

Strange and Wonderful
American Folk Art from the
Willem and Diane Volkersz Collection
Teachers Guide

Hallie Ford Museum of Art
September 17 – December 22, 2016

This guide is to help teachers prepare students for a field trip to the exhibition, *Strange and Wonderful: American Folk Art from the Willem and Diane Volkersz Collection*; to offer ways to lead their own tours; and to propose ideas to reinforce the gallery experience and broaden curriculum concepts. Teachers, however, will need to consider the level and needs of their students in adapting these materials and lessons.

Goals

- To introduce students to the work of artists whose work is defined as “folk”, “self-taught” and/or “outsider”
- To examine formal and narrative aspects of folk, self-taught and outsider art
- To explore the idea of art as communication

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Discuss the definitions of “folk,” “self-taught” and “outsider” art as they relate to the works in the exhibition.
- Discuss how the individual artists use the parts and principles of art in his or her work.
- Discuss the expressive and narrative qualities of the individual works in the exhibition
- Discuss how the artists in the exhibition use art to communicate about their lives and beliefs, and their reasons for doing so.

INDEX

INTRODUCTION.....	3
BEFORE THE MUSEUM VISIT/AT THE MUSEUM.....	4
WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION.....	5
RESOURCES.....	13
CONTENT STANDARDS.....	14
IMAGES.....	17

INTRODUCTION

Folk art is generally defined as art by and for common people. Traditionally, it refers to art that, while made by artists without academic training, comes from a certain tradition, with skills often handed down through the family, the community, or apprenticeships. Examples include quilting, basket-making or wood carving. Contemporary folk art, however, includes the term “self-taught” and “outsider” to refer to artists who work largely outside of established traditions. Collector Willem Volkersz describes them as follows:

...[They are] men and women who, although untrained as artists, have a powerful need to express themselves – and do so in unconventional ways. Unburdened by the history of art and with limited resources, these folk artists (also known as naives, visionaries and self-taught artists, and when operating on the economic and social fringes of society, as *outsider artists*) draw heavily on their personal experiences and skills and develop their own – often very unusual – formats. Because of their lack of traditional artmaking skills and the eccentric forms their work takes, they are often not taken seriously.... [O]ften included in the “self-taught” genre [are artists who are singularly gifted but who suffer] from emotional or developmental problems. Their view of the world and their unique visions allow us glimpses into worlds that are otherwise unknown to us.

Despite the variety of artists, materials, techniques and styles of contemporary folk art and its many categories, the common thread is the artists’ need to create and to communicate through art, even under the most challenging circumstances.

From the 1940s on, there emerged a large, identifiable group of self-taught artists who became notable and collectable outsider artists in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s. They tended to live in rural parts of the United States and lacked formal education. Many were the sons and daughters of sharecroppers and former slaves. Most started their artistic careers late in life and often used inexpensive and ordinary materials—whatever was available and handy—to create their artwork. Some of these artists experienced visions in which God or the angels told them to make art, while others carved, painted, or sewed to keep active or busy in retirement. Still others used their artwork to rail against the government or their neighbors. Artists like Rev. Howard Finster, Dilmus Hall, Eddie Martin, Nellie Mae Rowe, Mary T. Smith, and Sarah Mary Taylor would emerge at this time as important figures in the folk art movement and would eventually form some of the cornerstones of the Willem and Diane Volkersz collection.

Willem and Diane Volkersz, of Bozeman, Montana, began to collect folk and outsider art in the 1970s. The Volkersz’ met at the University of Washington in the 1960s where Willem was working on his BA degree in studio art. He became fascinated with Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers in Los Angeles, and after he and Diane moved to Kansas City when he accepted a teaching position at the Kansas City Art Institute, they began to collect folk and outsider art. From the late 1970s to the present, they have amassed one of the most important folk and outsider art collections in the country. It is the storytelling or narrative aspects of the artwork that particularly appeal to them. “Folk art is the development of these artists’ own unique format and imagery, and they have to tell a story,” Willem has said. “It’s something in their lives that they’ve negatively experienced, such as a divorce or death. It gives them emphasis to start telling their story, and that is what we’ve really been interested in.”

BEFORE THE MUSEUM VISIT

- If possible, visit the exhibition on your own beforehand.
- Use the images and suggested discussions and activities to introduce students to contemporary folk art.
- Make sure students are aware of gallery etiquette.

AT THE MUSEUM

- Review with students what is expected – their task and museum behavior.
- Be selective – don't try to look at or talk about everything in the exhibition.
- Focus on the works of art. Encourage students to look closely at each work of art and consider beginning with the visual scanning they used in the classroom as well as the suggested discussions (see below). A good way to start is by asking, "What is happening in this picture?" or "what do you see here?" Follow with questions that will help students back up their observations: "What do you see that makes you say that?" or "Show us what you have found."
 - Describe what you see here: your first impressions of subject matter, and if applicable, scene, mood and atmosphere.
 - How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
 - Consider why the artist created the work: what the artist is trying to communicate and why he or she was compelled to do so.
 - Is the artist sending a message about his or her life and beliefs, telling a story or making associations for the viewer, or is the work about how the artist uses color, texture, contrast, space, etc.? Or both? Explain.
 - What materials and techniques has the artist used? Do they, along with the compositional elements (how the artist puts together the visual elements) contribute to the message? Explain.
 - After spending some time with the work, what adjectives would you use to describe it? (Happy, Sad, Exuberant, Joyful, Ominous, etc.) Explain your choices and what about the work makes you say that? Is it similar to your first impression, or has that changed? Explain.
 - Think about the terms "Folk", "Self-taught" and "Outsider" as they relate to the works in the exhibition.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION



Robert E. Smith (Missouri)
A Rural Family
1990
Acrylic, pen and ink on illustration board
15 x 20"

Robert E. Smith was born in Saint Louis, Missouri, in 1927. He spent his early years in Missouri and Texas. He joined the United States Army in 1948 but was given a medical discharge after six months. In 1950, he had a “nervous breakdown” and was committed to Farmington State Hospital, near St. Louis, until 1968. After his release, he worked in the mental health field, earned his GED, and worked as a “hawker” (a person who sells refreshments or merchandise) at baseball stadiums in St. Louis, Kansas City, and Houston. He passed away in Springfield, Missouri, in 2010.

Smith began to paint in 1964 while he was still at Farmington State Hospital. He painted on poster board and paper with acrylics, crayons, and watercolors, and his cartoon-like paintings and drawings, which he called “story paintings”, had a strong narrative content. His subjects included political events, family gatherings, historical events, and stories about his life. Most of his paintings are accompanied by handwritten stories describing the action taking place in them, as well as tape recordings of him reading them aloud.

Willem Volkersz began collecting Robert E. Smith’s work in 1982, when he was invited to speak at an exhibition of Missouri folk artists organized by the University of Missouri (*Missouri Folk – Their Creative Images*):

...One of the artists included was Robert E. Smith; upon hearing that I was going to speak at the opening reception, Robert packed up one of his paintings and sent it to me in the mail in the hopes that I would buy it. I not only sent him a check, but also purchased most of the paintings he had in the exhibition and became a lifelong supporter and collector of his work.

Speaking about Smith’s work, Volkersz states,

...[Robert’s] “story paintings” reflect his personal experiences as well as the news of the day....*Schizophrenia Ward #39* (in the exhibition) is probably the one he inhabited at the time when the mentally ill were incarcerated...*Raiding Bears in Montana* (also in the exhibition) was made after I sent him a clipping of a bear cub that had to be captured on the Montana State University campus not long after we moved to Bozeman. Smith once even did library research for a series of paintings for a traveling exhibition of his work. With every topic, Smith developed an imaginative story complete with people named

Cornelius Smittyboob, Dr. Betty and Petunia. In a friendless world, Smith created his own family of characters.

A Rural Family is a story painting of the Dinwiddles, a family of six that Smith may have known or may have invented – “his own family of characters,” as Volkersz calls them. Each character has a name and in his recorded narrative of the painting, they and their surroundings are described in minute detail (with sound effects!).

Suggested Discussion

- Briefly describe what you see here: your first impressions of subject matter, scene, mood and atmosphere.
 - How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
 - Where does your eye go first? Why?
 - How does your eye move around the composition – is it led by color? By shape? By pattern? By size?
 - Describe the color (note the use of complimentary colors). Has the artist used it realistically? Explain. How does the color contribute to the atmosphere and mood?
 - Is the artist’s use of space and perspective realistic? Non-realistic? A combination of both? Discuss the artist’s use of two- and three-dimensional space, and how he has used realistic perspective (relative size, overlapping) and unrealistic perspective (tilted, flattened) as well as a combination of eye-level and bird’s eye point of view.
 - In a work so full of details and color, how has the artist created visual unity and balance?
 - After spending some time with the work, what adjectives would you use to describe it? (Happy, Sad, Exuberant, Joyful, Ominous, etc.) Explain your choices and what about the work makes you say that? Is it similar to your first impression, or has that changed? Explain.
- How is *Rural Family* like a story? (individual characters, descriptive detail of scene and actions). Have students describe what they see in the scene, then create a story about the characters, their home, and what they are doing. Use dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts, and feelings.

- Listen to Robert E. Smith narrate *A Rural Family*. How was his story similar to yours? How was it different? Did he bring your attention to something you may have missed? What did the dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts, and feelings add to your experience of the work?

<https://goo.gl/LpMoFp>

OR



Suggested Activities:

- Using colored pencils, crayons, or pens on paper, create a “story painting” of your family. Depict something you do together in a specific place in your home or back yard. What would you include to tell the story of your family?
- Narrate your story painting – describe your painting in detail, with dialogue and descriptions of figures and objects as well as actions, thoughts, and feelings either verbally or in written form.



Brenda Clements (Montana)
Memory Jug
Date unknown
Glass bottle with attached found objects
19 x 15 x 15”

Brenda Clements lives in Bozeman, Montana. As a self-taught artist, she has been fascinated with the American flag and has painted them and collected them for many years. Her memory jug is a departure from her typical artwork, although the tradition of memory jugs dates to Victorian times.

The term “memory jug” refers to a variety of vessels or containers covered with commonplace objects that are affixed with putty, cement, or other adhesive medium. These objects – often mementos of loved ones – could include mundane items such as keys and nails, things from nature like nuts and shells, and perhaps a button or piece of jewelry worn by the deceased.

Because their makers, and those they were memorializing, are anonymous, and there is little recorded to tell us about the tradition itself, memory jugs have always been a little mysterious. Historians have traced their origins to the 19th-century, perhaps an example of a Victorian era woman’s craft, where sentimentality and love of decoration held sway. They may also have antecedents in African mourning vessels, transported and adapted in this country by slaves. In southern black communities memory jugs – covered with objects which had belonged to the deceased and could be used in the afterlife – were placed in cemeteries as grave markers.

Suggested Discussion

- Without giving students the title, ask them what they see, and what the object (the jar) is. Have them provide adjectives to describe it.
- Have students identify as many of the individual pieces as possible. Look for possible connections or themes that unite them.
- Share information about memory jugs with students (for historic and contemporary examples, <https://goo.gl/gMaK1E>)
 - Why do you think the artist chose to make this particular piece (like the 19th-century makers of memory jugs, little is known about the artist, Brenda Clements)?
 - Is it, in Victorian fashion, a memorial to a loved one or did she just cover it with objects she liked?
 - If it is a memorial to an individual, what might it tell us about him or her?

- If it is just objects the artist liked, what might it tell us about her, when and where she has lived, and what was part of popular culture at the time?
- Discuss the composition of the memory jug – how the artist has arranged the objects on the jar. Discuss color, size, texture, rhythm, etc. as well as subject matter.
 - Do you think she was successful in creating a unified whole out of so many different parts? Why or why not?
- After spending some time with the work, what adjectives would you use to describe it? (Happy, Sad, Exuberant, Joyful, Ominous, etc.) Explain your choices and what about the work makes you say that? Is it similar to your first impression, or has that changed? Explain.

Suggested Activity

Create a memory jug (or poster) for the class. Have each student bring an appropriate-sized object that reflects them personally, and/or one that they think reflects popular culture today. Using the surface of the poster board, arrange the objects, thinking about how the individual pieces create a whole visually, and if there are any connections that can be made between them that might tell a story. If time and resources permit, transfer the arrangement to a vessel, otherwise adhere them to the poster board.



Mary T. Smith (Mississippi)
Hog Meet Good
1984
Enamel on Masonite
16 x 24”

Mary T. Smith was born in Brookhaven, Mississippi, in 1904, the daughter of sharecroppers and one of thirteen children. She developed a serious hearing impairment as a child and went to school through the fifth grade. She married twice, and in the late 1930s moved to Hazelhurst, Mississippi, to live on her own. In 1941, she gave birth to a son but did not marry his father. For the next thirty years, until she retired in the 1970s, she worked as a gardener and a domestic.

As a child isolated by hearing and speech difficulties, Mary Smith found an outlet through drawing, but it wasn't until later in life, when she had a home of her own and was relatively independent, that she found her artistic voice. During the late 1970s, Smith began to transform her home and yard into an environment proclaiming her belief in the Lord and the wisdom in following His Commandments, as well as a colorful display of portraits of neighbors, heroes, friends, and animals. Her work was usually painted on readily available materials (mostly found in a nearby garbage dump), such as plywood, corrugated tin, cardboard, or paper, and often included text proclaiming her social, political, or religious views as well as more mundane personal observations, like her love for hog meat. She suffered a serious stroke in 1985 and passed away in Hazelhurst in 1995, but continued to make artwork up until the end.

Willem Volkersz was introduced to Smith's work while traveling through Mississippi in 1984. Her home, which was located on US Highway 51, was hard to miss. Paintings with raw, yet exuberant figures, accompanied by phonetically-spelled inscriptions were attached to the fence surrounding her small house and neatly mown lawn. Seeing it while driving by, Volkersz stopped to talk with Smith and to photograph her yard. He ended up purchasing a few paintings, becoming one of her earliest collectors.

Mary Smith is just one of the many artists featured in *Strange and Wonderful* who created and lived among art environments. What exactly is an “art environment?” According to SPACES (Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Spaces), a non-profit organization dedicated to “the study, documentation and preservation of art environments and self-taught artistic activity”:

This term is customarily used to refer to immobile constructions or decorative assemblages, monumental in scale or number of components. Art environments may be interior or exterior, and typically include elements of sculpture, architecture, bas-relief assemblage, and/or landscape architecture. Such composite works, produced additively and organically without formal architectural designs or engineering plans, owe less allegiance to folk, popular, or mainstream art traditions and the desire to produce

anything functional or marketable, and more to personal and cultural experiences, availability of materials, and a desire for personal creative expression.

Art environments exist in every state of the union and every country in the world. They can be large or small and they can exist inside or outside. Most are made to be public, but some are extremely private. Sites can be found in the unlikeliest of places – in a suburban backyard, a remote desert, or in a thriving city. Art environments are often discovered by ordinary people as a result of a wrong turn, or by chance while on vacation. Sometimes they are discovered by following nothing more than a hunch or a “word-of-mouth” lead.¹

- Briefly describe what you see here: your first impressions of subject matter, style and mood
 - How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
 - Where does your eye go first? Why?
 - How does your eye move around the composition – is it led by color? By shape? By pattern? By size?
 - How has the artist created visual unity and balance?
 - Describe the artist’s style and its expressive qualities.
 - How has the artist used text? As a descriptive inscription to accompany the image, or as an element of design? Both? What does the text add to the image, and how would it effect the work if there were no text?
 - After spending some time with the work, what adjectives would you use to describe it? (Happy, Sad, Exuberant, Joyful, Ominous, etc.) Explain your choices and what about the work makes you say that? Is it similar to your first impression, or has that changed? Explain.

Suggested Discussion

- Using the same questions as you did with *Hog Meet Good* above, look at images of Mary Smith’s art environment.
- Like most artists with art environments, Smith welcomed visitors and would engage with guests who came to see her home. What does this add to the experience of the artwork?
 - Imagine *Hog Meet Good* as part of the environment. Does it fit in? Why or why not? Do you think it is more successful as an individual piece or would you rather see it as part of the environment? Explain.
 - What does *Hog Meet Good* tell us about Mary Smith? What does her art environment tell us about her? If you saw *Hog Meet Good* while visiting her

¹ SPACES website, <http://spacesarchives.org/about/what-is-an-art-environment/>

home, what questions would you have for her? What would you ask her about her art environment?

- Compare and contrast the works by Robert E. Smith, Brenda Clements, and Mary Smith. How are they similar? How are they different? What do these artists have in common?

Suggested Activity

- Beginning with SPACES online collection, have students research art environments in Oregon, Washington and Idaho. Ask them to share their results with the class, using images and maps to show the sites and their locations.

SPACES online collection: <https://goo.gl/3EzZwx>

RESOURCES

Exhibition Catalog

Gluekert, Stephen and Tom Patterson with an introduction by Willem Volkersz, *Strange and Wonderful: American Folk Art from the Volkersz Collection*. Colorado Springs Fine Art Center, Colorado Springs, CO, 2013

Webliography

SPACES online search for art environments.

<http://spacesarchives.org/about/what-is-an-art-environment/>

PBS Independent Lens: *Off the Map*. This look into backyard paradises created by visionary artists around the world includes interactive and video tours of Howard Finster's Paradise Garden and Eddie Owens Martin's Pasaquan

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/offthemap/>

CONTENT STANDARDS

English Language Arts and Literacy

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

Anchor Standard 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

3.RL.7 Explain how specific aspects of a text’s illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story (e.g., create mood, emphasize aspects or a character or setting).

4.RL.7 Make connections between the text of a story or drama and a visual or oral presentation of the text, identifying where each version reflects specific descriptions and directions in the text.

5.RL.7 Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).

Text Types and Purposes

Anchor Standard 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

3.W.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear even sequences.

a. Establish a situation and introduce a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally.

b. Use dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts, and feelings to develop experiences and events or show the response of characters to situations.

c. Use temporal words and phrases to signal event order.

d. Provide a sense of closure.

4.W.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear even sequences.

a. Orient the reader by establishing a situation and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally.

b. Use dialogue and description to develop experiences and events or show the responses of characters to situations.

c. Use a variety of transitional words, phrases, and clauses to manage the sequence of events.

- d. Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely.
- e. Provide a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events.

5.W.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear even sequences.

- a. Orient the reader by establishing a situation and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally.
- b. Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, description, and pacing, to develop experiences and events or show the responses of characters to situations.
- c. Use a variety of transitional words, phrases, and clauses to manage the sequence of events.
- d. Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely.
- e. Provide a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events.

6.W.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

- a. Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.
- b. Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, and description, to develop experiences, events, and and/or characters.
- c. Use a variety of transition words, phrases, and clauses to convey sequence and signal shifts from one time frame or setting to another.
- d. Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to convey experiences and events.
- e. Provide a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events.

7.W.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

- a. Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and point of view and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.
- b. Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, and description, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

- c. Use a variety of transition words, phrases, and clauses to convey sequence and signal shifts from one time frame or setting to another.
- d. Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.
- e. Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on the narrated experiences or events.

Visual Arts

Anchor Standard 1: Creating-Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 2: Creating-Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 7: Responding- Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8: Responding – Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard 9: Responding – Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

Anchor Standard 10: Connecting-Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Anchor Standard 11: Connecting-Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to making art.



A Rural Family



Robert E. Smith



Memory Jug

Following images: *Hog Meet Good*, Mary T. Smith's home, photo of the artist



HOG WRETT GOOD

HAVE
I WONT I

matt + gmt



I GOT TO GO

I AM GOD'S BOY
I LOVE TO BE T-SCHING

I LOVE THE BARK
ON THE LORD
I MADE A BOB

I'M BEING BORN IN THE
SU-MER
I'M BEING BORN IN THE
WINTER

WAR



CHRIST COME 2 FA LORD BR DA

MY MINDY THING
2 3 4 5 6 7 8

I LOVE THE LORD KNOW I DO
HONOR THE LORD
DAY 2 IN RIGHT MIND

