Folk Art

*Columbia, PTC Chariot, Elitch Gardens, Denver, 1920*
GLOSSARY

Amish – members of a U.S. protestant group who migrated from Europe to North America in the 1700s; the Amish seek to maintain a lifestyle based on simple living, plain dress and resistance to the adoption of many modern conveniences including prohibitions or limitations on the use of power-line electricity, telephones, and automobiles, as well as regulations on clothing.

Byzantine Empire – the Greek-speaking Roman Empire of late antiquity and the Middle Ages; the city at the center was first called Constantinople, then changed to Istanbul.

Battle of the Little Big Horn – an armed engagement that was fought in 1876 near the Little Big Horn River in eastern Montana Territory, between Lakoto-Northern Cheyenne Indians and the U.S. Army. Led by General Armstrong Custer, the U.S. Army suffered one of its greatest defeats; Custer and his army were annihilated.

Carousel – an amusement ride consisting of a rotating platform with seats for passengers. The seats are traditionally in the form of wooden horses or other animals, which are often moved mechanically up and down to simulate galloping, to the accompaniment of circus music.

Coney Island Style – a term used to refer to the type of elaborately and highly decorated carousel horses that were featured on carousel rides found in Coney Island amusement parks.

Contemporary artist – any artist whose work is featured between 1970 and the present day.

Country Fair Style – a style used to describe a type of simply adorned carousel horses found in rural areas.

Hex signs – a form of Pennsylvania folk art typically displaying flowers, birds or hearts painted in an even pattern on a large circle. Hex signs were first used to invoke magical powers or good fortune. The use of hex signs today is one of traditional art, and for good fortune in crop cultivation.

Fleur-de-lis – (from the French), literally “flower of lily” that is a stylized version of the flower, used in decorative arts and symbols.

Mennonites – a Christian group, often persecuted by Catholics and Protestants. Committed to nonviolence, Mennonites embrace simple living and plain dress, much like the Amish.

Nostalgia – a longing for the past; a general interest in past eras and their personalities and events, especially the “good old days” of a few generations back, remembered fondly.

Patriotism – the love and devotion to one’s country.

Philadelphia Style – a term used to refer to the type of elegant and classically decorated carousel horses that were featured on carousel rides designed by the Philadelphia Toboggan Company.

Quaker – a worldwide religion based on the teachings of Jesus Christ, also known as The Religious Society of Friends; Quakers believe that individuals can have a personal relationship with the divine without the need for intermediaries, such as priests, rituals or sacraments.

Scrimshaw – hand carved crafts created by whalers, made from ivory or bone of whales; carvings are elaborate pictures and lettering on the surface of the bone or tooth, highlighted with pigment.

Symmetrical – balanced, having equal proportions on all sides.
What Is Folk Art?

The most important distinguishing characteristic of the collection of art called “folk art” is individualism. It is art that, by its lack of sophistication, separates it from “fine art,” the art we generally think of when we see paintings in an art museum. Folk art is a traditional, often ethnic expression of vigor, honesty, inventiveness, imagination and a strong sense of design. It is art of rural people, commonly bringing a message of national pride, optimism and often a great sense of humor.

As the pioneers who roamed the wilderness became settlers, turning wild fields and woodlands into organized communities, colonists gained the time and inspiration to devote to their artistic natures. Some celebrated life remembered from their European family roots while others found inspiration from Native American cultures and a new way of life. Their crafts often sprang from the everyday work they did - carvings and sculpture developed from the work of carpenters, shipwrights, blacksmiths and farmers; painted crafts emerged from carriage and house painters. Many folk artists were self-taught amateurs.

The next two units study folk art produced by immigrants and native Americans across the country, divided by regions. In this unit, we will look at the art produced on the East Coast, by European immigrants who settled in the New England area. Their carving crafts reflected a blend of old world memories and new world materials.

As you study this unit, ask yourself:

- Where have you seen crafts like these?
- What crafts from your own region, state or neighborhood would you like to create?
- How different is folk art from fine art?
We begin a study of folk art with the premier artist of pictures portraying folk art craft, **Charles Wysocki**. Although technically a contemporary artist (1928 – 2002), Wysocki devoted his life to the creation of paintings of folk art that displayed his love of patriotism, and a nostalgic look back at a turn-of-the-century America, especially New England. To learn the breadth of the topic of folk art, all you have to see are a few examples of Wysocki’s pictures. His great reverence for the past is shown in the detail, a clean, neat, ordered way of life.

A. Look closely at the Wysocki pictures above. Can you find common objects in all of them? List as many as you can find._________________________________________________________

What is the object that best indicates his patriotism? HINT: He often puts one somewhere in his work. __________________________
Have you ever thought about what life was like crewing on a New England whale boat in the 1800s? As whalers hunted the elusive great whales for their precious oil, they often lived at sea for long periods of time. It could take from three to five years to obtain enough oil to fill their vessels. On these long and tedious voyages, sailors needed to relieve their boredom, so they carved and engraved countless varieties of decorative objects, calling their art “scrimshaw.” These objects were crafted from materials at hand, the jawbones and teeth of whales!

Scrimshaw requires an ivory or hardwood base, and the use of fine carving or scoring instruments such as a small pen knife, dental tools or sail needles. Here is how the artist prepares the scrimshaw: first, he “scores,” or carves, the image on ivory with the tip of an instrument. Next, he covers the image with an ink that will absorb into the carving. Then he polishes over the image to remove all but the ink that has seeped into the carved lines. Finally, he polishes it to a fine luster.

This scrimshaw is called *The Proposal*, and is believed to have been carved around 1830 by an unknown artist. It was carved from a sperm whale tooth, set on a jawbone base, and is 3 ½ inches high. It was found in New Bedford, Massachusetts.
In the 5 5/8” whale’s tooth scrimshaw at left, the figure of a famous American, Dewey Beard (photo insert), also known as Iron Hail, was carved by Ken B. Sprague. No other information about the artist or the location is known, but we know a lot about Dewey Beard – he was the last white man (raised as an Indian) to survive the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

This war, known commonly as Custer’s Last Stand, was fought between the Lakota and Cheyenne Indians against the U.S. Calvary in the Montana Territory of 1876.

The scrimshaw of the ships at left was also carved on a whale’s tooth. It illustrates two vessels in the process of laying the first telegraph cable that would connect the United States with England.

The cartoon drawing of the same sea venture was published in 1858.

B. Do you think the scrimshaw artists did a good job of accurately representing real life in their carvings? Why or why not?

Laying cable in the Atlantic.
Frank Lesley’s Illustrated Newspaper, 1858.
C. Let’s go on a scavenger hunt to the New Bedford Whaling Museum in Massachusetts. From your computer’s browser screen, type in

http://www.whalingmuseum.org/

From the museum’s home page, click on ONLINE EXHIBITS. Click in the circle on the right for EXHIBITS. Scroll down the boxes in the center of the page and click on BRITISH PAINTINGS AND SCRIMSHAW. Read the inscription on the whale’s tooth image in the center to find the answers below:

Type of whale______________________________________________________________

Where caught______________________________________________________________

Name of ship_______________________________________________________________

Amount of oil collected_______________________________________________________

Year______________________________________________________________
Penn’s Woods Hex Signs

Hex signs displaying a mix of flowers, hearts and animals. Notice the symmetrical (matching sides) designs.

In 1682 English Quaker William Penn, living in the colony of Pennsylvania, invited German Quakers and people of all faiths to immigrate from Europe, and to join him in the new land. He described “Penn’s woods” as a place where they would find affordable land, rich soil, and ample rainfall to grow their crops. They would also find religious freedom to worship in the style of their Quaker, Mennonite and Amish beliefs. Penn’s colony later became the state of Pennsylvania, and his principles of democracy served as the inspiration for the United States Constitution.

The Pennsylvania farmers were good farmers with artist skills. They built huge barns, then painted them bright red, and decorated them with hex signs.

Some people believed in the religious importance of hex signs. Others felt that hex signs protected barns and livestock from lightning and evil spirits, or prevented milk from turning sour. Most believed that hex signs were just interesting decorations. Today we appreciate them as folk art.

Most hex signs are round with designs that have four, six, or eight divisions. Six divisions, like the example below, are most common. Designs are symmetrical, having equal components that balance the picture.

Barn in Pennsylvania, displaying hex signs

Divisions

Common hex sign with 6 divisions
The Geman Pennsylvanians painted colors on their signs, according to the following meanings:

- red – emotions, creativity
- yellow – love of people, the sun
- green – growth of plants and ideas
- blue – protection, peace
- white – purity, the moon

D. Look at the four numbered designs on the previous page. Which one signifies growth of plants and ideas?______________

It’s your turn! Design a hex sign. What message would you want to display? Design your hex sign below, keeping in mind the meaning of the colors and making sure your design is symmetrical.

![Hex sign design](image-url)
Carved Carousel Horses

Carousels, commonly known as Merry-Go-Rounds, are as welcome a sight to an amusement park, garden or mall as a circus clown with an armload of balloons. They attract riders of all ages. Most carousels feature cheerful, upbeat circus music, and some challenge riders to grab at brass rings as they circle by, riding on painted animals. Although many other animals can be found on most carousels, how did horses become the most popular?

Carousels did not originate in the United States, but date as far back as ancient Byzantine times. The word carosello translates from the Arabian to “little war,” and refers to a test of equestrian skill involving a rider’s ability to catch something tossed at him. The game was so popular in France and Germany that it expanded into the creation of elaborate costumes and decorations which the animals, as well as the riders, wore.

French noblemen, riding on wooden horses, trained for spearing contests by using lancers to skewer rings* as they rode around center poles. Artists designed these wooden horses with elegant and elaborate details as a means of displaying their craft. This circular caravan of beautifully decorated animals eventually evolved into the carousels we enjoy today.

*On some carousels today, riders grab at finger rings as they pass on their wooden horses.
French, German, Sicilian, and Russian craftsmen are credited with bringing their carousel carving skills to the United States in the mid- to late-1800s. In the photo below, Russian born Marcus Charles Illions works with his sons as they complete various stages of carving carousel horses. Can you find the horses’ heads? (Look for the \textbf{X}.)

From family-owned shops like Illions, larger carving companies developed, and three distinct styles emerged:

1) \textbf{Philadelphia Style}. Horses were elegant, as if kings and queens could ride atop their regal decorations. One company who produced this style was The Philadelphia Toboggan Company, known simply as \textbf{PTC}. Classic embellishments often included stars, \textit{fleur-de-lis}, and bright gold paint. The horse was extremely graceful, and realistically designed, even adorned with gold horseshoes.

E. Characteristics of Philadelphia Style include:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{[ ]}
\item \textbf{[ ]}
\item \textbf{[ ]}
\item \textbf{[ ]}
\end{itemize}
2) Coney Island Style. Elaborate, striking decorations of bright, colorful flowers, jewels, glitter and a flair reminiscent of costumes characterizes the horses of carvers like Illions, Charles Looff, Carles Carmel, Solomon Stein, and Harry Goldstein.

![Carousel horse by Marcus Charles Illions](image)

F. Characteristics of Coney Island Style include:

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3) Country Fair Style. Rural carousels are decorated horses proudly embellished with symbols of patriotism or western gear. This style has few fancy features that might hinder the process of packing, moving and large-scale production needed for country displays. The Herschell-Spillman Company and the C.W. Parker Company produced classic examples of this style.

![Carousel horse, the Herschell-Spillman collection](image)

G. Characteristics of Country Fair Style include:

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Carousel horses have three standard poses, standing, jumping or prancing. A stander (1) has three legs on the ground, a jumper (2) has all four legs in the air and a prancer (3) has two rear legs on the ground, two forelegs in the air.

H. Can you identify these poses?

Ear positions may be upright and alert (A and B above), or flattened in a more aggressive stance (C and D above). Most horses mouths are open.

Carousel horse design features went in and out of style much like today’s fashions. Carousel horse’s tongue positions are good examples of a design fad. Horses made prior to 1890 or after 1925 are almost always positioned with tongues naturally inside the mouth. Horses with protruding tongues, as shown in the photos below, were popular between 1890 and 1925.
Horses circle the carousel in a counter-clockwise direction in the United States, and clockwise in European and other countries. They are decorated lavishly on the side that faces the crowd, but workmanship is spared on the “inside.” For this reason, it is easy for collectors to tell which horses were made for carousels in the U.S. (Photo below, left). It is also interesting to note that all the pictures you see of U.S. carousel horses show them facing to the right.

Some carousel horses bear the monogram of their carvers. Look at the saddle of this PTC horse (photo below, right).

Although carousels travel in a circle, there is a leader or “King” horse on each platform. Look for a large horse with the most elaborate decorations, and ride him like royalty!
I. How would you describe this carousel horse?

Pose__________________________ Style______________________________
Position of ears_________________ Position of mouth____________________
Position of tongue________________

Do you think this is a leader horse? Why or why not?_________________________

______________________________________________________________________

Based on what you can see in the photo, was this horse made for a carousel in the United States? Why or why not?__________________________

Next time you are at a carousel, take a closer look at the details of the horses, carriages and other animals. Although most modern carousel animals are made of synthetic materials, the most valuable collectibles are carved of wood. You can find these handcrafted carousels throughout the United States. Some of our favorite carousels can be found here:

**California**
South Coast Plaza, Costa Mesa
Fun Zone, Balboa Peninsula, Newport Beach
Disneyland, Anaheim
Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, Santa Cruz

**Colorado**
Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, Colorado Springs
Elitch’s Gardens, Denver

**Florida**
Barnum City Circue world, Orlando
Griffen’s Amusement Park, Jacksonville Beach

**Illinois**
Marriott’s Great America, Gurnee
Fairyland Amusement Park, Lyons

**Michigan**
Michigan State University Museum, East Lansing
Greenfield Village, Dearborn

**New York**
Coney Island, Brooklyn
Central Park, New York City

**Pennsylvania**
Fantasyland Storybook Gardens, Gettysburg
Hershey Park, Hershey

**Washington**
Fun Forest Park, Seattle
Point Defiance Park, Tacoma
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