

AN EXAMINATION OF AMERICAN SIDESHOW BANNERS

AS FOLK ART, ca. 1920-1960

Emery Christian Weimer, B.A.

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

December 2002

APPROVED:

Jennifer Way, Major Professor

Scott Montgomery, Committee Member

Diane Taylor, Committee Member

Jacqueline Chanda, Committee Member

D. Jack Davis, Dean of the School of Visual Arts

C. Neal Tate, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse School of  
Graduate Studies

Weimer, Emery Christian, An Examination of American Sideshow Banners as Folk Art, ca. 1920-1960. Master of Arts (Art History), December 2002, 96 pp., 4 illustrations, references, 50 titles.

This thesis redresses the lack of scholarly attention paid to painted circus banners produced in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century by exploring the extent to which American folk art painting scholarship, methodologies, and objects can be used to articulate the meaning and significance of banner painting.

This study expands the disciplinary treatment of banner painting by introducing *domesticated art* as a means of representing non-academic art produced in the U.S. The thesis also presents a model for exploring banner painting after identifying traditional American folk art painting methodologies, which fail to investigate banner painting style, format, and artistic training associated with banner work.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	iii
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem	
Methodology	
Review of Literature	
2. DEFINING BANNER PAINTING AS FOLK ART.....	15
3. METHODOLOGICAL TREATMENTS.....	51
4. BANNERS AS DOMESTICATED ART.....	68
5. CONCLUSION.....	86
ILLUSTRATIONS.....	89
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	93

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. <i>Oriental Magic</i> .....	90
2. <i>Bathing Beauties</i> .....	91
3. <i>Blockhead</i> .....	91
4. <i>Emmett: The Armless and Legless Boy</i> .....	92

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The sideshow banner was the most prominent type of visual imagery found in circuses and fairs in America in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The banner line, which consisted of multiple canvas banners hung in a row to form a midway, constituted the primary visual attractor of audiences at sideshows in the United States from the 1870s to the collapse of sideshow entertainment in the late 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Despite their familiarity to circus and sideshow entertainment, banner paintings remain critically unexamined by American art scholars. In order to understand the significance of banner imagery, features of banner imagery, as well as the construction and use of banners, will be examined in light of what current scholarship and methodologies associated with American folk art painting have the potential to tell us about them.

Banners teased the fair-goer's eye with impossible claims of scale, origins, and abilities. They included images ranging from evocations of the grandeur of royalty to aspects and rituals that Americans associated with foreign cultures. Through the use of flamboyant color schemes and subject matter exaggerated in proportions, details, and activities, they promised audiences that a wide range of sensations awaited them inside the circus tent.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Fred G. Johnson, *Sideshow Banners* (Chicago: State of Illinois Art Gallery, 1989) 14-19.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Conniff, "The Carnival Spirit," *Architectural Digest* 48 (August 1991): 34.

The subject matter of most painted sideshow banners involved one or several figures appearing physically deformed or disabled. Included with the figures might be props, costumes, and false narratives articulated by an exaggeration of size of the figure and/or its attributes, references to foreign origin, and/or a fake stage name for an individual. These components were included to draw attention to individual anatomical differences and limitations. Examples of anatomical differences from the norm can be seen in the use of the fat lady or thin man characters, or any figure with extra or missing limbs. False narratives consisted of fictional biographies or stories associated with a particular attraction, as well as names and identities, such as the “Alligator Man,” or “Dog-boy from Russia.” The narrative component might include a scroll of text appearing to unfurl above the image, or text encompassed by a circle, called a *bullet*, with the word "alive" appearing in bright red paint.

Banners in circuses and sideshows were first used in England during the early 1800s and they constitute the oldest surviving form of fairground decoration. They functioned exactly like painted shop signs, in that they hung outside the entrances of a show or booth and thus advertised the contents within. Sideshow banners also find their roots in Europe. Traveling showmen such as the *Marchands des Chansons*, balladeers who sang or recited melodramatic and comic sagas, often used a type of rolled up banner to illustrate their stories.<sup>3</sup>

Early English banners were made either from wood boards, mounted to the front of a show booth like a shop sign, or they were painted on cotton canvas and fitted with special rings or grommets for attachment to a rope. Thus they hung on the outside of

---

<sup>3</sup> Geoff Weedon, *Fairground Art: The Art Forms of Traveling Fairs, Carousels, and Carnival Midways* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981) 236.

carnival attractions.<sup>4</sup> During the 1850s, American sideshows employed the same methods of display. Banners measured anywhere from eight to sixteen feet across and achieved a height of eight feet, which permitted them to hang above the heads of patrons of the fair. As the sideshows moved to different locations, carnival employees rolled up the banners and packed them away with the rest of the equipment. Typically, banners were exposed to varying climactic conditions and weather. The combination of banner use and exposure to weather contributed to the poor condition of many banners and low survival rates of older banner paintings.

The majority of banners produced between the 1930s to the 1960s employ the same basic style and format. This standard banner style lasted until the demise of mass banner production in the 1960s. Banners that display this standard format and bold style were brightly painted using highly contrasting colors and exaggerated subject matter. Banner artists usually presented figurative representations of the various sideshow attractions in the center of each banner painting. The central figures are commonly portrayed in the act of presenting their show and outlined in dark paint. A curtain typically appears in the background behind the central figure or a wide bright border was used to surround the central image or a combination of both the curtain and bright border was used. Above the central image is a scroll with the sideshow name or title of the performance.

An individual who had a trade painting background or a tent and awning firm that specialized in banner and sign painting for circus midways and other types of advertising completed each banner in oil colors. Although realized in oil paint on canvas, banners

---

<sup>4</sup> Frederick and Mary Fried, *America's Forgotten Folk Arts* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) 40.

were never intended to be considered works of art. Instead, the makers and users conceived them as tools useful in attracting the attention of a crowd and enticing them to part with their money. The practice of making sideshow banners ceased when the sideshow act as entertainment fell out of favor with the public. By the late 1960s banners had been replaced by images painted on the sides of metal carnival trailers and trucks that would line up to form the carnival midway.<sup>5</sup>

Art historians have largely ignored sideshow banner painting as an example of visual culture worthy of serious inquiry in its own right. Most scholars refer to banner artwork in passing as a component in a circus, the history of which they endeavor to describe. Currently, art historical articles present sideshow banner painting as a form of American folk art painting. Recent articles in *Folk Art*, *Connoisseur*, and *Applied Arts Magazine* all present sideshow banner art as a popular new collectable in the market for enthusiasts of American folk art painting. The question needs to be raised as to why banner art is being associated with the American folk art painting scene and what can this discipline bring to the understanding of the format and style of banner painting?

Long the subject of debate by art historians, critics, folklorists, and other scholars, *folk art* is most often defined as art created by individuals who were not academically trained (although they may have acquired their skills through apprenticeship, observation, or informal learning) and that adheres to the aesthetic standards of the small communities within which or for which it was produced. It should also be noted that certain formal qualities reappear in different American folk art painting contexts: heavy outlines, flat figures with very little modeling, rounded heads, detailed, and frequently, an intense

---

<sup>5</sup> Fred G. Johnson, *Sideshow Banners* 9.

decorative quality.<sup>6</sup> These formal features appear in numerous figurative representations within the litany of objects considered American folk art painting. It may be based on these standards that collectors, dealers, and scholars are now choosing to address sideshow banner art as a form of American folk art painting.

Does the definition of folk art and its standards concerning appearance apply to sideshow banner art? Can this inclusion into the American folk art painting field reveal a greater understanding of sideshow banner's colorful style and format or the development of a standard layout? Overall, historians have approached banner scholarship in terms of what the imagery reveals about circus and sideshow traditions while ignoring its visual nature. The goal of this thesis is to broaden an understanding of banner painting style and format by exploring American folk art painting scholarship and how this discipline can contribute to this investigation.

### Statement of the Problem

This thesis redresses the lack of scholarly attention paid to painted circus sideshow banners produced in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century by exploring the extent to which American folk art painting scholarship, methodologies, and objects can be used to articulate the significance of sideshow banner painting style and format.

---

<sup>6</sup> "Folk Art," *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms*. (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1984) 84.

It should be noted that there is no unchanging, essential definition of American folk art painting. Any attempt to define this challenging artistic form with its wide range of styles, materials, and techniques and many levels of sophistication will often be a broad one.

## Methodology

This thesis focuses on banner painting in the context of American folk art painting scholarship, methodologies, and objects. The methodology required for this examination will be a comparative analysis. It is possible to make sense of banner painting by comparing examples to similar occurrences members of today's art world consider solid examples of American folk art painting. In other words, the thesis explores the extent to which we can make sense of what is unfamiliar—in that banner painting remains largely unexamined in art historical discourses of American folk art—by referring to and drawing upon an existing tradition of scholarship and methodologies. Exploring meanings associated with *American folk art painting* will determine their usefulness in understanding banner art style. In addition, the thesis investigates the methodologies of American folk art painting and banner art, and examines the appearance, production, and artistic training from examples of each in order to find parallels between the two.

The first task is to examine *American folk art painting*, a concept that has many popular and academic meanings, as demonstrated in the article "Words, Words, Words: Folk Art Terminology—Why It (Still) Matters."<sup>7</sup> It is important to ask how the concept is used today as well as in the past. For example, scholars considered what types of art as American folk art painting during the time circus banners were created? Also, has the meaning of *American folk art painting* changed in academic scholarship and critical writing and, if so, in what ways? It is difficult to prove that the meaning and form of *American folk art painting* has remained consistent critically and scholarly, not to

---

<sup>7</sup> Joan M. Benedetti, "Words, Words, Words: Folk Art Terminology—Why It (Still) Matters," *Art Documentation* 19 (Spring 2000): 14-19.

mention acceptable, and we can get a sense of its slipperiness as a concept if we first consider and then relate it to a situation typical in art history.

Especially at the level of treating their subject in a survey fashion, art historians make sense of works of art by referring to, indeed, categorizing examples of art and ideas in styles, movements and eras such as “Renaissance” or “Rococo.” The regularity of so proceeding ensures students, viewers, and readers share a certain understanding of a time and place as well as a general idea of the artwork associated with that time and place. If not, the individual can research the term in Gardner’s *Art History Survey*, which provides a general definition of the term usually emphasizing formal qualities, artists considered key to the movement, work, or event, and the chronological time, geographical place, political space, and other dimensions of context the artists shared. The reader’s perception can grow more specific if the term is qualified, say, instead of Renaissance, then Italian Renaissance or High Renaissance. The latter two phrases narrow the scope of the study to artists working in a particular time and place within the art considered normative for the era. This is a long-established way of making sense of works of art by organizing them into categories meaningful within a particular disciplinary practice. It has value through its scholarly consensus and its long-lasting popular understanding. Accepted art historical categories help avoid confusion among existing movements within the art world and help link movements within art history.

However, a search for certainty regarding information about artists or artistic practices associated with folk art painting is extremely confusing, for example, because categories—such as *naïve*, *primitive*, *self-taught*—proliferate while failing to increase clarification. Refining *folk art* by adding *painting* does not provide much help in

winnowing away the other confusing if not controversial terms because there are many painters in the primitive, self-taught, amateur and outsider categories that still remain. Finally, arriving at the term *American folk art painting* still leaves hundreds of texts that deal with artists and artworks that fall under the large cosmology of the American folk art field that includes anonymous portrait and sign painters, carriage painters, amateur artists, the clinically insane, artists working in a consciously crude style, and a number of professional artists practicing in the European studio tradition. In other words, as a designation of topic and scholarly inquiry, *American folk art painting* would seem to offer little value as a term when no one seems to concur as to what it is or what it defines.

Directly related to examining scholarly definitions of *folk art* and evaluating their usefulness for understanding banner painting is consideration of why definitions of folk art do not apply to sideshow banners. Some concepts associated with American folk art painting, or that fall within its purview include *primitive*, *naive*, *art brut*, *outsider* and *self-taught*. What can we learn about banner painting style if considered from perspectives these terms afford? In what ways can scholarship and methodologies associated with these concepts help us to achieve a better understanding of the material?

The next step is to examine the concept of American folk art painting. The emphasis here will be to examine how art and cultural historians defined, studied, and wrote about American folk art painting in the past, especially during the chronological period with which this thesis is concerned, to show how the treatment of these objects has developed and changed in its brief history. This may reveal why the field has recently accepted sideshow banner art as a folk art. In *Folk Painters of America*, Robert Bishop discusses movements in American folk art painting as well as individuals who shaped

what we think of as the history of folk art including Jean Lipman, Nina Fletcher Little, Mary Black, Alice Winchester, Carl W. Drepperd, and Holger Cahill.<sup>8</sup> Do these scholars of American folk art approach their subject similarly? What does a methodological portrait of their field look like? Might it clarify why banner art has received scholarly attention as an art form only recently? Can their approach to folk art objects reveal an understanding of a standard banner style and layout?

A new methodological approach to banner art will be offered in light of what the scholarship of historic American folk art painting offers. This study will include an examination of banner art in the areas of production, appearance, and artistic training as sign painters, which topics of potential importance, in that strong visual parallels occur between banner art and certain examples of figurative American folk art painting, and these may shed light on the style and format of banner painting. Indeed, my examination will reveal provocative possibilities for establishing grounds on which banner art can be understood using a current folk art scholarship and methodology, as demonstrated in the “Ornamental Painter” by Carolyn J. Weekly. Weekly examines evidence of trade painting, such as sign or carriage painting and training as these practices influenced the work of the American folk painter Edward Hicks and other well-known American folk art painters. In particular, she demonstrates how trade and ornamental painting training along with academic painting techniques influenced American folk art easel work. Weekly’s approach can contribute to a clearer understanding of banner painting style and format by using her approach to investigate similar trade or sign painting elements in sideshow banner art. By observing the development and implementation of sign painting

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert Bishop, *Folk Painters of America* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979) 7-14.

techniques within banner production, we can identify an evolution of banner painting style and format. It is important to associate banner painting with similar visual and training components found in American folk art painting to emphasize what banner art has been related to erroneously, such as Japanese prints.

This approach to the material requires an examination of specific examples located in the Ringling Circus Museum in Sarasota, Florida. Visiting the collection gives me the opportunity to examine the proportions and sizes of the banners. Secondary sources included texts such as Carl Hammer's *Freakshow: Sideshow Banner Art* and Randy Johnson's *Freaks, Geeks, and Strange Girls: Sideshow Banners of the Great American Midway*. The images found in the secondary sources provide excellent reproductions that can be incorporated into the study.

#### Review of the Literature

Scholarship dealing with sideshow banners is limited in its scope. Scholars emphasize the history of the sideshow and circus attractions and thus mention banner painting as one of many components therein. The few texts that deal with sideshow banners, such as Carl Hammer's *Freakshow* and Randy Johnson's *Freaks, Geeks, and Strange Girls*, document the history of the banner in circus and sideshow attractions.

The main concerns of these authors are the sideshow acts and various personalities associated with freakshows. Johnson employs stylistic analysis in order to investigate the colors and sizes of the banners. Mainly, he argues that banner art should be recognized as a legitimate genre in American art.<sup>9</sup> In other words, Johnson recognizes the artistic merit of banner art, but he does not align it with any other body of work, such

---

<sup>9</sup> Fred G. Johnson, *Sideshow Banners* 14.

as American folk art painting, which would create a clearer understanding of the origins of the banner style. Johnson's appreciation of banner art does not go far enough as to create valid links to trade or sign painting techniques that appear throughout banner imagery.

Carl Hammer and Randy Johnson attempt to create formal connections between banner art and academic works. Hammer tries to elevate the status of banners to that of high-art by identifying similarities between sideshow art and both Japanese wood-block prints and Baroque portraits.<sup>10</sup> He focuses especially on the device of the curtain that frames a centrally placed figure. Randy Johnson also mentions these connections in a gallery exhibition catalogue, *Fred G. Johnson: Sideshow Banners*, for the work of the late banner painter Fred G. Johnson, Randy Johnson's father, but neither author offers any proof that American banner painters were exposed to these styles. All three sources provide excellent color reproduction of banners.

*Fairground Art: The Art Forms of the Traveling Fairs, Carousels, and Carnival Midways* by Geoff Weedon covers the majority of the collectible fairground fixtures and decorations, including sideshow banners. Weedon addresses the experiences of audiences at fairs by describing the sights and sounds of the midway and considers how banners functioned as an integral part of this scene. For example, he discusses a variety of sexual elements typical of banner painting and the erotic impact they had on the fairground public. Also, the author relates the visually erotic aspect of some banners to elements of horror in relation to popular themes found in movies of this era.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Carl Hammer and Gideon Bosker, *Freak Show: Sideshow Banner Art* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996) 15.

<sup>11</sup> Geoff Weedon, 268-272.

In his book *Freakshow*, Robert Bogdan offers an account of the different means of presentation involved with the actual sideshows. For example, he discusses the use of a small stage and curtained off areas within the sideshow tent. However, he pays very little attention to sideshow banners and their connections to the same elements of presentation that the sideshow promoters were using to display their advertised attractions. Bogdan's text focuses on personalities and personal lives of the sideshow performers.

Another text that focuses on individual personalities is *America's Forgotten Folk Arts* by Frederick and Mary Fried. The authors emphasize the individual backgrounds of actual banner artists. Significantly, they point out how very little attention is paid to banner painting artistically and in art history. Unfortunately, their manuscript contributes to the problem they identify. Although it discusses the backgrounds of banner artists such as Jack Cripe, Cad Hill, and David 'Snap' Wyatt, it ignores the art historical significance of banner painting. The text focuses on painting techniques and individual styles. Frieds' text serves as an example of banner art's inclusion into the American folk art painting field, but lacks a justification as to why banner painting is a folk art.

Journal articles from *Architectural Digest* and *Connoisseur* briefly summarize the history of sideshow banners used in circuses and fairs. After this, they move quickly into discussing the average price for which these "strange" banners are selling in today's folk art and antiques market. In another journal, *Parkett*, Robert Bogdan compares the sideshow to television talk shows by pointing out that both present individuals or performers as spectacles. Bogdan does mention the art of misleading an audience through imitations of spontaneity and dishonest approaches to portraying subjects.

One article that appears in the journal *Folk Art* falls into the category of the other sideshow histories and banner painter biographies. In "Beyond Belief: The Flustering Truth of Sideshow Banner Art," Michael McCabe investigates the midways and sideshows of early America and interviews former banner artists. McCabe provides an account of several sign painting firms that helps to strengthen our awareness of possible links between folk traditions and certain professional painting processes. However, he focuses the majority of his effort on paint combinations of some of the more famous banner painters and their techniques. He does not clarify what aspects of banner production or painting constitute the banners as a folk art.

A more recent article by Tricia Vita, a carnival and sideshow historian, explores in *Art New England* the new market for sideshow banners in galleries and in private collections. Based on interviews with collectors, Vita gives insight into some recent exhibitions of banner art. The article also draws attention to a few contemporary artists, including William Wegman, who have been influenced by banner art in their own work. Unfortunately, Vita fails to mention any connections with an American folk painting tradition for the banner images. Instead, the reader is to assume that banners influence the contemporary artist, but banner art itself originated from nothing.

In "Theater of Guts: An Exploration of the Sideshow Aesthetic," Fred Siegel examines the effects sideshows had on an unsuspecting American audience. Siegel discusses the space that performers and audience shared and what possible effects this could have on the mind. He does not relate any of his ideas to banner art. Rather, he focuses on the acts and the art of deception, not how the banners embody or materialize this deception.

Sideshow banners have been the topic of investigation on a limited scale in art historical scholarship. Little or no recognition has been given to the visual complexity of sideshow banners.<sup>12</sup> Art historians have largely avoided exploring the connection banner painting may have with American folk art painting other than to label banner painting as folk art. To date, scholarship addressing banner painting has emphasized circus history or the history of the sideshow.<sup>13</sup> Recent discussions comment on the fact that banner painting is now being embraced on the art market, yet fail to analyze why a reevaluation of banner painting developed when it did, other than pointing out multiple gallery exhibits and a rise in banner art prices.<sup>14</sup> This thesis will examine the development of a standard style and format of sideshow banner painting by recourse to the scholarship and methodologies of American folk art painting. Moreover, it maintains the influence of ornamental and trade painting techniques in American folk art painting as identified by Weekly in the “Ornamental Painter.” Furthermore, based on Weekly’s work, it posits a new methodological approach to the relationship of banner imagery with trade painting techniques, and so establishes a direct link to an American folk art painting heritage.

---

<sup>12</sup> Frederick and Mary Fried, *America’s Forgotten Folk Arts* 44.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Conniff, “The Carnival Spirit,” *Architectural Digest* 48 (August 1991): 38.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Pinchbeck, “Sideshow Stoppers,” *Connoisseur* 221 (December 1991): 108.

## CHAPTER 2

### DEFINING BANNER PAINTING AS FOLK ART

#### Introduction

American folk art journals and articles are now including examples of banner painting. Does banner painting qualify as a folk art and, if so, how? What can American folk art painting as a term or concept offer to a greater understanding of a banner painting style and format? *American folk art painting*, because of its inclusiveness to non-folk art objects, has developed into an open-ended category of study that can readily accept banner artwork. A useful and accurate interpretation of the painting that has been mislabeled as *American folk art painting* is needed to develop a clear discussion of this art, which includes banner art that possesses its own significance and ways of understanding outside the realm of true folk art traditions.

Indeed, examining and clarifying terms commonly associated with or currently at odds with *American folk art* such as *self-taught*, *outsider*, *art brut*, and *primitive* among others will clarify the multiple and overlapping meanings these labels share. Indeed, they engender an American folk art family tree, with each separate label as a branch performing as a distinct domain of inquiry that, when viewed collectively, comprise part of the same body or trunk. Each has particular limitations that cannot meet the dynamics necessary to address the field as a whole. Recognizing this problem, a new label of understanding is offered to address this discipline as a whole. Examining chronologically some of the changes found in the various definitions of American folk art painting by its

main scholars and investigating related concepts is crucial to understanding the relevance of this body of work when considering banner art and its place within the field.

### Preliminary Observations

Traditionally, *folk art* has been used to describe anything handmade, almost anything made by people who never went to art school. The folk art label designates objects that are or look “old-timey” and traditional to the individual viewer. *Folk art* is used to refer to things, utilitarian or not, that have a particular appearance, which is considered formally crude, simple, or plain in style.<sup>1</sup> It can describe American pattern quilts made in Japan, or wooden ornaments that have a patina of yesteryear, yet are mass-produced by the Fossil watch company.

Banner painting can be accepted as a folk art under these broad requisites. The majority of authentic sideshow banners existing from the heyday of the circus midway are at least forty to fifty years old. Thus banners can be considered as artwork from an older era. Banners are hand painted and appear simple in style and appearance. Also, they served a utilitarian purpose. Thus, according to this criteria banner painting is an American folk art.

However, in her article “Words, Words, Words: Folk Art Terminology—Why It (Still) Matters,” Joan M. Benedetti discusses her role in assisting the editor of the *Art and Architecture Thesaurus* with input from Alan Jabbour, Director of the American Folk Life Center in Washington, in clarifying this important area of art vocabulary. For

---

<sup>1</sup> Joan M. Benedetti, “Words, Words, Words: Folk Art Terminology—Why It (Still) Matters,” *Art Documentation* 19.1 (2000): 15.

eighteen years Benedetti worked as the Museum Librarian at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles. In 1995 the *AAT* added scope notes, which are notes in a thesaurus establishing parameters for the use of a term, because of the controversy concerning folk art in the past. The definition of *folk art* states:

Used for the genre of art produced in culturally cohesive communities or contexts, and guided by traditional rules or procedures for the creation in accordance with mutually understood traditions, and in some cultures allowing greater or lesser latitudes for personal expression; genre defined and term used since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines folk as “the common people of a society or region.”<sup>3</sup> The *Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms* lists folk art as unsophisticated art, which is supposedly rooted in the collective awareness of simple people.<sup>4</sup> The members of a folk group are a relatively small community of like-minded people bonded by shared concerns for ethnicity, religion, place, or occupation.

The question then remains, according to the official definition, how painted banners created for monetary reasons, no matter how crude or amateur in their appearance, can be labeled as American folk painting. Folk art definitions do not apply to banner painting. Sideshow banners are not used to serve any religious or communal function. Banners do not reflect the shared concerns of a like-minded community or represent a collective consciousness. What can account for banner painting’s inclusion into the American folk art field? Does the definition of American folk art painting offer an explanation for this inclusion?

---

<sup>2</sup> Joan M. Benedetti 14.

<sup>3</sup> "Folk," Def. 1. *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1994.

<sup>4</sup> "Folk Art," *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1984) 84.

## Defining American Folk Art Painting

Defining their subject seems to be a task necessary for scholars who concern themselves with artists and works classified in the American folk art painting field. In fact, the introductory chapters and prefaces to any number of texts, essays, or articles about American folk art painting published during the last sixty years have focused on the authors' own interpretations of what folk art is and how the definition refines, relates, or alters the application of the term to a particular topic of inquiry. There has yet to be an explanation as to how the folk art definition relates to banner painting in American folk art painting scholarship or in sideshow banner texts, or how the definition of American folk art painting has been altered to include banner painting.

In 1942 James Thomas Flexner outlined useful criteria for identifying three classes of painted pictures commonly considered to be works of folk art. Artisan painting, he suggested, consisted of pictures by professionals who had only slight training. Non-professionals created amateur paintings for personal pleasure. American folk painting was a category reserved for artworks like the Frakturs of the Pennsylvania Germans or rosemaling by Norwegian immigrants or, most obviously, traditional artworks made by American Indians. According to Flexner, these were true examples of folk expression grounded in local custom and passed down through generations by shared experience. In other words, Flexner wanted to reserve the use of *folk art* for art that met the criteria of the official definition. In contrast, artisan and amateur paintings are allied

to studio work.<sup>5</sup> No matter how crude, unschooled, primitive, naïve, or amateur they are, derivative forms of fine art should not be mistaken for the product of a folk tradition.<sup>6</sup>

In 1951, Holger Cahill sought to further define American folk painting. He separated folk painting into artisan and amateur categories. The artisan group included professionals who worked with some awareness of studio practice for either style or the content of their canvases. Amateurs were inspired by personal reasons or motives, and they showed only the slightest influence of academic conventions in their work.<sup>7</sup> Cahill noted, “Not all amateurs are folk artists” because folk artists must appeal to a “peoples’ sense of community.” Folk art was a “function not so much of the genius or rare individual giving his vision to the community as it was of the community or congregation itself.”<sup>8</sup> Cahill also noted a difference between true folk art expressions and the work of artisan and amateur painters.

Flexner and Cahill’s remarks were early calls for a reevaluation of the appropriate application of the folk art label to the body of work it is trying to address. Many scholars, such as Lipman, Drepperd, Black, and Hemphill, have attempted to reshape the definition, yet they continued to discuss the same artists and works. Labeling this odd body of work *folk art*, even though many scholars point out the fallacy, lays upon it a complexity that it does not fully deserve. Authors from the core group of scholars (Lipman, Drepperd and Hemphill) point out how the term *folk art* fails as a label for

---

<sup>5</sup> John Michael Vlach, introduction, *Plain Painters of American Folk Art* xii-xiii.

<sup>6</sup> James Thomas Flexner, "New Bottles for Old, Old Wine: American Artisan, Amateur, and Folk Paintings," *Antiques* 41 (April 1942): 246-49.

<sup>7</sup> John Michael Vlach, introduction, *Plain Painters of American Folk Art* xiii.

<sup>8</sup> Holger Cahill, "Artisan and Amateur in American Folk Art," *Antiques* 59 (March 1951): 210.

understanding this body of work and has been used in default. Changes in meaning of American folk art painting have allowed gaps in the scholarship vague enough to include such diverse works as limner portraits, watercolors from the clinically insane, to professional artists working in a consciously crude style. The inclusion of these works as examples of American folk art painting is odd because none technically qualify as true folk expressions.

*Folk art* is literally the art of the people, or "folk." The concept originated in Europe, where there was a sharp division between artists who trained at the academies and painted for rich aristocrats, and artisans who worked for the peasants. Folk artists served the latter group in the days before the proliferation of mass-produced consumer goods. Typically European folk art conforms to traditional formal patterns handed down from generation to generation. Thus copying from a master model would be applauded. Folk art tends to be utilitarian in purpose and communal in orientation. Household objects such as quilts or painted cupboards fall into this category, as do religious or devotional objects such as votive paintings. Purists exclude most other types of painting from their definition of *folk art*, because easel oil paintings tend to be expressions of autonomous, personal visions, rather than conforming to communal dictates.<sup>9</sup> Oil painted portraits were invented in Europe during the fifteenth century to serve the interests of elite or ruling class. Easel painting styles were determined by the tastes of the elite patrons. Folk art painting has nothing to do with catering to patron tastes or following

---

<sup>9</sup>John Michael Vlach, introduction, *Plain Painters of American Folk Art* (Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1988) xi-xiii.

contemporary painting styles.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the origins and traditions of easel painting have no connection to a true folk expression.

Generally speaking, artists that have a studio background have continually challenged accepted conventions and boundaries of the art world with their own personal insights and concepts of easel painting traditions. True folk art operates within accepted boundaries where virtuoso performances have no place. Yet, the American folk artist stands out (or scholars present them) as freakish, unique individual whose visions and ways of making are so singular as to be without comparison in the world of art. By comparison, studio artists, in an academic sense, try to present easel painting as a record of unique experience or vision. An easel painting representing folk art expression overturns the meaning of the term *folk* in a historical and sociological standpoint as Flexner and Cahill attempted to point out.<sup>11</sup> A folk group from a relatively small community of like-minded people bonded by shared concerns for ethnicity, religion, place, or occupation, does not need artwork in the studio tradition as a vehicle to promote religion, culture, or community.

Nevertheless, for years scholars have offered easel paintings as examples of folk art expressions in the U.S. This thesis has shown in conjunction with Flexner and Cahill that the easel painting tradition has little to do with folk art. According to these definitions, financial gain and personal expression are not components of folk art, as opposed to expressing a communal collective consciousness or religious function. There could also never be such a thing as a folk art factory or industry, such as the way banner

---

<sup>10</sup> John Michael Vlach, introduction, *Plain Painters of American Folk Art* xi.

<sup>11</sup> John Michael Vlach, introduction, *Plain Painters of American Folk Art* xii.

painting firms existed. Folk art painting cannot be a commodity and still maintain its folk function.

Popular scholarship still labels easel paintings from the Colonial era created for money or for the sheer pleasure of creating as American folk art paintings. It is more appropriate to label Native American sand painting or Hopi Indian Kachina dolls as an American folk art as these are art objects that are used communally in traditional ceremonies and whose creation processes are passed down through generations.

Pennsylvania German Fraktur drawings, which were handwritten documents recording births and baptisms in the seventeen and eighteen hundreds, usually embellished with drawings of soldiers, angels, birds, and various animals are another true form of American folk art. Easel painting for profit or pleasure has very little to do with communal traditions passed down through generations. American folk art painting implies through its use of *folk art* that the work it designates is somehow communal, religious, or traditionally based as an art form. However, the artwork it labels does not live up to the definition in a purist sense. This point becomes more relevant once art objects such as banner painting are discussed as a *folk art*.

*Folk art* requires constant clarification and justification, due largely to the inconsistencies credited to folk art historians and scholars. The common use can be clarified as *folk* meaning everybody, everywhere, within a certain time, or every time. In other words, *folk* serves as a label of convenience awaiting a suitable replacement. Unfortunately, the *folk* in *folk art* has become the applicable term for this odd looking and eclectic body of work that is anything but a folk art and is certainly not a fine art. A difference between what constitutes folk art and American folk art painting has been

noted. Does the concept of American folk art painting offer an explanation as to why banner art can be included? And if so, why only recently has banner art been accepted as a folk art?

### Early Concepts of American Folk Art Painting

This section will survey and analyze known information concerning the concept of American folk art painting and provide an idea of the growth and development of the folk art field in America in order to identify why banner painting is now being included within this discipline. Scholars such as Holger Cahill, Clara Endicott Sears, Jean Lipman, Carl W. Drepperd, Nina Fletcher Little, Mary Black, Alice Winchester, and, outside of this core group, Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr., have spent much of their lives studying American folk art painting and objects, and nearly all of them have developed his or her own concept of the definition. Much of their scholarship has reached the public through texts and articles.<sup>12</sup> Until recently, it was generally thought that American folk artists were anonymous, itinerant, and untrained. Research has somewhat altered this view. Scholarship has now identified many artists and their artistic careers studied. At the same time, contemporary investigation has established that not all of these painters were itinerant and a good number of so called American folk artists had the advantages of basic artistic training in trade painting or were exposed to traditional studio practice. More importantly, debates have shown the existence of contemporary modern folk artists and they have been finally included in this field. A brief retrospective of the way these scholars appreciate and define the concept of American folk art painting will generate an

---

<sup>12</sup> Jean Lipman, Elizabeth V. Warren, and Robert Bishop, *Young America: A Folk-Art History* (New York: Hudson Hill Press, 1986) 189.

understanding of the dilemma of multiple and in some ways contradictory definitions of American folk art.<sup>13</sup>

Since interest in American folk art painting developed, collectors and scholars have attempted to identify and classify it as a body of work by addressing it by such diverse terms as *amateur*, *artisan*, *pioneer*, *popular*, *primitive*, and *provincial*. In the 1920s, the first real appreciation of American folk art began as several modern artists and industrialists, including Henry Francis Du Pont and Henry Ford, gathered impressive collections of so called folk paintings. Interest in American folk art spread from these initial collections. The first public exhibitions were those shown by Mrs. Juliana R. Force at the Whitney Studio Club in New York in 1924. The Whitney Studio Club had grown from the Studio Club established by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in 1918. This informal center for artists had in turn sprung from the Friends of the Young Artists, which Mrs. Whitney had formed some three years earlier.<sup>14</sup> Folk art had just been “discovered” by Americans and there were no publications or collections devoted to it. By the early 1930s, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Newark Museum, and a number of other museums and art galleries had staged folk art exhibitions. By the 1940s, a good many publications were devoted to the subject, and collectors were multiplying.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps no one was more instrumental in establishing American folk art than Holger Cahill, who in 1930 staged the first major exhibition of American folk painting at the Newark Museum. In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, *American*

---

<sup>13</sup> Robert Bishop, *Folk Painters of America* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979) 7.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Bishop, *Folk Painters of America* 7.

*Primitives, An Exhibit of the Paintings of Nineteenth Century Folk Artists*, Cahill

accomplished two goals. For the uninitiated he provided a definition of folk art. In addition, he paved the way for a debate that continues today. He wrote,

The word primitive (in the exhibition) is used as a term of convenience, and not to designate any particular school of American art, or any particular period. It is used to describe the work of simple people with no academic training and little book learning in art. The earliest of the paintings shown date from the Eighteenth Century, the latest from the end of the Nineteenth. The work of living men might have been included, for there are many interesting folk artists painting in this country today. Their work finds its way into the big annual no-jury shows, the New York dealers' galleries, and even into the Carnegie International [...]. Here, as elsewhere, the European influence is at the heart of the native American development. Certain influences, Dutch or English mainly, are definitely recognizable. Most of these artists had seen paintings of one kind or another, or had seen engravings in books. It is evident that they tried to approximate effects achieved by academic artists whose paintings they had seen in the original or in reproduction.<sup>16</sup>

Two points should be noted. Cahill admits the term *primitive* as a tool helpful in describing works in the exhibition. He then mentions the existence of contemporary folk artists, or other primitives, which could have been included in the exhibition. Cahill believed contemporary painters could be classified as folk artists. It is unclear however if Cahill believed examples of *primitive* and *folk artist* were one in the same. In 1951 he updated his definition, noting, "Not all amateurs are folk artists" because folk art must appeal to a "people's sense of community."<sup>17</sup> Other scholars maintained that the intrusion of the machine into American society caused the dissolution of forces that once

---

<sup>15</sup> Jean Lipman, Elizabeth V. Warren, and Robert Bishop 8.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Bishop, *Folk Painters of America* 8-9.

<sup>17</sup> John Michael Vlach, introduction, *Plain Painters of American Folk Art* (Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1988) xiii.

had inspired the production of great folk art. In rebuttal, others like Cahill have taken a firm stand and stoutly defend the validity of naïve painters of today.<sup>18</sup>

Clara Endicott Sears was an early author and enthusiast of American folk art. Sears uses *folk art* to describe the body of work in her book *Some American Primitives*, but offers very little in the way of contributions to the evolution of its definition. Though other books dedicated to American folk painting have brought new perspectives to the field, Sears' text is included in this thesis based on the fact that it was one of a handful available at this time that concentrated exclusively on American folk art. Sears' *Some American Primitives*, 1941, is a gathering of anecdotes that might well serve as a solution for anyone contemplating the collecting works of this type. Here she states,

This book is primarily for collectors, and for those who have a real interest in preserving what is now called the folk art of America. These are not the grotesque examples that one comes across. I have a great shrinking from anything that departs from the normal.<sup>19</sup>

Whereas Cahill defends his use of *primitive* as a tool to describe American folk painting, Sears make no attempt to explain her use of *primitive* and *folk art*. Instead, she concentrates on artists and biographical information, while shrinking away from any solid definition of the artwork.

Unlike Cahill and Sears, Jean Lipman, as one of the most prolific scholars in the American folk art field, attempted a definition based on formal aspects of the painted works. In *American Primitive Painting*, 1942, in an essay titled "A Critical Definition," she states:

---

<sup>18</sup> Robert Bishop, *Folk Painters of America* 9.

<sup>19</sup> Clara Endicott Sears, introduction, *Some American Primitives: A Study of New England Faces and Folk Portraits* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1941) v.

The style of the typical American primitive is at every point based upon an essentially non-optical vision. It is a style based on what the artist knew rather than upon what he saw, and so the facts of physical reality were largely sifted through the mind and personality of the painter.<sup>20</sup>

Lipman in *American Primitive Painting*, 1942, and again in *American Folk Painting*, 1966, written with Mary Black, and more recently in *The Flowering of American Folk Art, 1776-1876*, published in 1974, spoke out for a new interpretation of the American folk artist and his contribution to the mainstream of American art. Lipman tries to define American folk art in *The Flowering of American Folk Art* as:

No single stylistic term, such as primitive, pioneer, naïve, natural, provincial, self-taught, or amateur, is a satisfactory label for the work we present here as folk art, but collectively they suggest some common denominators: independence from cosmopolitan, academic traditions; lack of formal training, which made way for interest in design rather than optical realism; a simple and unpretentious rather than sophisticated approach, originating more typically in rural than urban places and from craft rather than fine-art traditions.

In simplest terms, American folk art consists of paintings, sculpture and decorations of various kinds, characterized by artistic innocence that distinguishes them from works of so-called fine art or formal decorative arts. This is hardly a definition: it is necessarily an imprecise, even subjective designation. Properly speaking, folk art is a traditional, often ethnic expression, which is not affected by stylistic trends of academic art. In that sense much of American folk art is not folk art at all.<sup>21</sup>

This is an updated view from two of her previous texts, *Primitive Painters in America, 1750-1950*, with Alice Winchester, published in 1950, and *What Is American in American Art*, as editor, 1963. In these attempts Lipman uses *primitive* repeatedly to classify and thus make sense of the work. In fact, she lists the artists as primitives under the table of contents in *Primitive Painters in America*. Here she states,

---

<sup>20</sup> Jean Lipman, Elizabeth V. Warren, and Robert Bishop 8.

<sup>21</sup> Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester, *The Flowering of American Folk Art 1776-1879* (New York: Viking Press, 1974) 6-8.

Primitive, is perhaps not the most precise, but probably the most descriptive, and is the most generally accepted. If we take primitive to mean characterized by qualities belonging to the original state of man, such as naturalness and simplicity—which Webster says it does—then it is the word for these pictures.<sup>22</sup>

Lipman contributes to the definition of American folk art by recognizing that it is not a folk art in a true sense, unlike the opinions of Cahill and Sears. To defend her use of the term *folk art* to categorize her subject matter, in her introduction to *Flowering of American Folk Art* Lipman mentions the published symposium, “What is American Folk Art?” published in *Magazine Antiques* as the possible epicenter of the folk art debate:

*Magazine Antiques* published a symposium on “What is American Folk Art?” in 1950. Thirteen specialists offered as many different views not only of what it is but what it should be called. By common consent the term “folk art” has been widely if still not universally adopted, even though it may not be the most accurate or precise name. It is a convenience.<sup>23</sup>

Before more substantial texts were published, magazines for collectors of antiques became the major forums for opinions about folk art. The famous 1950 symposium that attempted to define American folk art was conducted in the pages of *Antiques* rather than in an academic publication such as the *Journal of American Folklore* or the *Art Quarterly*. The inclusion of this debate in *Antiques* says more for the fusion of collector interests than real concerns for an appropriate definition.<sup>24</sup>

In *Flowering of American Folk Art*, 1974, Lipman also changes her opinion concerning the time parameters of folk art discussed in *American Primitive Painting*, 1942. She suggests that this type of art reached its peak by the time of the centennial and

---

<sup>22</sup> Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester, *Primitive Painters in America 1750-1950* (New York: Dodd and Mead Company, 1950) 1.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester, *The Flowering of American Folk Art 1776-1879* 9.

<sup>24</sup> John Michael Vlach, *Plain Painters of American Folk Art* 162.

the machine age marked its decline. However, thirty-two years later, she points out that despite these restrictions, some blossoming and reseeded occurred during the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>25</sup> In *American Primitive Painting*, Lipman restricted the time period of folk art production from the years following the American Revolution to before World War I. She believed this last event ruined the collective naiveté that had distinguished folk artists from their patrons.

The evolution of her definition concerning the machine age is made most evident in *Young America: American Folk Art History*, 1986, written with Elizabeth V. Warren and Robert Bishop. The new idea of the folk photographer is introduced here, which absolutely negates her earlier opinions concerning the intrusion of the modern world as a stopping point for folk production. In general, the camera is a machine or tool for creating images and is a product of science and technology. Lipman's use of specific time periods and absence of modern technology as guidelines of understanding folk art production becomes weak and no longer makes sense once the camera is introduced as another facet in folk creation.<sup>26</sup>

Lipman's opinions concerning folk art, its definition, and its restrictions have continually expanded and evolved throughout her career. To be sure, Lipman acknowledges her omission of Spanish-American art of the Southwest and the distinctive art of the American Indian because they stem from different traditions and flourished in different regions and periods from the "American folk art" she wishes to emphasize.<sup>27</sup> Her changing definitions from strict time parameters to open ended acceptance of

---

<sup>25</sup> Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester, *The Flowering of American Folk Art 1776-1879* 6.

<sup>26</sup> Jean Lipman, Elizabeth V. Warren, and Robert Bishop, *Young America : A Folk-Art History* 9.

contemporary folk artists, to the exclusion of Native American art expressions to the inclusion of so-called folk photography can serve as evidence that the term and her use of folk art has continually evolved.

In a retrospective of her career as a dealer in American folk art from the 1930s to the present, gallery owner Adele Earnest acknowledged Lipman's *American Primitive Painting*, 1941, as "our bible." Despite its stagnate definition, the book served as a basic reference work from the 1940s through the 1960s, outlining the evaluative criteria for judging primitive painting, all the while the definition of the subject was continuing to change.<sup>28</sup> This point emphasizes the impact that scholars such as Lipman had on popular opinion concerning the definition of American folk painting. The parameters that Cahill, Lipman, Winchester and Sears originally defined to identify and evaluate American folk art are somewhat vague while they also attempt to be exclusive. These classifications, such as being produced between the Revolutionary War and the Machine Age, excluding art of the Southwest and American Indians, and, according to Sears, not being grotesque, but unschooled according to Cahill, have shifted to include twentieth-century artists and so-called folk photographers. The authors do not specify media or activity by the artist as criteria determining what qualifies as folk art or who counts as a folk artist. The definitions from these early contributors have slowly expanded and broadened to include works originally not intended as American folk offerings. This chronological movement from a narrow scope of study to a broadening perspective of the definition will continue to be a trend in other works of scholarship devoted to American folk art.

---

<sup>27</sup> Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester, *The Flowering of American Folk Art 1776-1879* 8.

<sup>28</sup> John Michael Vlach, *Plain Painters of American Folk Art* 161.

## Later Concepts of American Folk Art Painting

Carl W. Drepperd was another initial and important contributor to the field. In *American Pioneer Arts and Artists*, 1942, Drepperd dedicates the introduction to questioning misused folk art labels such as *primitive*.

The fact that the only American primitive art is the art of the aborigine, consisting of such things as totem poles, pottery, and sculptures, was overlooked or blithely disregarded. Primitive bespeaks more money-value and has more cultural appeal than amateur or pioneer. What is being gathered, collected, and sold under the name primitive is American pioneer amateur art, produced mostly in the first six decades of the nineteenth century. The manner in which we have used and abused the word primitive in applying it to early and nearly-early American art requires of the term an elasticity beyond the limits, even, of Indian rubber or any of its substitutes.

In his defense of the term *pioneer*, Drepperd explains,

This, because the pioneering state of mind does not hunt crudity to live with; it makes refinement of crudity. American pioneer art is, literally, the painted record of America in the process of achieving a fine art of its own.<sup>29</sup>

His use of *pioneer* is emphasized again when he states, "It also explains why America could never have a folk art in the European sense. The 'folk' is a static thing; a pegged caste from which there is little chance of escape."<sup>30</sup> He disagrees with the use of folk as a label even further when he explains,

What, in general, we have been calling folk art is properly minor pioneer art. Most of it being home-made, fostered largely by economic conditions and circumstances. To some of our pioneers, purchasing anything that could be made at home was an extravagance.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Carl W. Drepperd, *American Pioneer Arts and Artists* (Springfield: Pond-Ekberg Company, 1942) 2-3.

<sup>30</sup> Drepperd, *American Pioneer Arts and Artists* 4-5.

<sup>31</sup> Drepperd, *American Pioneer Arts and Artists* 147.

He again questions the term *folk art* when he points out,

There are people who have gone highly emotional over what they call American folk art. Such emotions are apt to lead to inventions. They were ‘folks’ but by all that’s holy, they were not of the ‘folk’: ‘folks’ among them meant ‘people’; ‘folk’ today means ‘peasantry,’ or worse.<sup>32</sup>

In *Pioneer America: Its First Three Centuries*, 1949, Drepperd continues to comment on misused labels. “The only so-called ‘folk art’ we had in this country was the expression of continental Europeans who just couldn’t escape its influences until they caught the pioneering spirit.”<sup>33</sup> Clearly, Drepperd makes a strong case for not using *folk art* or *primitive* as labels to describe this body of work. However, his use of *pioneer* is also limiting, as is the period of time when artists made this work. It is also important to note that the use of the term *folk art* was already in disagreement at its impetus in 1942 within the core group of early scholarly contributors.

Unlike Drepperd’s disdain of the use of folk art, Nina Fletcher Little has written a number of texts in which she defends the label. However, Little justifies her use of the term with arguments that are similar to Drepperd’s reasoning for the use of *pioneer*. That is, both agree that what they are referring to is a type of unskilled or amateurish early American art embodying the spirit of inventive people who produced it. She introduced her definition of folk art in *The Abby Rockefeller Folk Art Collection*, 1957. She defined this collection of American art as:

Folk art—people’s art, not the art of the chancelleries and palaces but of the towns and villages and the countryside—is a singularly delightful and instructive road into the life and times of our fathers, our grandfathers, and their forebears.

---

<sup>32</sup> Drepperd, *American Pioneer Arts and Artist* 154.

<sup>33</sup> Carl W. Drepperd, *Pioneer America: Its First Three Centuries* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1949) 139.

Much of this American folk art is naïve, most of it is unsophisticated, some of it is crude, but all of it is moving, and touched by the influences which shaped us as a people.<sup>34</sup>

Her definition is refined further in the introduction as:

American folk art is not an unskilled imitation of fine art. It was produced by amateurs for their own gratification and applause of their families and neighborhoods, and by artisans and craftsmen of varying degrees of skill and artistic sensitivity who worked for pay. The phrase “folk art” in the title of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection is, we believe, more explicit than other terms currently used to define material of this kind. It is sometimes spoken of as “popular art,” but folk art assumes the presence of an original artist whereas popular art includes products of the printing press, like Currier and Ives. While all American folk art was “provincial art” in the sense of being remote from the cultural centers of Europe, that phrase suggests rural as contrasted with urban origin, and in this sense is inexact. Folk art flourished in towns and the country and was not restricted to geographical limitations.<sup>35</sup>

Based on Little’s definition, American folk art is the crude, unsophisticated art produced by amateurs, craftsmen, and artisans in town and countryside for pleasure and money, however, it should not be confused with popular art. Her definition is adequate in pointing out that folk art was not exclusively made by itinerant artists in the country. However, the definition is less persuasive in the area of concrete formal or stylistic observation, and fails to put any real restrictions on when this art was produced other than the indefinite past. Also, she points out that folk art was remote from cultural centers of Europe, yet she fails to make clear that this was a physical separation only, in that the examples she provides display the latest trends and styles of fashion. This contradiction is made evident within the text when she discusses objects in individual artworks that reveal what was fashionable in society and art at the time.

---

<sup>34</sup> Nina Fletcher Little, introduction, *The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Art Collection* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957) vii.

<sup>35</sup> Nina Fletcher Little, introduction, *The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Art Collection* xiii, xiv.

Mary Black, former Director of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection at Colonial Williamsburg, and first Director of the Museum of Early American Folk Art, New York, presented her opinion concerning folk art in *American Folk Painting*, written with Jean Lipman, 1966. Black describes folk art formally as being characterized by static poses, with flat, shadow-less forms. She further explains that most American folk painters had difficulty in expressing roundness, anatomy, and perspective.<sup>36</sup> Black also positions the peak of folk art production between the American Revolutionary War and the American Civil War, but recognizes the fact that there are many contemporary folk artists.<sup>37</sup> She believes these are mostly self-taught men and women who have always lived in societies isolated by geographic, economic, or ethnic considerations. Black considers this a necessity in order to develop individual solutions to artistic problems.<sup>38</sup>

Black continues her observations in *What Is American in American Art?*, 1971, “While varying from colony to colony, they had in common the primitive virtues—first hand observation, integrity of form, and instinct for color, line and pattern—that belong to the primitive the world over.”<sup>39</sup> What is unique about Black’s description is her focus on the specific formal aspects of the artwork to help identify it as a folk art. Lipman also referred to formal features of folk painting but with such vague terms as *primitive* and *non-optical*. It is not clear what formal features Lipman is referring to in her description. Black specifically describes the formal features of folk paintings as flat and static. She

---

<sup>36</sup> Mary C. Black and Jean Lipman, *American Folk Painting* 16.

<sup>37</sup> Black, *American Folk Painting* 18.

<sup>38</sup> Black, *American Folk Painting* 218.

<sup>39</sup> Mary C. Black, *What is American in American Art* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1971) 13.

does not focus on the artists or their biographical information in order to justify their works as part of this eclectic collection. In other words, it is the formal qualities of the work, along with some extraneous factors, that justify their inclusion. Black's belief that many contemporary folk artists still exist and produce works deserving classification as American folk art is based upon her belief that formal characteristics qualify the work and not the previous restrictions of location or time.

The trend for including contemporary work within the purview of folk art is generally credited to Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr. Holger Cahill and other authors have stated their opinions concerning the validity of contemporary American folk artists. However, it was not until 1974, when Hemphill and Julia Weissman published *20<sup>th</sup>-Century Folk Art and Artists*, a book that today, scholars regard as a key reference for collectors of modern folk art, that the idea became a popularly accepted one. Hemphill and Weissman ratified an expanded definition of folk art that included recently created works. Hemphill, a trustee emeritus of the Museum of American Folk Art, believed in the inclusion of folk art by contemporary artists because it was "created by everyday people out of ordinary life" who are "unaffected by the mainstream of professional art."<sup>40</sup>

In an article titled simply "Bert," Weissman reflects on her and Hemphill's collaboration in *20th-Century Folk Art and Artists*. Weissman states that Hemphill often fretted over the use of *folk* or *visionary* to describe work by untutored individuals, whether sane, eccentric, or disturbed. Simply, he wanted to call all of it *art*. Weissman also recounts the symposium of 1950 of several art "authorities" who tried to define folk

---

<sup>40</sup> John Michael Vlach, *Plain Painters of American Folk Art* 165.

art but their conclusion was that it could not be defined, only recognized.<sup>41</sup> Weissman recalls,

Hemphill was rarely concerned with the parameters associated with conventional folk art collecting and intuitively satisfied his compulsion to acquire art by filling the collection with both ‘crown jewels’ and ‘study pieces’ alike. He seamlessly juxtaposed the more idiosyncratic works of the twentieth century with traditional portraits, mourning pictures, theorems, frakturs, shop signs, and weathervanes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>42</sup>

Hemphill essentially forces away the definition of folk art from social or cultural contexts, claiming, “The vision of the folk artist is a private one, a personal universe, a world of his or her own making.” His view can be summarized as art made by people of modest means who do as they please and urges the appreciation of offbeat, eccentric, and whimsical works of art.<sup>43</sup>

Hemphill’s belief is that almost any object is worth having, discussing, evaluating, and collecting. Once published, such a perspective stimulated interest in paintings by artists regarded as outsiders. Previously collectors and dealers considered such works disturbing and lacking aesthetic basis. However, in Hemphill’s opinion, anyone could be a folk artist.<sup>44</sup> Anyone and anything as parameters of understanding are far too inclusive to serve as a valid definition for folk art. Yet, the openness accomplishes the goal of breaking completely free of traditional American folk art boundaries concerning the inclusion of contemporary works. In doing this, it manages to negate any formal limiting definitions of American folk art as well.

---

<sup>41</sup> Julia Weissman, “Bert,” *Folk Art* 23.3 (1998): 49.

<sup>42</sup> Julia Weissman, “Bert,” 52.

<sup>43</sup> John Michael Vlach, *Plain Painters of American Folk Art* 166.

<sup>44</sup> John Michael Vlach, *Plain Painters of American Folk Art* 167.

It is unclear why the inclusion of contemporary American folk artists was not accepted until Hemphill's work. From his initial description of American folk art painting in the 1930s, Holger Cahill believed in the validity of contemporary folk artists. One possible reason may have to do with the relationship American folk art had with antiques and antique dealers. Contemporary folk artists and works did not fit into the concept because of chronology. The antique features of American folk art painting fell to the side once the formal characteristics of folk art became more relevant. Hemphill's expansion of the boundaries of folk art along with his abandonment of social, cultural, and chronological connections to older or outmoded definitions allowed for an entirely new perspective of American folk art painting by the end of the 1970s.

Hemphill is the final product of a forty-year trend toward releasing the floodgates that had once limited what American folk art painting could be understood as. The strongest limitation of the definition remained the *folk art* label itself. Because of this label, artwork such as banner art remained excluded due to preconceived and outdated criteria that no longer mattered. The majority of banner painting was created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and thus initially left out of original folk art painting scholarship due to being contemporary work and due to American folk art painting's initial focus on the antique. This survey shows that there was an initial scholarly acceptance of contemporary American folk artists that did not reach a popular acceptance until the late 1970s. This date is important as banner paintings began to be collected in the 1980s.

Alternate labels were invented that further complicated the field in order to get around the issue concerning contemporary work such as banner painting that were left out because a lack of acceptance. *Folk art* has bothered enough collectors, dealers, and

---

scholars to result in any number of more inclusive alternatives—*outsider*, *itinerant*, *visionary* and *self-taught*. These bring into the fold all kinds of people, from children to the incarcerated to those having degrees in anything but art.<sup>45</sup> Banner art has yet to be considered in any of these alternative fields. Can banner painting style and format better be understood or better suited under an alternative label such as *outsider* or *visionary*? A review of these alternative concepts needs to be made in order to explore their compatibility to banner painting.

### Banner Painting and Alternative Terms

Many authors have offered new terms: *pioneer artist* by Carl W. Drepperd, *American primitive artist* from Clara Endicott Sears, and *plain painters* from John Vlach as alternatives to using the term *folk art*. All seem to recognize the problem with the *folk art* label.<sup>46</sup> A number of other adjectives have been added: *self-taught*, *outsider*, *naïve*, *provincial*, *amateur*, *itinerant*, *country*, and *anonymous*. All present problems of tone or have limited or misplaced applicability as concepts for understanding banner painting.<sup>47</sup> This section explores these alternative terms and their relationship with folk art while trying to apply their concepts to banner painting.

The term *self-taught artist* is defined as an artist with no formal training who creates in order to express an often intense and very personal vision or aesthetic, and whose work is usually thought to be unmediated by standards, traditions, and practices of the culture of the art world as embodied by international art markets and established art

---

<sup>45</sup> Barbara Schreiber, "Notes from the Navel-Staring Department: On the Inside Looking Out or Why I Don't Fear Folk Art," *Art Papers* 22.1 (1998): 16.

<sup>46</sup> John Michael Vlach, introduction, *Plain Painters of American Folk Art* xv.

<sup>47</sup> John Michael Vlach and Simon J. Bronner, eds., *Folk Art and Art* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986) 13-26.

institutions.<sup>48</sup> *Self-taught art* needs to be renamed *self-taught artist*. The artist is self-taught, not the art. Then, what should we call the art? *Self-taught art*, or *artist* can be understood as a term of distinction, in that it distinguishes it from *high* or *fine* art. Self-taught artists were contemporary artists whose paths to that identity did not lead them through the academy.<sup>49</sup>

*Self-taught* is one of the earliest labels used synonymously with folk art. However, its use precluded the initial interest in American folk art painting in America. Although self-taught art per se has always existed, the disciplinary field of self-taught art is essentially a modernist construct. At the beginning of the twentieth century, as the European avant-garde attempted to break free of the academic tradition, people began to look toward the work of artists who had been denied formal artistic training. This was part of the same European interest that looked seriously at non-Western art such as tribal carvings or Oceanic exemplars. After World War I and the fame of Henri Rousseau, more self-taught painters were championed as *naïves*, in almost every country affected by modern art. Eventually, this interest spread to the United States, where it included a fascination with early colonial American artifacts. During the 1940s, the American art establishment threw its full weight behind the emerging Abstract Expressionist movement. By the 1960s and 1970s naïve paintings were routinely turning up on calendars and dinnerware. Once this genre became a received style—intentionally copied—instead of a self-invented one, it was essentially dead.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Joan M. Benedetti 14.

<sup>49</sup> Tom Patterson, "10 Years in the Life of Contemporary Art's Parallel Universe: A Personal View," *Art Papers* 18 (Sep/Oct 1994): 4.

<sup>50</sup> Anthony Petullo, *Self-taught and Outsider Art: The Anthony Petullo Collection* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001) 4-7.

Today, the most popular term associated with folk art is *outsider art*. In the second half of the twentieth century, it became evident that the cultural isolation required to produce genuine self-taught artists no longer existed. In turn, this led to a focus on more extreme aspects of lifestyle embodied in the *outsider*. In 1989, critic Chris Redd predicted,

As outsider art comes under increasing intellectual scrutiny, many of the prevailing notions around it are certain to change, and as its popularity continues to mushroom, related problems and complications are certain to multiply.<sup>51</sup>

Folk art's close ties to outsider art can be seen in this example definition. Outsider art is defined in *the Art and Architecture Thesaurus* as:

The term used for the genre of art produced outside the culture of the art world, as embodied by the international art market and established art institutions, and unmediated by the standards, traditions, and practices of that culture; often intensely expressive of the personal vision or aesthetic of the artist. For the genre of art that is the product of the traditional rules and procedures of creation of a culturally cohesive community or concept, use 'folk art.'<sup>52</sup>

*Outsider art* has several problematic areas, the first being *outside*. Outside of what, we should ask. Can anyone truly live and work outside his or her own culture?

To be sure, often *outsider art* is the label given to works produced by the individual institutionalized either in a prison or a mental facility, for example the late Martin Ramirez (ca. 1885-1960) or Henry Darger (ca. 1892-1973). The term *outsider art* is a loose translation of the French phrase *art brut* (literally, "raw art"), the art movement invented by Jean Dubuffet in 1945 and comprising mostly a European roster of self-taught and/or institutionalized individuals.<sup>53</sup> Dubuffet had invented a concept he would

---

<sup>51</sup> Tom Patterson 4.

<sup>52</sup> Joan M. Benedetti 14.

<sup>53</sup> Judd Tully, "Outside, Inside, or Somewhere In-Between?" *Art News* 95 (May 1996): 120.

spend the rest of his life refining until he was forced to recognize that an art totally divorced from culture was an ideal rather than an attainable reality. It did seem clear that, whatever it was, *art brut* was differed from the work of self-taught artists. Where the *naïve* artist looks outward, to his or her surroundings, the *brut* artist looks inward, recording visions and obsessions on some level meaningful only to themselves. This idea of the artist presenting an inner vision posed a logistical dilemma for connoisseurs of *art brut*: at a certain point judgments involving creative authenticity would have to be based on biographical information. If an artist created something that looked *brut*, but was too savvy concerning cultural issues, the work would have to be disqualified as belonging to this body of work.<sup>54</sup>

Roger Cardinal, an international authority on *art brut* and professor of literary and visual studies at the University of Kent in Canterbury, England, introduced the Anglicized version of *art brut* in *Outsider Art*, 1972. The problem of definition and the uneasy reliance on artists' biographies only grew worse when *art brut* was translated into English. In the United States, the distinction Dubuffet observed between the naïve and the brut, while difficult to sustain in the face of criticism in Europe, proved even more untenable in America.<sup>55</sup> Cardinal defined *outsider art* as “innocent of pictorial influences and perfectly untutored.” He was referring to contemporary artists such as Thornton Dial and especially to Howard Finster. The latter had his own 800 number and telemarketing team to sell his art, which is a situation hardly seeming innocent of the art world, and is certainly not innocent of the art market. In “Outside, Inside, or Somewhere In-

---

<sup>54</sup> Anthony Petullo 8.

<sup>55</sup> Anthony Petullo, 9.

Between?,” Judd Tully quotes gallery owners, curators, critics, and collectors who admit *outsider* is “just another marketing term [...]” and to the art as “another cash game [...].” The Tully article is a fine example of problematic qualities of *outsider art*, as it alternates *folk art*, *self-taught art*, and *visionary art* interchangeably throughout the article.<sup>56</sup>

To further complicate confusion concerning the identity of what counts as *outsider art* and *American folk art*, recently the Museum of American Folk Art installed the work of Henry Darger (1892-1973). The exhibition, called “The Unreality of Being” includes sixty-three paintings and drawings representing the breadth of Darger’s oeuvre. Darger has been critically considered an “outsider” due to the fact that he was insane. His drawings are sexually charged and include graphic depictions of violence in which children, particularly young girls, are slaughtered by fictional beings.<sup>57</sup> Darger’s work is also recently featured in *Self-taught and Outsider Art: the Anthony Petullo Collection*, 2001. In the preface, Petullo claims, “Not included in either category (*outsider* or *self-taught*) are folk artists, especially American spiritualists or three-dimensional artists.”<sup>58</sup> Why, then, is a confirmed *outsider* artist who was institutionalized being exhibited at the American Folk Art Museum in New York? Was Henry Darger a folk artist?

Neither *outsider art* nor *self-taught* invite inclusion of works by banner artists. *Self-taught* art fails as a label for banner art because the artwork associated with the term had become a received and imitated style by the 1940s when banner art was reaching its peak. There is no evidence supporting the idea that banner painters were

---

<sup>56</sup> Judd Tully 118-121.

<sup>57</sup> Richard Vine, "Thank Heaven for Little Girls," *Art in America* 86 (Jan 1998), 22 Jan 2002 [http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_dls/m1248/n1\\_v86/20148116/print.jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m1248/n1_v86/20148116/print.jhtml).

<sup>58</sup> Anthony Petullo, preface, viii.

intentionally copying a self-taught style, which does not make banner painting self-taught but would at best link it to the concept. Also, banner painters were not self-taught in the sense that they had art training or a trade painting background. Moreover, banner painting is not the result of self-expression or intense personal vision associated typically with self-taught and outsider art. However, the definition of self-taught artist is very similar to the more popular term *outsider art*. It is inclusive enough to contain many types of artistic expression, such as banner art, but specific enough to limit itself to certain formal characteristics. Certainly, self-taught artists produce outsider art. However, *outsider* is not general enough to include all the types of art produced by self-taught artists, and not all self-taught artists, including banner artists, have been institutionalized.

Other minor terms related to *outsider* and *self-taught* fail to accommodate banner painting. *Naïve* and *primitive* were alternative terms for referring to self-taught artists or their art. Currently, however, hardly anyone uses these terms due mainly to pejorative connotations.<sup>59</sup> The terms *primitive* and *naïve* have strong derogatory undertones, even if unintended, and cannot be used without risking the implication of inferiority. *Primitive* is rarely used in contemporary scholarship as a way to refer to American folk painting. Rather, it appears chiefly in older texts. *Primitive* has a strong connection to modernism, much like *self-taught*. As a label, *primitive* was used originally during the 1930s to establish relationships based on the formal qualities of modern art and American folk art painting and sculpture.

---

<sup>59</sup> Joan M. Benedetti 15.

The use of *primitive* relates to the use of African masks and pre-Columbian artifacts by modern European artists searching for inspiration for their art. American folk art manifested the same stylistic traits admired in the art of the modernists and therefore was labeled *primitive*. Banner painting is neither primitive nor is there any evidence linking its visual style to non-Western influences. Further investigation and greater understanding of non-Western art has revealed that *primitive* art is not primitive at all, and therefore the use of the term has become un-constructive in understanding either the art or the people who produced it.

*Amateur* is applicable only to a portion of the accepted body of American folk painting and cannot then serve as a comprehensive label for banner painting or its field. *Amateur* implies work completed for one's own pleasure, and not for money, which means being classified as a professional. Professional painters with a background in trade painting made sideshow banners. There is no evidence suggesting banner painters worked for free or personal pleasure.

*Itinerant* does not work for two reasons: first, this term is associated with the outdated idea that traveling folk artists roamed the countryside of the United States in search of work. The reality was that artists from folk and fine art traditions spent time on the road. Second, many so-called folk painters never traveled very far or, they worked in a city. Banner painters probably did some traveling with the circus as work dictated. In fact, banner artists such as Jack Cripe even had shows on the midway. However, the majority of banner work was produced by banner painting firms and ordered by mail or phone. *Anonymous* points more toward the deficiencies in the field rather than characteristics of an artwork. There are numerous banner examples that have yet to have

an identifiable artist and further research needs to be completed to be able to either identify these artists or designate the work by the firm that produced it. *Pioneer* focuses too much attention on the past. That is, *pioneer* does reflect the fact that so-called folk art was produced during our pioneer period, but also there is folk art in the present. The majority of banner painting exists from the 20<sup>th</sup> century and there is no evidence of example banners existing from any so called pioneer period.

Banner painting does not qualify as a folk art. None of the alternate terms that used to associate works with folk art apply to banner painting or, they have limitations that fail to address banner painting entirely. Thus, definitions accorded *American folk art painting* and alternative terms art cannot lend greater understanding of banner painting. Yet, still we are left with a vast amount of work in portraits, landscapes, still lives, weekend painting, banner painting, and institutional therapies scholars and critics long associated with *American folk painting*, despite incorrect understanding of what the label signifies. It may be useful to categorize this work into reasonable subgroups. However, a useful and accurate interpretation of the painting that has been mislabeled as *American folk art painting* is still needed to continue a clear discussion of these artists and their work, including banner art that possesses its own significance and ways of understanding outside the realm of true folk art traditions.

In order to achieve this, two options remain: continue the confusion by misusing the folk art term to knowingly label works that are not, such as banner painting, or realize the need for a new label for understanding so-called American folk painting. Such a venture may be too ambitious for this thesis as evident in the numerous alternative terms that have already been offered. Each of these terms has limited applicability to the field

as a whole, yet it is necessary not to confuse or align work such as banner painting with folk art as this is a completely different concept. The idea here is to recognize this difference by offering an inclusive label that does not allude to folk art concepts.

### Domesticated Arts

*Domesticated art* offers a solution to the problem of clear terminology for addressing banner painting and other art labeled as but not technically constitutive of *American folk art painting*. First, it is a new term and hence does not suffer from contamination of previous abuse and misrepresentation of its subject. Second, it lacks the pejorative connotations associated with other terms such as *primitive* or *naïve*; rather, it projects a modest but deserving image that neither demeans this class of painting nor confers on it an undeserved prestige. For paintings generally perceived as *American folk art painting*, conventions of fine art are present but not fully deployed. The net result is a work like fine art but simpler; it is a stylistically plain version of what potentially could have been quite elaborate or complex under different circumstances.<sup>60</sup>

The term *domesticated art* comes from Mirra Bank in *Anonymous Was a Woman*, in which she explores the traditional art of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American women. *Domesticate* takes on several facets of meaning in the sense that it can describe who made the art, how it was used, what was portrayed, where it was made, and why it was created. In particular, Bank employs the term *domestic industry* to describe needlework, painting, quilts, and school pieces created by these women.<sup>61</sup> The term emphasizes the fact that much of the work was made at home, perhaps by women who

---

<sup>60</sup> John Michael Vlach, introduction, *Plain Painters of American Folk Art* xv.

<sup>61</sup> Mirra Bank, *Anonymous Was a Woman* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979) 9-11.

rarely ventured far from their houses. However, in an alternative sense, *domesticate* can also be understood in relation to its existence around the home as well as pertaining to its maker.

As a label, *domesticated art* has dual meanings that help to define significant features of paintings typically described as *American folk art painting*. Primarily, *domesticated art* refers to works of or relating to the family or household as in the subject matter, production, and/or use. In other words, it can refer to artwork made in the home, used in the home, or portraying life in and around the home. This understanding helps to exclude fine art in the studio tradition often produced for the upper class, the elite, or royalty. Secondly, *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines *domesticate* as being produced in or native to a particular country.<sup>62</sup> As a verb, *domesticate* is to make fit or to adapt for domestic use or life.<sup>63</sup> In other words, apart from art related to the household, *domesticated art* is a common version of or an adaptation of a studio art, such as ornamental painting, trade painting, sign painting, or non-academic painting produced in the United States by so called American folk painters and banner artists.

Paintings heretofore designated and thus explained by terms including *outside*, *self-taught*, *amateur*, *pioneer*, *itinerant* and *visionary*, in addition to banner art painting all make sense within the category *domesticated art*. *Domesticated art* applies to banner art in the sense that it is derived from a form of fine art adapted or made to fit a particular need for use in the United States. In other words, banner art is a type of two-dimensional oil painting on a large canvas used to present portraits of sideshow attractions, predicated

---

<sup>62</sup> "Domestic," Def. 3. *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1994.

<sup>63</sup> "Domesticate," Def. 1. *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1994.

on traditions of nineteenth-century English and European trade painting, rather than fine art.

There are no false or implied time parameters that need to be adjusted to shift the scope of what domesticated art should or should not include. It may be due to American folk art painting's shifting time parameters that banner art was initially excluded from the folk art field. Banner art cannot be understood in terms of American folk art painting for the same reasons that the term *folk art painting* does not and should not apply to the domesticated arts it tries to include.

### Conclusion

Sideshow banners are not a folk art. Nor are the majority of the paintings traditionally labeled as American folk art. Paintings, and more specifically portrait paintings, have been offered as examples of folk art expression for years and dominate many American folk art collections. Folk art has little to do with the origins of the easel painting tradition. It is not appropriate to label sideshow banner paintings as a folk art, just as it is equally inappropriate to continually use the *folk art* term to categorize or describe any paintings created for personal or professional reasons no matter how crude or odd. Scholars recognizing these issues offered new labels with equally vague definitions in order to better classify this body of work. Each of these labels—*outsider*, *pioneer*, and *primitive*—fails to encompass the works perceived as a collective. The invention and scholarly use of these alternative labels draws attention to the fallacy of using *folk art painting* as a scholarly term to label banner painting and other works associated with this field. These alternative labels add to the confusion of clear terminology. It is also important to note that the majority of banner paintings were

produced during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars may have excluded banner painting from the American folk art field due to inconsistencies in defining the time parameters associated with American folk art painting or by emphasizing on works created before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars also may have overlooked banner painting due to an initial concentration on the antique in the impetus of American folk art interest. However, changes in the concept of American folk art painting have allowed for the inclusion of such contemporary works. Sideshow banner painting is now associated with this body of work for this reason.

Using *domesticated art* to refer to banner art and categorize what has traditionally been called *American folk art painting* allows a clarity that *folk art* does not have. In short, *folk art painting* as a critical and scholarly concept is not applicable to banner art, nor does it apply to the number of paintings traditionally known as *American folk art painting*.

The lack of consistency and consensus with the concept of American folk art painting is not evidence of failure or poor scholarship. Diverse opinions do not mean undecided. Diverse opinions exist in longer-established areas of art history. The diversity in American folk art painting should be seen as a mark of health and accomplishment as scholars continue to redefine the concept.<sup>64</sup> Scholarship and popular usage continues to apply the term *American folk art painting* and its family tree to almost any expressive work done outside the sphere of influence of art schools. This is what Holger Cahill meant when he called the exhibition of folk art at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932, *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900*.

---

<sup>64</sup>Wanda M. Corn, "Coming of Age: Historical Scholarship in American Art," *Art Bulletin* 70 (June 1998): 199.

The popular sense of folk art as an umbrella term to describe the art of the common [wo]man will undoubtedly continue. One thing is certain. Popular and scholarly meanings of all the terms I discussed in this chapter will continue to change. Moreover, they will remain controversial, since ideas about people and society will likely change more rapidly than can our ability to find words to express new ways of knowing and experiencing, abetted by representations for categories of knowledge.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Joan M. Benedetti 19.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGICAL TREATMENTS

#### Introduction

The scholarship on banner painting emphasizes either formal or biographical approaches to the material. More specifically, scholars and commentators relate banner imagery to high art on the basis of form and style or, they reconstitute circus midways of the past and refer to banner imagery in order to complete the vision. Moreover, the scholarship on banner painting employs the same methods as American folk art painting scholarship. Scholarly approaches to banner painting do not depart from the emphasis on form and style or the reconstitution of context found in American folk art painting scholarship. These approaches help make sense of banner painting scholarship as it stands. The goal of this chapter is to identify and analyze patterns of approach in banner painting scholarship and American folk art scholarship to verify the treatment of banner painting as a folk art which may provide concrete reasoning for banner painting's inclusion into the American folk art painting field. Also, what do American folk art or banner painting methods have to contribute to a better understanding of banner painting style and format?

Two camps of scholarly criticism dominated interpretations of American folk art objects well into the 1960s and beyond. For organizational purposes, in this thesis *reflective* and *progressive* refer to the two scholarly interpretations found in American folk art painting scholarship. This thesis creates and uses the terms *reflective* and *progressive* to help categorize these approaches, which themselves have been studied, for

example, by American folk art scholars David Trend and Michael D. Hall. However, this thesis attempts a holistic examination of these two approaches to help identify methodological trends that are being used in banner painting scholarship.

### Reflective Approach

The reflective group, somewhat overwhelmed by the complexity of modern life, began to look back in time with great longing to what they idealized as a more perfect and simple past. For them, certain innocence seemed to have been lost once the Allies achieved victory in the World War I. At that time, collectors began to survey the pre-industrial history of the United States as the encroaching realities of modern life, including war, as well as mass immigration and the new American isolationism from Europe made them reflect on what they had believed was a more innocent and simpler heritage. Of significance is that two important institutions affecting the collecting of folk art emerged. In 1922, the magazine *Antiques* was founded and in 1927, the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg commenced. Thus, one of the major critical journals that would focus on folk art criticism and one of the major institutions that ultimately would display and archive an influential folk art collection were established to celebrate the historical American past.<sup>1</sup>

The impulse to collect paintings, weathervanes, rocking chairs, and other utilitarian objects from rural America's past took root in earnest in the decades following WW I, as the United States emerged as a dominant hemispheric power. Also, this period witnessed the culmination of great economic and social transition, as workers from abroad and the Southern states massed in new industrial centers of the Northeast and

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Hall, *Stereoscopic Perspective: Reflections on American Fine and Folk Art* 126-127.

Midwest. The United States economy shifted from an agrarian economy to an industrial one during this time. An increased presence of ethnic minorities in developing metropolitan centers created new social arenas that had never existed before. An American cultural identity crisis prompted an acquisition and celebration of familiar objects. The emphasis on utilitarian objects and domesticated painting showed a desire for United States' identity before the "foreign" influences of the European war and mass immigration. This impulse became manifest as diverse styles and forms of art and utilitarian objects merged into a unifying "Americana." In this way the notion of *folk* was stripped of any differentiating characteristics among what should have been recognized as a diverse collection of painted works.<sup>2</sup> Works were lumped together, in fact treated by scholars as if they were anonymous and offered as *folk art*. Scholars presented paintings based on their shared utilitarian and historical qualities. Studies did not focus on such issues as formal diversity and also failed to establish a critical system for evaluation. Instantly, many works became masterpieces of simple American folk expression.

Mirroring this nostalgic impulse, many of the more conservative early enthusiasts and were less art collectors than they were antique collectors and dealers. They believed American folk art held social importance as a comment on the sensibilities of the honest folk who settled the American frontier.<sup>3</sup> Scholars belonging to this group eagerly described folk art as quaint, simple, charming and practical.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, by valuing antiquity over aesthetics, they blinded themselves to the continuation of domesticated art

---

<sup>2</sup> David Trend, "The Politics of the Ordinary: Tradition and Social Change in Folk Art," *Art Papers* 16 (Nov/Dec 1992): 20.

<sup>3</sup> Michael D. Hall, *Stereoscopic Perspective: Reflections on American Fine and Folk Art* 126.

<sup>4</sup> Holger Cahill, *American Folk Sculpture* (Newark: The Newark Museum, 1931) 13-18.

in the twentieth century. In other words, critics and collectors focused on domesticated art exclusively from the 1700s to pre-1900 and, in part, offered and emphasized these works as antiques over any artistic value they may have had. That is, they valued historic charm over aesthetic value. Scholars ignored other domesticated paintings failing to evidence the tacit expectation that folk meant old, leaving banner paintings as well as other contemporary artists working in domesticated styles to be picked up years later under different labels, such as *outsider* or *self-taught*.

In their thinking and writing, scholars associated with the reflective approach to folk objects borrowed from a style of writing traditional to English literature. One finds the origins of this style in the eighteenth century pastoral that celebrates the simple pleasures of the common peasant. In the pastoral, ordinary themes and subject matter are reproduced, but in a language and syntax of such sophistication that only an educated reader would appreciate them. Writing in this mode of warm remembrance serves to identify and acknowledge simple pleasures of years past, while simultaneously marking a distance from them and the people with whom they are most associated.<sup>5</sup>

For example, Holger Cahill uses a pastoral description of folk art in catalogue notes for the 1930 exhibition “American Folk Art, the Art of the Common Man, 1750-1900,”

Many of these people had little training but all of them knew how to co-ordinate the activity of the hand and the eye, and had the art of making things with their hands, an art which has declined rapidly with the machine age [...]

He continues with:

---

<sup>5</sup> David Trend 19.

[...] and at its best an honest and straightforward expression of the spirit of the people. This work gives a living quality to the story of American beginnings in the arts, and is a chapter, intimate and quaint, in the social history of this country...It mirrors the sense and sentiment of a community, and is an authentic expression of American experience.<sup>6</sup>

In *Some American Primitives*, 1941, Clara Endicott Sears recreates a vivid pastoral setting in which folk artists produced their work. She uses *primitive* to discuss domesticated paintings, which is a concept actually more in line with the progressive method of discussing American folk art, due to the label's strong connection with Modernism. (This link is explored further under the progressive approach to folk art). Despite her progressive use of *primitive* Sears observes,

It is therefore a joy to me to assemble in the collection I have made the portraits that indicate a talent that is capable of growing and developing into something that is beautiful, as has been the case with quite a number of those itinerant portrait painters who wandered from village to village and over the hillsides of New England in that 'yeasty' period when there existed every sort of talent, literary, artistic, and musical, as well as transcendentalism, and the many 'isms of that day that bubbled up to the surface from 1700 and thereabouts to around 1860.<sup>7</sup>

Alice Ford continues with the pastoral mode by defining folk art as "Folk, or primitive, or popular, or provincial, or amateur paintings are the memoirs of Everyman. They are his favorite scenes and legends. They are his fantasy and the colorful idiom of his escape. They are his face, fields and lore. They are his heart, and his history."<sup>8</sup>

Mary Childs Black, former Director of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection at Colonial Williamsburg and first Director of the Museum of Early American

---

<sup>6</sup> Alice Ford, *Pictorial Folk Art: New England to California* (New York: Studio Publications Inc., 1949) 49.

<sup>7</sup> Clara Endicott Sears, introduction, *Some American Primitives: A Study of New England Faces and Folk Portraits* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1941) v.

<sup>8</sup> Alice Ford, *Pictorial Folk Art: New England to California* 168.

Folk Art, New York in a private conversation with Robert Bishop, former Director of the Museum of American Folk Art in New York (now the American Folk Art Museum)

proposed a timeline of American Art as thus,

The genesis, rise, and disappearance of folk art is closely connected with the events of the nineteenth century when the disappearance of the old ways left rural folk everywhere with an unused surplus of time and energy. People were free to invent and make simple things for their own pleasure in each household and in each village, until the rise of industrial production toward the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

This explanation is pastoral, in that Black wishes to suspend belief that the “old ways” consisted of an abundance of empty time for which people created art objects.

After its initial invention in the early twentieth century, the pastoral approach continued to be used widely. A good example is *Unexpected Eloquence: The Art in American Folk Art* by Howard Rose, 1982. Rose was a collector, dealer, and writer of American folk art. In his book he employs fiction to explore the seriousness and earnest approach folk artists had toward their work. Rose describes the artistic method of folk artists as, “Consistency of approach or surface—style of hand—was never much of a worry to these backwater adventurers.” Rose continues,

No, here was the chin-up art of our own forward-looking democrat, at peace with conditions and with himself. Here was the inventive but modest nobody with a lesson for worldlings: sincerity, lucidity, chastity, usefulness, unselfconsciousness, charm, reverence, both for materials and the New World which was his subject.<sup>10</sup>

In this passage, once again, the pastoral approach suggests a type of idyllic existence for the folk artist in which he, his art, and the word around him embodies an array of

---

<sup>9</sup> Robert Bishop, *Folk Painters of America* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979) 7.

<sup>10</sup> Howard Rose, *Unexpected Eloquence: The Art in American Folk Art* (New York: Raymond Saroff, 1982) 13, 20.

wholesome qualities. The suggested reader perception in the pastoral mode generates a desire for these same qualities, however, most remain out of reach and can be found only in the nonexistent world of the American folk-artist or, they may be touched upon by appreciating art made by these “folks.”

### Reflective Approach to Banner Painting

Banner painting scholarship of the reflective school re-creates the sideshow and circus atmosphere for which the banners produced. Evidence of this treatment can be seen in any number of scholarly and popular accounts describing the sideshow and smell of popcorn and cotton candy as a means to recreate the context of a past that banner paintings, as objects that survived history, will lack forever more. Michael McCabe uses the pastoral approach to address banner art in “Beyond Belief: The Flustering Truth of Sideshow Banner Art”:

During the 1920s and thirties, sideshows flourished in isolated rural America. Communication was limited at best, and distances between people and places seemed greater at that time than they do now. Traveling circuses and their sideshows were messengers of a sort, bringing exotic news from afar to regions intrigued by the alien outside world. Every summer, people in agricultural regions looked forward to the thrill of the exotic outsider that descended on their communities for a few days; the appearance of traveling shows rounded out the season of hard work under the sun. Timid, God-fearing people bristled under the huge banners that flirted with them playfully in the warm breeze.<sup>11</sup>

Carl Hammer and Gideon Bosker also employ the pastoral approach to describe banner art in their book, *Freakshow: Sideshow Banner Art*, 1996. They begin,

With its retina-searing colors, freak appeal, and bombastic reconstructions of human and animal anatomy, the circus sideshow banner preyed on our inexhaustible curiosity to come face to face with the grotesque and the unimaginable. Throughout the circus' heyday from the late nineteenth to the mid-

---

<sup>11</sup> Michael McCabe, “Beyond Belief: The Flustering Truth of Sideshow Banner Art,” *Folk Art* 23.3 (1998): 66.

twentieth century, the sideshow's chatter, lure, and sizzle were insistent, and the barker's plea was remarkably consistent.<sup>12</sup>

Concerning figures in banner imagery Hammer adds,

In the very lair of carnival pleasures, among the ceaseless chatter of hawkers pitching cheap tricks and the smell of hot molasses and popcorn, the oddly gifted performed grotesque tricks—most of them illusions—for a curious public.<sup>13</sup>

Subjective inference and ignoring an actual exploration of banner imagery are significant weaknesses of the reflective approach. It is an understatement to suggest that McCabe and Hammer employed artistic license to situate banners in environments and for which they were made. However, these and other examples of the reflective approach do have merit in that they provide contextual information that remains absent once a banner painting is viewed in a gallery or private residence. Like the reflective method used in folk art scholarship, the relevance of this approach in discussing banner painting participates more in presenting an idyllic past that these banners may or may not express than it contributes to any understanding of banner painting. For instance, what constitutes for the production of a standard banner format? How can the reflective method account for the use of a drop shadow and the consistent use of a framing curtain? The reflective perspective does not an aesthetic investigation of banner painting beyond pointing out the various sideshow acts that appear as the subject matter. McCabe and Hammer's pastoral approach have more to do with filling in the historical scene than it mounts a critical analysis of the work. This method can justifiably be applied as a means of exploring the use, time period, and pictorial content of banner painting. The reflective

---

<sup>12</sup> Carl Hammer and Gideon Bosker, *Freakshow: Sideshow Banner Art* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996) 9.

<sup>13</sup> Carl Hammer and Gideon Bosker 27.

approach is also appropriate when used to reconstruct the contextual frame that may be needed to fully understand the original perception of the banners by contemporary viewers.

It is helpful to examine the vocabulary of the genre to understand how pastoral presentations serve the interests and needs of folk art scholarship. Consider, again, connotations of frequently used expressions such as *pioneer*, *amateur*, *anonymous*, *self-taught*, and *folk*. The very fact of this collection of labels evidences the absence of a working professional consensus on what objects signified by each share, and how should scholars relate them to one another intellectually. Moreover, historically, the labels allude to a range of power relations and class interests involved in transposing utilitarian objects made in different regions of the United States into display items valued for their appearance comparatively, that is, in relation to one another.

As a way to analyze the significance of American folk art painting, narratives of the reflective school of scholarship that stage a longing for a past that never existed may have usurped a more complex account of banner painting.<sup>14</sup> Contemporary domesticated works, of which I consider banner painting an example, were produced too recently for pastoral-oriented accounts of the reflective school of American folk art scholarship to appreciate them. Moreover, in evoking the atmosphere for which banners were painted, the reflective school privileges imagination at the expense of more rigorous reconstitution of environment and use.

---

<sup>14</sup> David Trend 20.

## Progressive Approach

On the other hand, the absence of a primary or initial critical study of American folk art painting may have contributed to its populist appeal. Generally speaking, in the early part of the century such objects were completely ignored by the universities, as historians were obsessed with texts and art connoisseurs cared only about high culture. Therefore utilitarian objects and examples of domesticated art such as banner painting could never be considered appropriate material for “refined” sensibilities unless scholars institutionally certified banner painting with an additional legitimacy.<sup>15</sup>

The progressive approach to American folk art sought to certify these art objects with fine art legitimacy by searching for high-art examples existing in European and American art while offering formal parallels between each. The process of certification began to take place in the 1930s, as New Deal sponsorship by the federal government gave rise to projects charged with documenting the preservation of American culture. This event coincides with the art world's expanding interest in folk objects as artistic markers of an American history beyond Colonial Williamsburg and the antique market. 1932 marked the inauguration of the Museum of Modern Art's “American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900,” curated by then-museum director Holger Cahill. Instantly, the show established a place for folk in the art world by assigning high cultural value to common objects. Thus began the progressive art world's appropriation of *folk*, a practice predicated on the suppression of practical and utilitarian

---

<sup>15</sup> David Trend 20.

purpose in the name of aesthetic form, which relates to a turn to display, which I mentioned in the previous section.<sup>16</sup>

In turn, this led to the development of new progressive labels such as *primitive*, *outsider*, and *visionary*. Chiefly, existing labels associated with the reflective approach, such as *pioneer*, *amateur*, *anonymous*, *self-taught*, and *folk* no longer made sense for several reasons. Since the modern art world included contemporary domesticated art and artists based on aesthetics, *pioneer*, *anonymous*, and *folk* failed to signify artists whose activity did not match the criteria associated with the concepts. For example, the labels privilege the artist over form and style. *Amateur* was inappropriate because it takes away from the high art status the progressive group was trying to establish. *Self-taught* was also a reflective term that said more about the abilities of the pastoral "Everyman" than it did for modern art aesthetics. *Primitive*, *outsider*, etc were new terms that could reflect the formal qualities of domesticated art. (That is, *primitive* understood in the new European sense of modern art, and *outsider* recognized as a label signifying art outside of the academic studio tradition.)

The progressive camp of scholarship perceived American folk art painting and sculpture as ratification for Modernism and was based in the Formalist theory of art appreciation. This group focused on formal qualities in American folk art and identified correspondences in the use of line, color, and shape with contemporary modern art. They were cosmopolitan in their outlook and much taken with the new modern art evolving in

---

<sup>16</sup> David Trend 21.

Europe. Also, they were attracted to folk art because of its simplicity and directness. It manifested many of the stylistic traits they admired in the art of the high modernists.<sup>17</sup>

This type of connection is similar to Pablo Picasso's interest in African masks and in Henri Rousseau, whom Picasso believed to be a great artist. Georges Braque and Picasso both were interested in African masks and fetish carvings. Max Ernst collected Indian and Inuit artifacts. Henry Moore had gathered pre-Columbian figures and specifically cited these works as sources of inspiration.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the art world in Europe had already ratified Modernism. The American scenario strengthened the comparison to the raw forms found in tribal African and pre-Columbian artifacts that possessed a purity of formal expression, or *primitive* power which Modernists were seeking in their own work. Adding American folk art to this collection of archaic forms was an afterthought, since the argument had been established by 1930.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1930s, American folk art scholarship employed the progressive practice to ratify the new high art generally rejected by the conservative majority of Americans viewing it. With their insistence on line and contour, critics compared Picasso's drawings to American silhouette weather vanes that also manifested bold linear contours. Through this process, the radicality of Picasso's work was neutralized. His art was rendered non-threatening once art critics equated with things made by simple whittlers, limners, and blacksmiths. The same fate befell the art of other modern European artists, such as Henri Matisse or Henry Moore. Who could not approach a Matisse painting

---

<sup>17</sup> Michael D. Hall, *Stereoscopic Perspective: Reflections on American Fine and Folk Art* 127.

<sup>18</sup> Michael D. Hall, *Stereoscopic Perspective: Reflections on American Fine and Folk Art* 131.

<sup>19</sup> Michael D. Hall, "The Problem of Martin Ramirez: Folk Art Criticism as Cosmologies of Coercion," *Clarion* (Winter 1986): 56.

when, in its flatness and abstraction, it seemed to call out to the flinty primitive portraits rendered by itinerant New England limners? So accommodated into the heritage of American culture, reassessed, this line of argument is too pat and skews our understanding of deeper meanings in both modern and so-called folk art. It is a formalist version of the chicken or the egg.<sup>20</sup>

Another dimension of the progressive approach and early advocacy for folk art had to do with politics. In the 1930s and 1940s, Americans still were trying to legitimize themselves in the world of art. Looking inward, Americans sought to position an indigenous art in a place of acceptance within the art world. Despite the fact that many of the first collectors, curators, and dealers, including Cahill and Drepperd, were sophisticated and progressive in their understanding of art, unwittingly, they created a tone of political reaction in the platform supporting folk art, especially with their persistent reference to it as art of the “common man.” Postwar enthusiasm for folk art became emotionally charged with nationalistic spirit reflecting the enthusiastic mood of a nation emerging as a world power.<sup>21</sup>

The work of Carl W. Drepperd provides an example of political dimensions qualifying the progressive approach to American folk art scholarship. In *Pioneer America: Its First Three Centuries* published, notably, in 1949, after WWII and the beginnings of the Cold War, Drepperd explains *pioneer* as Americans who had faith in freedom and free thinking. He contrasts American ingenuity and foresight with a European mentality that failed to make progress in spite of great potential. Drepperd uses

---

<sup>20</sup> Michael D. Hall, introduction, *Stereoscopic Perspective: Reflections on American Fine and Folk Art* 7-8.

the ideas of communism and Marxism, “the last refuge of the incurable repressed and of people with inferiority complexes,” to prove how the pioneering spirit saved money and put it to work to create common wealth. He continues, “If this story doesn’t thrill you, inspire you, and motivate you to a new keener, and more positive appreciation of your American antiques, you are not an American in mind or spirit.”<sup>22</sup> Nothing remotely similar to this approach appears in banner art scholarship. Although Drepperd’s introduction to American folk art may strike some as propaganda, I include it in this discussion to ensure I survey the progressive approach fully. Of importance is that this approach used by Drepperd, Lipman, Cahill and others deserves more attention, however, it does not apply to banner scholarship.

The 1960s saw folk art finally establish a solid beachhead in the art world. Collector and dealer Adele Earnest initiated a series of folk sculpture exhibitions at the Willard Gallery in New York, which was known for its attention to modern and contemporary art. Of interest is that the Willard Gallery introduced folk sculpture in a place associated with fine art objects—not in the context of antiques. Earnest recognized the expressive strength and formal abstraction of the folk art examples.

Also in the Sixties Herbert Hemphill, Jr. began to establish his perspective on folk art aesthetics. Hemphill and a circle of artists and collectors that gathered around him began to collect objects that they felt had strength of form but, more important, had power of expression. Hemphill moved away from collecting early folk art and began

---

<sup>21</sup> Michael D. Hall, "The Problem of Martin Ramirez: Folk Art Criticism as Cosmologies of Coercion" 56-57.

<sup>22</sup> Carl W. Drepperd *Pioneer America: Its First Three Centuries* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1949) 2-6.

searching out works of twentieth-century origin. His concerns addressed the offbeat, the expressive and that which in Europe is called the *brut*—the raw.<sup>23</sup>

Searching for connections or influences between two unrelated art objects creates a type of trap. It is easy—in fact, engaging—to play a game in which one takes two objects from art history and declares them to be equivalent, even related, because they appear to manifest the same creative sensibility or similarity in form or style. In this scenario American folk art has proved especially popular. Curators and collectors identify what Jean Lipman calls “provocative parallels”—features of style or composition that link works produced in the high-end mainstream to examples from the folk environment.<sup>24</sup> However, searching for and declaring such coincidental formal connections as possible influences or as theoretical crutches of high art legitimacy is a misguided venture.<sup>25</sup>

#### Progressive Approach to Banner Painting

The progressive approach to banner painting and American folk art offers little more than a weak method of study. Authors have tried to make the same “provocative parallels” found in progressive folk art approaches when discussing banner painting. In describing banners made by Chicago artist Fred Johnson, historian Dennis Adrian cites numerous influences, including the Flemish techniques of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch painting as well as the French and Spanish Barbizon school.<sup>26</sup> In *America's Forgotten Folk Arts*,

---

<sup>23</sup> Michael D. Hall, *Stereoscopic Perspective: Reflections on American Fine and Folk Art* 133.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Lipman, *Provocative Parallels* (New York: Dutton Paperbacks, 1975).

<sup>25</sup> Michael D. Hall, introduction, *Stereoscopic Perspective: Reflections on American Fine and Folk Art* 7.

<sup>26</sup> Dennis Adrian, “Step Right Up!,” *Applied Arts Magazine* 13.3 (1998): 20.

Frederick and Mary Fried describe the banner painter as the “poor man’s Hieronymous Bosch.”<sup>27</sup> Collector/dealer Carl Hammer compares banner art to Japanese prints and Baroque portraits in *Freakshow: Sideshow Banner Art*.<sup>28</sup> One problem is that banner art and, for that matter, any example of domesticated art, does not correspond what members of the art world perceive as “high” or academic art. Thus, while provocative parallels attempt to elevate the status of domesticated painting to that long enjoyed by academic painting, from the very start such a project occurs on shaky grounds. At best, these comparisons allude to formal qualities found among American and European work. However, the wrong European examples were chosen and do not explain the references to Japanese prints. It would be more appropriate to link banner painting to European examples of shop signs, fair displays, and other trade paintings that eventually were imported into the United States.

Critically however, the progressive approach is inconsistent and arbitrary, considering the multitude of influences and comparisons one might bring to bear in studying banner painting. If one were to take these comparisons at face value, banner artists would have been well-schooled and academically knowledgeable professionals. This inconsistency should serve as a warning sign that a more critically and conducive approach is needed rather than the progressive attempt at matchmaking.

### Conclusion

The reflective group of scholars sought to remember the United States as it was before World War I or as it was before the intrusion of modern life. They relied upon

---

<sup>27</sup> Frederick and Mary Fried, *America's Forgotten Folk Arts* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) 40.

<sup>28</sup> Carl Hammer and Gideon Bosker 15-16.

examples of folk art expressions as pictorial evidence of a simpler era. As an approach, the reflective camp borrows from the English tradition of pastoral writing in which the author looks toward the past to locate the meaning and significance of the work in the social and cultural fabric of the United States, which they represent idyllically. The progressive group perceives American folk art objects as an endorsement for modern art. Or, folk art objects constitute artistic evidence of America's course as a political and financial world power.

These two approaches were formed largely at the impetus of American folk art interest possibly developing in reaction to World War I and the new machine age of the 1920s. The effects of both events led scholars to reevaluate the pre-industrial heritage of the United States, while others proposed a vision of what the nation and its folk arts had come to mean in modern times. Each side saw art through a different social and intellectual value system. Folk art tangibly reinforced dealer/collector/scholar beliefs in American democracy, equality and individuality.<sup>29</sup>

Revisiting reflective and progressive approaches to banner art reveals much about similarities in the treatment of banner painting and American folk art. Indeed, the two approaches demonstrate correspondence between banner painting and folk art, however, they offer very little in the way of formal and stylistic analysis. Thus, as an example of domesticated art, banner painting lacks attention on a variety of fronts. Investigating artistic training, banner production, and appearance will help further the understanding of banner style and format as a domesticated art.

---

<sup>29</sup> Michael D. Hall, *Stereoscopic Perspective: Reflections on American Fine and Folk Art* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988) 126.

CHAPTER 4  
BANNERS AS DOMESTICATED ART

Introduction

Banner painters and what have traditionally been thought of as American folk art painters have in common certain features of training and production. Many had a background in trade painting. The majority of banner paintings that exist still are products of individual painters employed by tent and awning firms specializing in painted banners and advertisements for various circuses and midways. However, traditional American folk art concepts and methods do not identify how banner painting and American folk art painting share techniques in the area of sign or trade painting. This chapter presents a method of approach that closely observes the influence of sign painting within the banner format that eventually developed into a standard style. This investigation is presented as a model to suggest how to better address banner painting, in that progressive and reflective methods of approach fail to examine the format of banner painting by focusing on either high art comparisons or by creating pastoral circus scenes. Specifically, in their article “Ornamental Painter,” scholars Carolyn J. Weekly and Scott W. Nolley propose an alternative approach to American folk art that can be employed to investigate banner painting style and format.

In the first place, the methodology of Weekly and Nolley provides a rich model for making sense of the style and format of banner paintings. In addition, their discussion of sign painting techniques raises questions about the ways trade painting and advertising

techniques may have influenced banner imagery. There are few studies of American folk artists that address specific techniques associated with trade work, such as carriage painting or ornamental painting. The Weekly article examines how trade work influenced and was incorporated into the easel pictures of folk artists. Some so-called American folk artists had trade painting occupations, such as sign painting or, in the case of the popular folk painter Edward Hicks, carriage painting that supplied them with the major part of their income. Outside of their trade occupation or in conjunction with it, these artists continued other artistic pursuits, such as easel painting, which brought additional money. Lionized as master American folk artists and frequently included in anthologies of “folk” paintings, Edward Hicks, Joseph Hidley, Thomas Chambers, Rufus Porter, and William Matthew Prior referred to themselves as house and sign painters, coach painters, painter and stainer, and fancy painters.<sup>1</sup> Robert Peckham also was a sign painter and decorator by trade, while he painted portraits on the side.<sup>2</sup>

American folk art painting scholarship often shows how these artists attempt to employ or fail at achieving certain pictorial features traditionally associated with academic studio practices, such as perspective, shadow, and color use. When possible, folk art histories present some paintings in relation to the original source of inspiration, usually printed, that the artist possibly worked from. Of interest to me are affinities between technical shortcomings at academic easel painting, and what the appearance of American folk painting owes to the practical experience born of specific material

---

<sup>1</sup> John and Katherine Ebert, *American Folk Painters* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975) 122.

<sup>2</sup> David Krashes, "Robert Peckham: Unsung Rural Master," *Folk Art* 21 (Spring 1996): 41.

conditions of ornamental or sign painters. In these affinities I suggest there is potential to identify and examine technical shortcomings in relation to trade-painting techniques in other examples of domesticated art such as banner painting. Could this perspective engender a better understanding of how they approached easel painting or why certain elements are presented in certain ways?

### The Case of Edward Hicks

Weekly and Nolley relate the paintings of Edward Hicks (1780-1849) to his profession as a coach and sign painter. They consider Hicks' career and background in relation to parallels between his ornamental work and his easel work, and they conclude that while Hicks observed certain qualities and effects in the paintings of studio-trained artists, he strove to imitate atmospheric and color perspective or tried distinguishing gradations of color for the foreground/middle ground/background techniques. Such an endeavor was not emphasized in or typical of his apprenticeship training. Moreover,

Two qualities of Hicks' paintings that viewers find so engaging and refreshing are the somewhat flat areas of balanced color and the immediacy of the animals. Much of this is a result of Hicks' inability to convincingly place creatures in three-dimensional space through shading and foreshortening. Hicks most often used a drop shadow—a strongly delineated, dark, wide outline following the contour of the animal's body nearest the ground. This feature often goes unnoticed by viewers of Hicks' work, but it is an important element in the presentation of the animals and a technique common to sign painting.

The authors examines Hicks' brushwork, noting

Hicks' brushwork in his easel paintings retains a large measure of the sharp, lyrical quality that characterizes his decorative work and sign painting. Examination of a large number of paintings by Hicks indicates that he continued to use sign painters' brushes for much of his easel work. The use of these tools resulted in the linear and fluid quality of brushwork consistently observed in his signboards and easel pictures.

Hicks borrowed devices from his trade painting experience, especially those he learned first and then practiced during the course of his apprenticeship; these he incorporated into easel work. In addition, during these years he learned about the use of prints as sources for design work; he would continue to use such images for the rest of his career. His reliance on print sources for composing many of his figures and scenes is perhaps the most widely cited connection between his work and fine-arts models, although it should be noted that the practice was common among artists of every rank during and before Hicks' lifetime. Such fine-art models aided Hicks in drawing and linear perspective.<sup>3</sup>

"Ornamental Painter" is a perfect example of how components of artistic training and production techniques can contribute to a better understanding of banner painting and other so call American folk art painting. The article investigates Hick's training as a sign and coach painter, the tools he used, and sources from which he borrowed as factors in shaping the appearance and style of his easel paintings. In regard to banner painting, we might ask: How did sign painting techniques and training affect the look of banner images? What tools and media were used to create banner paintings, and which did the artists borrow from their trade apprenticeships and practices? What visual sources did banner artists use that may have influenced banner imagery?

Banner painting scholarship does not include detailed information concerning how this strong connection to trade painting and, logically, sign-painting techniques influenced banner imagery as a whole. A closer study of sign-painting techniques of the time including paint and brush types is still needed if this area of banner painting is to be understood beyond this brief attempt. Such an investigation might pay attention to color

---

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn J. Weekly and Scott W. Nolley, "Ornamental Painter," *Folk Art* 24.3 (1999): 48-51.

choice, visual presentation, and arrangement as part of the concert of intellectual and material forces shaping the final appearance of banner paintings. To suggest a model of how to better address banner painting, this chapter examines the development of a standard banner format along with what little is known concerning banner production.

### Approaching Banner Art

In both format and style examples of banner painting prior to 1930 are very different from later banner work. Early banners provide a starting point from which an exploration of the incorporation of sign painting techniques within the banner format can begin. The integration of sign painting techniques eventually led to a standard banner format consisting of bold colors, large borders, dark outlines, bold text, and central figurative representation. How did the evolution progress? What visual components suggest an awareness of, even experience in sign painting?

Numerous examples of early of banner work, such as *Oriental Magic*, 1915 and *Bathing Beauties*, 1920 (figs. 1 and 2) are directly related to scenic backdrop painting traditions of the times. These two banners exemplify the body of work produced by scenic painters, artists who painted stage drops and backgrounds for vaudeville shows, operas, and theatres, created the earliest canvas show fronts.<sup>4</sup> For example, the 1911 catalogue for the Driver Brothers' United States Tent and Awning Company of Chicago included show fronts for vaudeville, minstrel, and exotic dancer shows. *Oriental Magic* in particular contains the various parts of what would eventually appear in the standard banner format. It incorporates a large central figure, lettering, and a framing device. However, early banner-painting techniques were labor-intensive and detailed due to the

---

<sup>4</sup> Frederick and Mary Fried, *America's Forgotten Folk Arts* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) 30.

complicated imagery they presented and the use of scenic painting techniques were not exactly well suited for the advertising function banners served.<sup>5</sup> These early painting techniques were more technical and visually ambitious compared to the bold cartoon style of the later years of banner production. That is, scenic painting techniques were visually more complex and not based on any standardized visual style that later banner artists would develop.

A scenic painter's approach can be seen in *Oriental Magic*, with its broad flat area of color serving as the background for the central figure that appears somewhat off-center. In contrast to the background, the central figure contains numerous colors and much attention to detail. The multiple folds of the magician's costume and precise gesture and expression are far more complicated compared to banner imagery from later years. This is important to note, since eventually, at least by the 1930s, banner production would shift away from such complicated scenic artist styles to a flat and simplified sign painting production format. The lettering and border style in *Oriental Magic* work minimally compared to later banner painting format. The lettering is complicated and off center. The dark print appears on top of the yellow background as if to take up the only empty space left that will allow for it. The color choice for the lettering is dark blue or gray, which again, may have more to do with contrasting against the light background, rather than a conscious choice to make the lettering jump out to a passing customer. The border is mentioned because only a thin stripe of color serves to frame the image and is barely noticeable.

---

<sup>5</sup> Michael McCabe, "Beyond Belief: The Flustering Truth of Sideshow Banner Art," *Folk Art* 23.3 (1998): 70-71.

Closer observation of the magician reveals he is exhibiting his abilities by conjuring playing cards and various animals from his wand and blue urn. His actions are hard to read as much of the items flying from his wand are lost in the background or not rendered with clarity. The items become obscured within the image as a whole or easily missed from a distance. Later banners would continue a tradition of rendering the various sideshow attractions in the act of performing. However, the rendering of these later banners will involve higher clarity through the use of color and outlines. It would be interesting to discover if the magician figure was borrowed from a visual source such as a photograph or printed material as the magician is rendered with great detail and complexity compared to the background of the banner. Many long running and popular sideshow acts sold small post cards with their picture on the front and a small biography on the back. Did the artist use one of these post cards for the Magician banner? Did the layout of the postcard influence the banner format? The majority of these post cards were printed in black and white. Does this fact have any influence on the color choice of the banner?

*Bathing Beauties* contains what must have been a laborious task of imitating the wood grain of a midway stage. The artist here was probably trained more in scenic backdrop painting than figurative representation, in that the representation of the wood looks more accomplished than the five beauties standing on it. *Bathing Beauties* is complicated in the sense that it is unclear what exactly is being portrayed and is visually ambitious in trying to render numerous figures standing upon a wooden stage. It should also be noted that the stage is slightly tilted up in order to give some sense that the figures are actually standing upon something. The end result is that the figures appear to be

floating. The palette is drab and possibly attempts to recreate the colors found in nature or represents the color choice made by the artist to convey the sense of an actual place. One should ask the same questions used for *Oriental Magic* concerning the use of a photographic reference in the *Bathing Beauties* banner. Are the drab colors and complicated layout the product of working from a black and white postcard of the same act? There needs to be further research given to the area of sideshow postcards and their relationship, if any, to banner painting.

The lettering at the top of *Bathing Beauties* is equally as dull and overly complicated as the lettering choice in *Oriental Magic*. The color that appears is a light brown or beige hue. This choice points toward a scenic painter's color choice for allowing the banner to work more as a backdrop than using bold colors to make the lettering and the entire image jump out at a passing customer. The color of the lettering and overall neutral color choice of the banner serve as evidence of the artist trying to reproduce the colors found in nature and does not reflect the color choice of an artist who intended for the banner to grab the attention of a viewer as later banners will attempt.

Both of these pre-1930 banners lack the visual punch, focus, and color that later banner artists would develop incorporating sign painting techniques in order to engage the attention of a viewer. Compared to later examples of banner work, the imagery here does not stand out in the use of color or arrangement. It appears as if these early examples could easily hang behind a stage or live act, as they are not visually overwhelming. This suggests that the training of early banner artists was in backdrop or scenic theatre art production and not as trained sign painters who were more schooled in the art of capturing the visual attention of the viewer through color and arrangement.

After 1920, banner production was slowly taken over entirely by sign painting firms that developed the standard format of the banner image. Many banner artists, such as Fred G. Johnson, apprenticing in sign and banner painting firms at a young age. During the 1920s, H.L. Cummins and Neiman Eisman became notable artists in the company's stable of banner painters. In Kansas City, the banner company Baker and Lockwood used an assortment of freelance artists to create banner art for their region of the country. O. Henry Tent and Awning Company eventually became a banner painting giant as other firms were dismantled by the instability of the Depression.

The Millard and Bulsterdaum Tent and Awning was one of the first firms to employ the bright orange or red border color scheme as a way to draw the attention of a crowd from a distance. By the 1930s, banner artists had moved away from a labor-intensive look of older banners that lacked a standard format, exemplified by *Oriental Magic* and *Bathing Beauties*, in order to keep pace with the demand of sideshow expansion at this time. Modeling of form became simplified with emphasis placed on being efficient and effective in rendering figures and objects. A black outline emerged as a pictorial device that economically focused the image and highlighted the central figure.

Also in the 1930s, firms began to add drapery-curtain motifs and references to potted vegetation in the background of banner images that operated as a framing mechanism around the central figure and helped to visually separate individual banners as they hung on the banner line. It is important to note that the use of a red curtain that both separated individual banners from one another and operated as a framing device is an invention of banner firms to create a clear and unified advertisement. There is no evidence that suggests banner painters were influenced by Spanish Baroque portraits that

also used a framing curtain. The presence of a curtain in banner imagery may also be a visual link to the original scenic and theatre art that banner work developed from in which such a devices as plant props and false curtains may have been commonly used as background motifs.

The banner *Blockhead*, by Jack Cripe, 1960 (fig.3) can be investigated as a fully developed example of the standard banner format and style. *Blockhead* incorporates a large central figure, bold colors, large, simple and clear lettering, dark outlines, and a framing curtain with a heavy red boarder. These components will be explored in relation to what little is offered concerning sign painting techniques and banner production.

Cracks in the canvas have either been caused from the wear the banner received being displayed outside or from the way it was rolled up for storage or to move to a new location. Another possibility for the cracking could be the composition of the paint pigments. Many banner artists used their own formulas and experimentation must have been prominent. What is known is that oil-based house paints were used, which would have been necessary in place of artists' tube paints to meet the requirements needed to cover such large canvases. It is unclear if sign painting techniques involve the use of house enamels. An assumption can be made here due the financial problems that would occur if premixed oil colors from tubes were used to cover banners of such a large size. The cost for the paint alone would make the price of a finished banner far to expensive and economically out of reach for many small circuses and fairs. Experimentation with oils must have focused on making the most out the house enamels to produce banners at lower costs.

Some quick, square brush strokes in red can be seen in either corner near the bottom of the canvas. The artist may have used these brush strokes in an attempt to create depth or shadow, and more of the color can be seen between *Blockhead's* arms and body, as well as form the outline of the well-established framing curtain. The small dashes are about two inches in width, which indicates a fairly large and stiff-bristled brush. Whether this size brush was part of a sign painter's tools is not known. However, this same sized brush was used in the lettering at the top of the banner. Was there such a thing as a lettering brush, and if so, could this brush have been used to create the red-dashed behind the central figure?

*Blockhead* serves as an excellent example of the use of a framing curtain and red border. These visual components served several functions. They helped to create a unified image by surrounding and emphasizing the central image. The bright red or orange color choice of the frame and curtain contrasts with the lighter yellow background, which again emphasizes and draws attention to the central image. Most importantly, the red border would help to separate *Blockhead* from the sea of other painted banners making up the banner line on the midway. A sign painter would know that each banner would be competing for prominence and thus would need a visual device that both highlighted the central image and separated it from other banners on the line. These points, and in particular the last point, should be considered as evidence that the strong red borders appearing on painted banners made after 1930 are a direct result of a sign painting technique to draw the attention to the central figure or figures in banner imagery.

It should be noted that the scroll at the top with "Blockhead" in bright red on a white background is lettered perfectly with a gentle scroll and precisely centered. The lettering contains a gray drop shadow that sign painters sometimes try to employ in the pictorial area of the banner as well. The clear and simple lettering in the standard banner format can serve as evidence of the strengths of banner artists in rendering letters rather than at figurative representations. It is important to note that good lettering is not any easier than good figure painting. It takes extreme coordination and a well-practiced eye to hand letter script on any surface, especially if the large size of these letters, one foot tall and at least seven feet in length, is considered. It is not uncommon for a painted banner to have exceptional lettering and mediocre figure rendering, thus emphasizing the strengths of sign painting training.

The heavy black outlines on the figure are another sign painter's technique to give visual emphasis and focus to the figure. The outlines help to separate large areas of color and work as a device that gives quick detail to areas, such as the turban, that would be difficult to render based solely on color and value. The combination of bold colors, large text, and heavy outlines could possibly serve as evidence of a background in advertising techniques. Advertising in banner painting works as a form of visual persuasion. In the article "Selling the Goods: Origins of American Advertising, 1840-1940," Stacy A. Flaherty notes that most persuasive advertising techniques can be examined as "hard" or "soft" sells.<sup>6</sup> The idea of a *hard* sell is strongly reflected in the style and format of banner painting. Emphasis here can be seen in the combination of bold colors that demand visual attention and simple lettering or the use of sans fonts that could easily be

---

<sup>6</sup>Stacy A. Flaherty, "Selling the Goods: Origins of American Advertising, 1840-1940," *Journal of American History* 78 (Dec 1991): 1010.

read from a distance and jumped off the banner plane through the use of a drop shadow. The figurative image in the banner may have also worked as an advertising device. Flaherty addresses imagery in advertising as a reflection of the hopes and concerns of the potential buyer, in this case, the fair patron. The hopes of the patron here would be addressed within the presentation of the figure, often presented in motion, exemplified by the image of *Blockhead* hammering nails in his face, to affirm the validity, (a concern), of the attraction. The addition of the bullet “Alive” or other re-affirming text also prompted the interest or curiosity of the viewer, while reaffirming the patron’s concern for phony acts.

Flaherty introduces the idea of the “scare tactic” as a device often used in advertising of the era that the visual content of banners might also be using.<sup>7</sup> The scare tactic can be understood as an advertising device employed by banner artists to draw the attention of patrons based on their disbelief of what is being depicted. What the banner image portrays is often a scene that tries to shock the viewer or portrays something that warrants disbelief. *Blockhead* again serves as a model for numerous examples of banner art that portray somewhat shocking, and presumably very shocking imagery to audiences of this era.

Approaching *Blockhead* by examining the presence of sign painting techniques and possible advertising strategies reveals several important factors that traditional banner and American folk art painting scholarship do not accomplish. The use of the drop shadow and the bold outlines around the figure are evidence of sign painting techniques and traditions. The artist used several sized brushes and possibly specialized

---

<sup>7</sup>Stacy A. Flaherty, “Selling the Goods: Origins of American Advertising, 1840-1940,” *Journal of American History* 78 (Dec 1991): 1011.

brushes in order to achieve varied effects. Pointing out possible advertising techniques such as the use of bold colors, large, simple text, and daring, often shocking imagery in a standardized layout also reveals an untapped facet of banner painting worthy of more investigation beyond this attempt.

*Emmett the Armless and Legless Boy*, Fred G. Johnson, 1960 (fig.4) is another banner whose style and format can be investigated by examining the presence of sign painting techniques. The same flat, simple, and direct approach to rendering that is seen in *Blockhead*, including the sign painting devices of a red border and framing curtain, are employed by Johnson to portray Emmett painting at his easel. Here, the curtain is dark blue, but remains equally effective at framing the central image. The lettering appears on a strong yellow background. The letters are exceptionally rendered with a dark drop shadow that hovers inches away from the red letters. The end result is the appearance that the letters hover above the contrasting yellow scroll. This again serves as evidence of the tremendous skill of banner painters at free-hand lettering. The use of a drop shadow is evident along the bottom of the curtains as well as on the stool and serves as another link to sign painting techniques incorporated into the banner style.

The vase holding Emmett's brushes has been briefly highlighted to give it a sense of swelling around its middle. Johnson however loses the rules of perspective, or is not interested in employing these rules, at the bottom of the vase, as it appears to be as flat as the canvas Emmett is painting on. Johnson gives an overall sense of an ad hoc perspective where each element within the picture frame is tilted or flattened according to the artist's needs or his lack of ability, possibly due to his background as a trade painter, and thus not well versed in linear perspective. His approach to perspective heightens the

impact of the image in a way that academic linear perspective cannot achieve. In other words, the use of linear perspective and foreshortening would complicate the image and take away from the directness and immediacy of its “flash” or visual shock that works perfectly within advertising practices.

The production demand and fast pace of the artist may have some bearing on these visual inaccuracies. Johnson had his own personal recipe for paint that allowed him to work on up to six canvases at once. The artist used a blend of boiled linseed oil, benzene, and Dutch Boy white lead paint.<sup>8</sup> It is not known if this paint combination is related to sign painting techniques or practices. One can see evidence of his speed with the large brushstrokes in the background. These strokes also serve as evidence that the artist painted on wet canvas. The butterfly marks his brush left behind can only be produced when the brush is pressed too harshly into the canvas leaving paint at the beginning and end of each stroke, while picking up the background color in the middle.

Johnson's copy materials consisted of farm journals, children's book illustrations, and magazines.<sup>9</sup> It would be difficult to find direct links to his sources other than to note the linear, almost coloring book quality this and other Johnson banners have. In fact, Johnson often approached his canvases by laying in the black lines of the picture to use as a guide before using any color.<sup>10</sup> If his technique were captured at this point, his canvas may in fact resemble a large page from a coloring book. These heavy lines are evident throughout the banner image and give it visual weight as well as an overall sense of

---

<sup>8</sup> Michael McCabe, “Beyond Belief: The Flustering Truth of Sideshow Banner Art,” *Folk Art* 23.3 (1998): 70.

<sup>9</sup> Randy J. Johnson, *Freaks Geeks and Strange Girls: Sideshow Banners of the Great Midway* (Honolulu: Hardy Marks Publications, 1996) 65.

<sup>10</sup> Randy J. Johnson, *Freaks Geeks and Strange Girls: Sideshow Banners of the Great Midway* (Honolulu: Hardy Marks Publications, 1996) 23.

flatness. Other artists may have used photographs or other banners as visual resources. It would be worthy to investigate these banners in conjunction with their source material, but for now this facet of banner painting remains untouched.

A possible advertisement strategy that was used in the banner is Emmett rendered in action. Like *Blockhead*, Emmett is captured in the midst of performing his act. In other words, Emmett is a real person, and Johnson wants to stress this in his advertisement by rendering Emmett in motion. The *hard sell* of the banner image is Emmett is portrayed in the act of painting and being surrounded by various carpentry tools, that, through their placement and presence, Johnson implies Emmett can use. The viewer is enticed to affirm the validity of the image and Emmett's ability.

The format and style of *Emmett* can be understood fully by exploring the artistic training, production, integration of sign painting techniques, and visual resources that were combined to create the final image. Sign painting and advertising techniques are evident in the use of the drop shadow, bold colors, and abbreviated highlights and details. The paint medium may also share a link to sign painting methods. The wet-on-wet painting marks reveal the speed in which Johnson rendered the banner image as well as the large brush size. Johnson's copy materials are also important to note as they had direct influence on the final banner image. Addressing *Emmett* by examining the influence of sign painting techniques and training, instead of as a type of fine art or folk art, reveals a greater understanding of the sideshow banner style and format than traditional American folk art painting methodologies and scholarship can accomplish.

## Conclusion

This chapter presents a method of approach that closely observes the influence of sign painting within the banner format that eventually developed into a standard style. This investigation is presented to suggest how to better address banner painting. Traditional American folk art concepts and methods do not identify how banner painting and American folk art painting share techniques in the area of sign or trade painting. Progressive and reflective methods of approach fail to examine the format of banner painting by focusing on either high art comparisons or by creating pastoral circus scenes. Weekly and Nolley offer a new alternative to traditional American folk art methodologies, neither progressive nor reflective, in the article “Ornamental Painter,” which can be employed to investigate banner painting style and format.

*Oriental Magic, Blockhead, Emmett*, and numerous other banners serve as examples of how sign painting techniques influenced and shaped the development of a standard banner style and format. Sideshow banners confirm a utilization of trade painting techniques that share links to particular painting materials, tools, visual sources, and artistic training in sign painting. A better understanding of banner style and format can be reached by the contributions of each these elements in the final banner image, rather than to perceive these elements as flaws unworthy of investigation.

Despite their training as scenic or sign painters, these artists show a remarkable facility at rendering figurative work as well as a strong ability at hand lettering. Banner imagery attempts to convey the facts of the scene in a clear and focused fashion that may be evidence of source material the artists borrowed from or proof of the employment of advertising devices that presented images efficiently and effectively to the potential

customer. Sideshow banners have a power and appeal in their simplicity and visual directness. Examining the influence of sign painting can reveal links between the style and approach used by banner artists in their rendering of banner images.

However, the discussion of the imagery in banner painting is very limited to what little is known about the techniques of sign painting and banner painting practices, source materials, and tools. In other words, there is little information available concerning sign painting as a trade and the techniques that may have been used by commercial sign painters of this era. These areas need to be researched and remain an untapped source as far as their relevance and importance to a complete understanding of the style and format of sideshow banner paintings.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

This paper has investigated ways in which banner painting can be understood using traditional American folk art painting scholarship. Scholars have constantly debated and redefined the term *American folk art painting* since its invention in the twentieth century into a term that has become unclear and inappropriate as a label of understanding the work it tries to address. Through the analyses of terms such as *folk art*, *outsider art*, *self-taught art* and *amateur art*, this paper has traced a pattern of acceptance of many types of non-academic painting that can be classified as one field of study. American folk art painting scholarship has changed the concept of the visual art popularly known as *American folk art painting* and now allows for the inclusion of sideshow banner painting and other non-academic painting under the heading of *domesticated arts*. This study expands the disciplinary treatment of banner painting by introducing *domesticated art* as a means of representing non-academic art produced in the United States that is not based upon chronology, geographic location, or the artists' mental state. *Domesticated art* offers a solution to the problem of clear terminology for addressing banner painting and other art labeled as but not technically constitutive of *American folk art painting*.

In addition, this paper explains how scholars have approached banners using the reflective and progressive methodologies traditionally employed in American folk art scholarship. Scholars employed the pastoral reflective approach to contextually explore

folk objects once they were removed from their original settings. This method adds a great deal to the understanding of utilitarian art objects, such as banner painting, that are far removed from their use on the midway and in sideshows. However, the reflective method adds subjective inference and fails to directly address banner imagery. The progressive mode of comparing or creating formal parallels between domesticated art objects to high art examples fails as a method of understanding on the basis that it does not address the complexities of either domesticated art or high-art forms other than to point out the formal commonalities between them.

Like other domesticated arts, scholars have compared banner painting to fine art examples. Making these progressive comparisons does not address the complexity of the images away from pointing out formal coincidences and provocative parallels that confuse the distinction between fine and domesticated art. Approaching banners in the pastoral mode does allow for a more contextual understanding of the images, but does very little in the way of addressing the banners themselves.

This thesis presents an exploration of banner painting as a domesticated art as a model to suggest how to better address banner imagery. Investigating artistic training, banner production, and appearance helps to further the understanding of banner style and format as a domesticated art. This study explores banner painting by examining these images as products of a combination of trade painting, advertising, and functionality. This thesis uses the article “Ornamental Painter,” by Carolyn J. Weekly and Scott W. Nolley as an example of how to propose an alternative approach to banner painting by focusing on the influence of trade painting techniques and artistic training. One can trace these influences through a chronological change in banner painting styles. These changes

led to and are all factors that contributed to the final appearance of a standard banner style and format.

Introducing banner work as a domesticated art does not attempt to make parallels between it and academic art, nor does it point out visual imperfections in banner painting without analyzing factors that further the understanding of their appearance and how they were produced. By taking into account the techniques of sign painting, tools, and the utilitarian use of the banner image as advertisements, a more complete understanding and appreciation of these images as a domesticated art can be made. Further work investigating the tools, visual resources, and trade painting techniques still needs to be completed in order to realize a complete understanding of sideshow banner painting.

## ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig 1 (7'6"x4')  
Unknown, *Oriental Magic*, circa 1915, Jim Secreto Collection, *Freaks, Geeks, and Strange Girls: Sideshow Banners of the Great American Midway*, by Randy Johnson (Honolulu: Hardy Marks Publications, 1996) 28.



Fig 2 (7'6"x12')  
 Unknown, *Bathing Beauties*, circa 1920, Jim Secreto Collection, *Freaks, Geeks, and Strange Girls: Sideshow Banners of the Great American Midway*, by Randy Johnson (Honolulu: Hardy Marks Publications, 1996) 96.

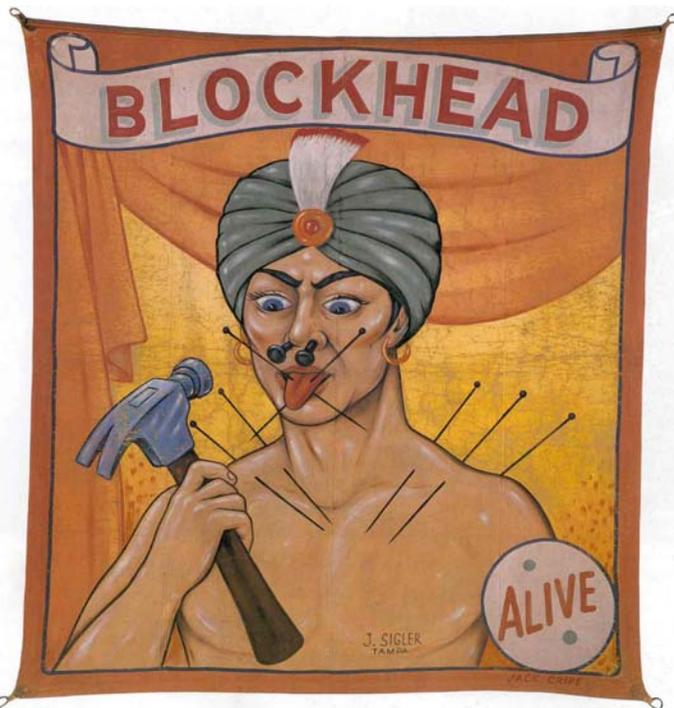


Fig. 3 (9'x12')  
 Jack Cripe, *Blockhead*, 1960, Jim Secreto Collection, *Freaks, Geeks, and Strange Girls: Sideshow Banners of the Great American Midway*, by Randy Johnson (Honolulu: Hardy Marks Publications, 1996) 9.

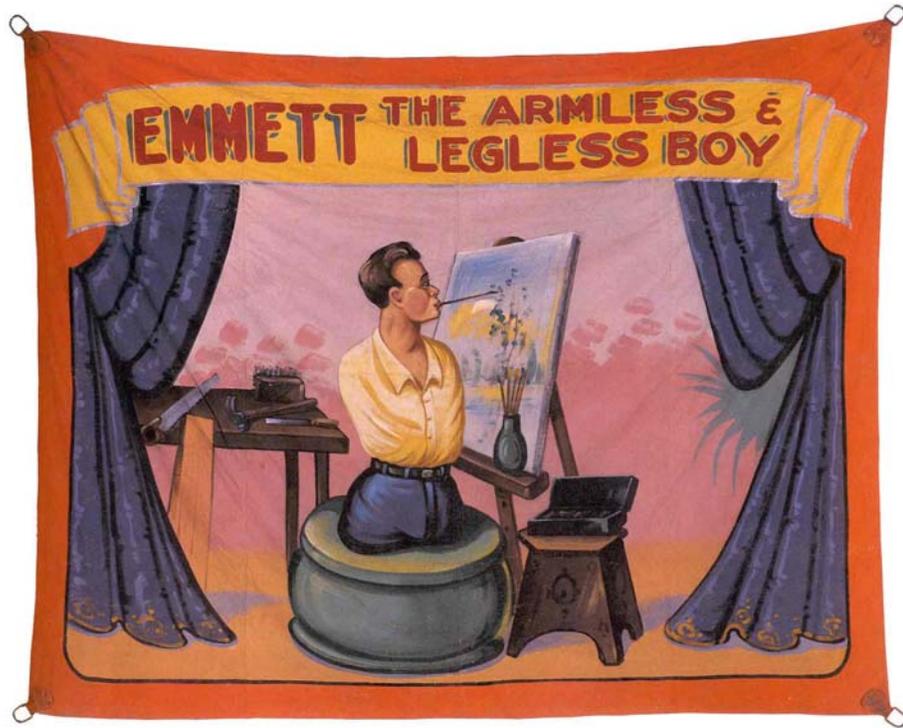


Fig 4 (8'x10')  
Fred G. Johnson, *Emmett: The Armless and Legless Boy*, Jim Secreto Collection, *Freaks, Geeks, and Strange Girls: Sideshow Banners of the Great American Midway*, by Randy Johnson (Honolulu: Hardy Marks Publications, 1996) 67.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adrian, Dennis. "Step Right Up!" *Applied Arts Magazine* 13.3 (1998): 20.
- Bank, Mirra. *Anonymous Was a Woman*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979.
- Benedetti, Joan M. "Words, Words, Words: Folk Art Terminology—Why It (Still) Matters." *Art Documentation* 19 (Spring 2000): 14-19.
- Bishop, Robert. *Folk Painters of America*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979.
- Black, Mary C., and Jean Lipman. *American Folk Painting*. New York: Clakson N. Potter, Inc., 1966.
- Black, Mary C. *What is American in American Art*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1971.
- Borum, Jennifer P. "Passionate Visions of the American South: Self-Taught Artists from 1940 to the Present." *New Art Examiner* 21 (Feb 1994): 41-44.
- Cahill, Holger. *American Folk Sculpture* Newark: The Newark Museum, 1931.
- . "Artisan and Amateur in American Folk Art." *Antiques* 59 (March 1951): 210.
- . "Folk Art: Its Place in the American Tradition." *Parnassus* 4.3 (1932): 4.
- Conniff, Richard. "The Carnival Spirit." *Architectural Digest* 48 (August 1991): 34.
- Corn, Wanda M. Wanda M. Corn, "Coming of Age: Historical Scholarship in American Art," *Art Bulletin* 70 (June 1998): 190-199.
- Delacruz, Elizabeth. "Outside In: Deliberations on American Contemporary Folk Art." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 34.1 (2000): 77-86.
- "Domestic." Def. 3. *The American Heritage Dictionary*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1994.
- "Domesticate." Def. 1. *The American Heritage Dictionary*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1994.
- Drepperd, Carl W. *American Pioneer Arts and Artists*. Springfield: Pond-Ekberg Company, 1942.

- . *Pioneer America : Its First Three Centuries*. Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1949.
- Ebert, John, and Katherine Ebert. *America Folk Painters*. New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1975.
- Flaherty, Stacy A. "Selling the Goods: Origins of American Advertising, 1840-1940." *Journal of American History* 78 (December 1991): 1009-1015.
- Flexner, James Thomas. "New Bottles for Old Old Wine: American Artisan, Amateur, and Folk Paintings." *Antiques* 41 (April 1942): 246-49.
- "Folk." Def. 1. *The American Heritage Dictionary*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1994.
- Ford, Alice. *Pictorial Folk Art: New England to California*. New York: Studio Publications Inc., 1949.
- Fried, Frederick, and Mary Fried. *America's Forgotten Folk Arts*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Hall, Michael D. "The Problem of Martin Ramirez: Folk Art Criticism as Cosmologies of Coercion." *Clarion* (Winter 1986): 56.
- . *Stereoscopic Perspective: Reflections on American Fine and Folk Art*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988.
- Hammer, Carl, and Gideon Bosker. *Freak Show: Sideshow Banner Art*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996.
- Johnson, Fred G. *Sideshow Banners*. Chicago: State of Illinois Art Gallery, 1989.
- Johnson, Randy J. *Freaks Geeks and Strange Girls: Sideshow Banners of the Great Midway*. Honolulu: Hardy Marks Publications, 1996.
- Krashes, David. "Robert Peckham: Unsung Rural Master." *Folk Art* 21 (Spring 1996): 41.
- Lipman, Jean, and Alice Winchester. *The Flowering of American Folk Art 1776-1879*. New York: Viking Press, 1974.
- . *Primitive Painters in America 1750-1950*. New York: Dodd and Mead Company, 1950.
- Lipman, Jean. *Provocative Parallels*. New York: Dutton Paperbacks, 1975.

- Lipman, Jean, Elizabeth V. Warren, and Robert Bishop. *Young America: A Folk-Art History*. New York: Hudson Hill Press, 1986.
- Little, Nina Fletcher. *The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Art Collection*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957.
- Lucie-Smith, Edward. "Folk Art." *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms*. London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1984.
- McCabe, Michael. "Beyond Belief: The Flustering Truth of Sideshow Banner Art." *Folk Art* 23.3 (1998): 66.
- Patterson, Tom. "10 Years in the Life of Contemporary Art's Parallel Universe: A Personal View." *Art Papers* 18 (Sep/Oct 1994): 4.
- Petullo, Anthony. *Self-taught and Outsider Art: The Anthony Petullo Collection*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001.
- Pinchbeck, Daniel. "Sideshow Stoppers." *Connoisseur* 221 (December 1991): 108.
- Rose, Howard. *Unexpected Eloquence: The Art in American Folk Art*. New York: Raymond Saroff, 1982.
- Sears, Clara Endicott. *Some American Primitives: A Study of New England Faces and Folk Portraits*. Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1941.
- Schreiber, Barbara. "Notes from the Navel-Staring Department: On the Inside Looking Out or Why I Don't Fear Folk Art." *Art Papers* 22.1 (1998): 16.
- Siegal, Fred Siegal. "Theatre of Guts: An Exploration of the Sideshow Aesthetic." *TDR*. 35 (Summer 1998): 107.
- Trend, David. "The Politics of the Ordinary: Tradition and Social Change in Folk Art." *Art Papers* 16 (Nov/Dec 1992): 20.
- Tully, Judd. "Outside, Inside, or Somewhere In-Between?" *Art News* 95 (May 1996): 120.
- Vine, Richard. "Thank Heaven for Little Girls." *Art in America* 86 (Jan 1998), 22 Jan 2002 [http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_dls/m1248/n1\\_v86/20148116/print.jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m1248/n1_v86/20148116/print.jhtml).
- Vlach, John Michael. *Plain Painters of American Folk Art*. Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1988.
- Vlach, John Michael, and Simon J. Bronner, eds. *Folk Art and Art*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986.

Weedon, Geoff. *Fairground Art*. New York: Abberville Press, 1981.

Weekly, Carolyn J., and Scott W. Nolley. "Ornamental Painter." *Folk Art* 24.3 (1999): 48.