Tramp Art: Cultural Expression, Visual Splendor

Robert T. Wright
Community Gallery of Art
College of Lake County
Tramp Art: *Cultural Expression, Visual Splendor*

Tramp Art plack with horns.
Collection of Davey Packer, Chicago, Ill.

Cover art: Tramp Art frame.
Private Collection

*A note on the condition of the objects displayed in this show:*
Throughout this exhibition you will see various objects in different stages of disrepair. The condition of these pieces shows the life these objects have led. You will see repairs on many pieces, an indication that they were objects of value to be kept and maintained. The condition of the works included in this show should be seen as part of their overall story, and as part of the aesthetic that collectors now cherish.
**Tramp Art: Cultural Expression, Visual Splendor**

By Amy Ortiz

*Tramp Art: Cultural Expression, Visual Splendor* explores themes and ideas that run through the vernacular woodcarving tradition called *tramp art*. For this exhibition, tramp art is explored through the arrangement of the objects into two groups, form and subject matter. This is done to display the artistic integrity of the pieces, highlight the objects’ many different forms, and give life to their story.

My interest and focus as a student of art history and material culture has always centered on what has been defined as the vernacular or folk arts. Different from what is traditionally called high-style art-academically founded work that fits well within the canon of art history- the vernacular arts are grounded in a different pattern of making, and a different train of thought. People of like religious beliefs, ethnicities and philosophical ideas tend to settle and socialize together, re-enforcing cultural expression within that community. Perfect examples of this continuity are the Amish communities living in various parts of the east coast United States. Old ways of doing things persevere, not only because religious ideals dictate a certain way of living, but also because pride is taken in maintaining old value systems. This is also true for works of art produced by a culture.

The wonderful thing about tramp art is this style of woodworking has evolved into a much larger story than just one facet of its history. Old design traditions are still apparent in the final products, but industry, fashion, politics and economics all play a role in the evolution of tramp art. As you wander through this exhibition, you will see a remarkable likeness in design. This type of embellishment is architectural, it projects forward into the viewer’s space, it is active, and light plays across these projections and gives the pieces life and presence. Geometric shapes take precedence, hearts, stars, triangles and squares rotate and evolve and project themselves into the viewer’s space.

These objects were often highly varnished or painted in metallic or brightly colored paints. Found objects could be encrusted around the forms; seashells, rocks, beads, foil, mirrors, and in one fanciful example in this exhibition- *horns*... anything to lend a jewel-like or mystical quality to the pieces. Shiny brass pulls and knobs were sometimes added as decorative elements, trapping and reflecting light.

These forms are tactile; they are as interesting to touch as they are to see. Velvet fabrics were often tufted between the projecting designs, giving the objects a plush opulence. These objects look *exotic*, not like everyday objects in the home. Most of these objects were made to have a function: to hold, keep, or
display items. These pieces have a mystery and character about them, and they elevate their contents to another level of importance. Others were made as effective display to denote importance to a person, place or organization: the church and secret societies like the Odd Fellows, Freemasons and the Woodmen of America were popular themes. Important personages were framed by fantastic creations, often times made specifically for the pictures or prints held within them.

They can be full of secrecy and mystery. It is not unusual to find pieces that have secret compartments accessed by hidden sliding drawers or false bottoms!

Bank with interior compartment with key. Made out of cigar boxes. Private Collection.
What is Tramp Art?

The phenomenon known as tramp art or hobo art are terms used mostly by collectors to describe a Nordic/Baltic/Germanic-American complex of decorative carvings. This particular style of expression became popular and reached its peak between the years of 1865 and 1940, roughly seventy-five years, and then lost momentum as a popular decorative style. The European craftsmen who introduced this style of carving, specifically German and Scandinavian artisans, came from the European tradition of the apprenticeship and guild system, where skilled woodworkers learned their craft. Apprenticeships could be served in one place with one master craftsman, but others preferred to serve their apprenticeships wandering the countryside, working under different craftsmen. In Germany, these wandering apprentices were called Wanderburchen. Just after the Civil War, there was an increase in immigration of skilled craftsmen to help with rebuilding the country\(^1\). As these craftsmen settled in America with their fellow countrymen, they also met and mixed with people of all ethnic backgrounds. The continuation of this art form was both culturally reinforced and spread to other artists who would put their own spin on the design.

The popular myth behind this design style is the idea that these boxes, frames, crosses, and sculptures were made by tramps and hoboes during the Great Depression for host families in exchange for food and lodging. This is in part true - the era of the tramp and hobo coincide with the rise in popularity of tramp art. The hobo and tramp world had its roots in America’s rapid industrial growth and the development of the railroad.\(^2\) Just as the Wanderburchen wandered from job to job, so did the hobo and the tramp. For example, as a child, James McAree lived in western British Columbia, a major intersection of two Canadian Railways. He recounts that his home was a "marked house" - a house with an identifying mark indicating that this was a place to rest and find a meal. During the great depression, everyday at lunchtime one or more hoboes appeared at the door for a meal. Often a small piece of tramp art was offered as payment.\(^3\)

However the fact soon becomes apparent that because of their sheer size of most of these objects could not be carried around and worked on. More likely people from diverse backgrounds made these pieces on site over long periods of time, in some cases years. Recent scholarship reveals that people from all walks of life, and those of all ethnicities practiced the art of chip carving. A traditionally northern European way of woodcarving became a national phenomenon, changing little in appearance throughout the process.


Three toy chairs. The end chairs display "crown of thorns" construction. The middle chair has a "wolf's tooth" carving pattern. Collection of Davey Packer, Chicago, Ill.
The artists are usually not known. As with much vernacular art, the emphasis was on solving a problem of need or function, not on establishing a name for the artist. A gift of affection or an heirloom piece still had a job to perform. In some rare cases, the artist did sign the object, like the frame displayed backwards in the exhibition. However many pieces can still be attributed to one artist. Similarities in the way a notch was carved, patterns of design and construction all can reveal a specific hand at work.

Tramp art displays a remarkable overall homogeneity, and although there is room for play with shapes and detail of carving, the design fits within a framework that seems to be remarkably consistent. Scottish, English, Irish, German, Scandinavian, Dutch, and possibly even Afro-American people found this form of decoration a proper and appropriate way to decorate functional objects, mark important milestones in one's life, and express larger truths such as love, religion, and the continuation of the family.

The making of tramp art seems to have been almost exclusively a male pursuit. When done in groups, this was a way for men to gather at the end of the day and enjoy each other's company. This was also one way in which ideas about construction and design were passed from father to son, artist to artist. Although there are artists who still make tramp art, it is made in a slightly different mind-set; the artisans who produce tramp art today do so for a collectible market. Their works are displayed and sold at folk art fairs around the country, and sold to housewives and decorators who are striving to re-visit a romantic ideal of America's past.

Tramp art was subject to the fashions of the day. Much tramp art of the nineteenth century incorporated the heavily ornamented Victorian styles; Eastlake and later, the influences of Art Deco appear. The Arts and Crafts movement with its emphasis on handicraft also helped fertilize the growth of tramp art. Along with changing fashions, older and more traditional construction techniques and designs hung on, creating a wonderful hybrid of folk and fashion, traditional and modern.

Materials play an especially significant role in the story of this design vocabulary. The rise in popularity of tramp art concurs with the fashion of cigar smoking in the nineteenth century. Clifford
Tramp Art frame with added mirrors. The Ziggurat shape of this frame mimics the individual construction that makes up the decorative molding. This repetition of design elements is very common in vernacular styles of expression. Collection of Joan and Rich Schnadig, Highland Park, Ill.
Postcard frame. Frames were often made to contain specific images. Perhaps these postcards represent an important trip or significant place to the original owner.
Collection of Joan and Rich Schnadig, Highland Park, Ill.
Wallach, in *Tramp Art: One Notch At A Time* (1998), states that in a very real sense, availability of materials gave rise to the popularity of the craft "The surplus of non-reusable mahogany and cedar cigar boxes, consequent of the Tax Act of 1865, and a plentitude of pine packing crates occasioned by the practicality of transporting consumer goods by rail created a huge quantity of free material for the handicrafter."\(^5\) Cigar boxes were plentiful, and available, thus making them ideal for this type of woodworking.

Later, as the idea of tramp art became popular, it was picked up by commercial sources and further dissipated. During the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, there were magazine articles and handbooks published explaining the technique to a mass audience. *The Ladies Home Journal, Popular Science, School Arts Magazine*, and others promoted tramp art as a way to keep young or idle hands busy.

**How was chip carving done?**

Tramp art is a whittling craft. Very few tools were needed; descendants of tramp artists recall only hand fret or coping saws for producing the uncarved blanks, and straight or pocket knives for notching. A couple of examples are known to have been made with razor blades, and in another, broken glass.\(^6\) Practice and patience were needed to achieve the most dramatic results, especially in larger pieces. Those with little skill could undertake the less intricate forms.

The underlying form was either constructed first, as in the case of the frames, or the original form was used as the support for the added decoration. Cigar boxes became the most available material, and the wood was soft enough to notch easily. Notching the piece of wood was done first, and then the graduated layers were glued and nailed together to form the finished result. Many of the boxes in this exhibition have a simple cigar box as their understructure, with consecutive layers added to the outside. The final form often obscured or overwhelmed simple or unskilled construction.\(^7\)

Today, tramp art is understood as a very different aesthetic than we are used to. It is hard to understand, and for some, difficult to look at. Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but these objects are undeniably intriguing! Most importantly, these objects give us a glimpse into the past; showing that the story behind them and the culture that produced them was as multi-faceted as the objects stunning surfaces.

**Amy Ortiz is currently pursuing a PhD in Art History/Decorative Arts and Material Culture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This exhibition is designed to accompany her doctoral dissertation.**


\(^5\) Wallach, Clifford. *Tramp Art*.

\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Fendelman, Elaine. *Tramp Art: A folk Art Phenomenon*
Tramp Art mirror. This mirror has a set of crossed tools in the top circle, and the initials of either the artist or the owner. Sometimes the two were one in the same. The tools may represent the occupation of the owner, or his affiliation in a secret society. Private collection.

Tramp Art frame with velvet. In addition to wood, other materials, such as velvet, were used to give objects a luxurious, plush material. Collection of Joan and Rich Schnadig, Highland Park, Ill.
Bibliography


The Robert T. Wright Community Gallery of Art would like to express its gratitude to those individuals listed below for loaning their Tramp Art to this exhibition.

Davey Packer, Chicago, Ill.
Joan and Rich Schnadig, Highland Park, Ill.
Katherine F. Chambers, Libertyville, Ill.
And other private collections.
Tramp Art cross. This cross is constructed in the "crown of thorns" style. Interlocking pieces of wood are notched in the center and joined together.
Collection of Davey Packer, Chicago, Ill.
Tramp Art

Cultural Expression, Visual Splendor
May 21 – August 6, 2004

Robert T. Wright
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College of Lake County
19351 West Washington Street

Tramp Art is a folk art that was produced in America from the end of the Civil War through the 1930s. Tramp Art is noted for its highly ornate and idiosyncratic utilitarian objects that were carved from cigar box wood with pocketknives. This exhibition includes examples of Tramp Art boxes, frames, furniture and whimsical objects. Curated by Amy Ortiz, this exhibition contains pieces loaned from area private collections.

Gallery Summer Hours:
May 21– June 4 & August 2-6
Mon-Fri 8:00 am – 4:30 pm
June 7- July 30
Mon-Thu 8:00 am – 10:00 pm
Fri 8:00 am – 4:30 pm
Closed July 5th

Gallery information: 847/543-2240
E-mail: sjones@clcillinois.edu
http://yyz.clc.cc.il.us/artgallery/

The Robert T. Wright Community Gallery of Art is a project of the College of Lake County Foundation. This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.