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No Idle Hands: The Myths And Meanings Of Tramp Art

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Synopsis

Tramp art describes a particular type of wood carving practiced in the United States and Europe between the 1880s and 1940s in which discarded cigar boxes and fruit crates were notched and layered to make a variety of domestic objects. These were primarily boxes and frames in addition to small private altars, crosses, wall pockets, clock cases, plant stands, and even furniture. Whittling objects such as chains and ball-in-cage whimsies was a common hobbyÃ¢â ¬â ¢including among rail-riding Ã¢â ¬Å“hobosÃ¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â ¢and for many years Ã¢â ¬Å“tramp artÃ¢â ¬Â• was believed to have been made by these itinerants as well. Although this notion has been widely dispelled, the name has stuck. In recent years efforts have been made to identify makers by name and reveal their stories. While some examples of tramp art may be attributed to itinerants, this carving style was more commonly a practice of working-class men creating functional objects for their households. No Idle Hands presents more than one hundred and fifty tramp art objects collected mainly from the United States and also including pieces from France, Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia, Canada, Mexico, and BrazilÃ¢â ¬â ¢demonstrating the far reach this art form has had. It includes works by contemporary artists, thus establishing tramp art as an ongoing folk art form rather than a vestige of the past. The pieces reproduced here reveal an artistic and intricate sensibility applied to each handcrafted piece. Essays consider assumptions about tramp art related to class, quality, and the anonymity of its makers and examine this practice through the lens of home and family while tracing its relationship to the tobacco industry. The book will cultivate an appreciation of an art form that is as thought-provoking as it is enduring.

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Customer Reviews

Laura M. Addison is curator of European & American Folk Art Collections at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

There isn’t much middle ground when it comes to Tramp Art. Love it, or hate it. We’ve been occasional collectors of it since the early 1970s, and I still recall the definitive exhibit at the Museum of American Folk Art around 1975. Since then.....prices have gone way up, but thankfully appreciation and knowledge have also tracked upward. When I heard that the International Museum of Folk Art in Santa Fe was doing one of theirwell-known soup-to-nuts exhibits on this topic, I made sure to plan a summer excursion to see it; plus I pre-ordered this catalog to increase my enjoyment of the exhibit. This is a large well-designed book, with austere/dignified page design and typography, allowing the "hero" shots of the artwork to be the stars of the show. Photography is clear, concise, and (for those of us who love this offbeat art form) illustrative. The photos seem almost tactile -- quite fitting, come to think, for an art form that is all about handling, transforming, and "feeling the vibe" of the materials. Some myths about tramp art are dispelled, and some new theories are presented with insightful essays and text. The book strives to educate, and succeeds -- but I think the real joy of this book is the page-after-page expo of an art form that is quirky, heartfelt, spontaneous, and ultra-personal. These anonymous makers created from the heart -- and these surviving examples of this unique folk art form have incredible, persuasive power.

Best book I have found on tramp art. Lots of good pictures.

Beautifullly illustrated and well written. This book gave the reader a wonderful overview of what make sure this art form so unique and interesting.

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