

An exhibition of American design. Chicago, Lakeside press. [1947].

An Exhibition of American Design. The Lakeside Press Galleries

Native American

THE ORIGINAL of the Dancing Girl in the drawing reproduced on the first page of this folder was a wood-carving that once adorned a circus-wagon. Weathered and faded now, this joyous figure no longer trips to the tune of bands or of steam calliopes; and yet, we can imagine that she is still listening for the music that poured forth in those good old days when the parade rolled along in all its shining splendor. There was a special magic and glory in the air when we were young and the circus came to town—and in this picture of the Dancing Girl there is a bit of that glory for you to keep.

Both the Dancing Girl and the ship's figurehead Eagle on this page are from the magnificent collection of American popular art at the National Gallery of Art, Index of Design, Washington, D.C., by whose permission they are reproduced. The significance of the American Design materials at the National Gallery is set forth in the following brief sketch by their Curator, Erwin O. Christensen:

“Toward the end of the nineteenth century, when America was depending upon machines to produce almost everything it needed—but before we had learned to make machine-products that were beautiful as well as useful—we lost sight temporarily of our early traditions, almost forgetting the fine things that had once come from the clever hands of American craftsmen.

“Now, happily, we are realizing more and more how much we have to be proud of. From a collection of the popular arts of an earlier America it is plain that there were good artisans in every region and in every period. The Colonial silversmith and cabinet-maker have always been recognized as fine craftsmen; but gradually we came to see that the woodcarver, the blacksmith, the local potter, and the weaver had also made admirable objects that had a sturdy, forthright simplicity in harmony with the national character.

“American folk arts tended to simplify the styles absorbed and adapted from many lands. But they did more than that. New England shipcarvers showed independence in detaching their figureheads, so that they seemed to advance before the ships. In no other country has wood sculpture been so much a part of the familiar scene. Our cigar store Indians, so eagerly collected today, once mingled with the crowds on public sidewalks. Among the many objects in which we can feel pride are the weather vanes, grilles, and hitching posts produced by our metal crafts; our ceramic wares excelling



in pattern, color, and glaze—not forgetting the more sober salt-glaze stoneware jars and jugs, splashed with cobalt blue designs, that filled our cellars and pantries; the crewel embroideries, coverlets, and quilts, which rank among our finest products; the carved and gilt bandwagons from our circuses, and the sprightly carrousel horses still to be seen at carnivals and fairs.

“No finer compliment, surely, has ever been paid our splendid American heritage of folk art than the superb craftsmanship that was lavished upon the great number of drawings in this collection. So vividly have many of these objects been rendered that one often feels impelled to touch the drawing—to make certain that it is a picture, rather than the object itself.”

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