut into geometric shapes, then pieced together, arranged in patterns, and layered. The decorative chip-carving might be considered equivalent to the quilting stitches, an embellishment that enhances, but is ancillary to, the structural integrity of the piece.

Although quilts occasionally were made from new bolts of cloth, more often they were fashioned from remnants, sewing scraps, or



70B/7095 Tramp Box with "Havana Cheroots," 3.5 x 13 x 6"



WG 76/122 Wilbert Griffith, *Big and Tall Women*, 2002, oil on canvas, 20 x 24"

New Interest in Wilbert Griffith



WG 72/140 Wilbert Griffith, *Landscape*, 2002, oil on canvas, 20 x 24"

It pleases us to note the recent acclaim that has come to Wilbert Griffith.

Mr. Griffith works in the living room of his house in a small North Bay community, creating colorful

evocations of his Barbados past and other bright, imaginative scenes.

Several of his paintings were included in a show entitled "Revealing Influences" at the San Francisco Museum of Craft and Folk Art this fall. Also, he was chosen to be included in a just-published book, *100 Artists of the West Coast*, edited by Douglas Bullis (Schiffer Publishing).

The Gallery currently has a show of Mr. Griffith's most recent work, which we think is some of his best yet. If you can't get by to see it before February, see the collection of his paintings that are on our website, www.amesgallery.com.

Julio Garcia

In Memory

We are sorry to announce that one of our artists died last July.

Julio Garcia was a smiling, happy man, who devoted his later years to carving his imaginative and colorful figures. His voluptuous women and animated men seemed to emerge, full grown, from the blocks of wood that he salvaged.

He lived in the East Bay with Alicia, his wife of over fifty years, who passed away soon after he did.

Mr. Garcia's work is in many collections; and has been included in the exhibitions, "Visions from the Left Coast," Contemporary Arts Forum, Santa Barbara, CA, 1995; and in "Memories and Visions," University of Nevada, Reno, NV, in 1996, and Nevada Institute of Contemporary Art, Las Vegas in 1997. His work will also be included in the upcoming show, "The Eyes Have It: A Look at California Visions," in Sacramento, CA, opening in April.



JULIO GARCIA . . . and friends.

As we move into 2004, we find ourselves doing even more shows away from Berkeley and The Gallery (see *Calendar*, Pages 4–5).

— We hope the new schedule proves to be a convenience for those of you who live in the cities in which we exhibit. Karen and Sherry are usually at The Gallery in our absence.

The extensive and beautifully installed show of tramp art that continues at the North Terminal at the San Francisco International Airport prompted us to do a more in depth article on the subject (see *Chipping Away the Layers*, Page 1).

Also, we call your attention to a show of works by Harry Lieberman at the new Jewish Community Center in San Francisco. I'm also co-curating a show at Cal State Sacramento—see “The Eyes Have It: a Look at California Visions” in the calendar for April. *And* catch us on TV! (see *Calendar* for January 28).

We hope your holiday season was joyful. We thank you for your years of patronage and support, and wish us all a bright and peaceful 2004.

Bonnie

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 www.amesgallery.com



S-9 A.G. Rizzoli, *Mr. & Mrs. Harold Healy Symbolically Sketched*, 1936, ink on rag paper, 35.5 x 24.625"