21,777 — that’s how many pieces of wood make up the complex design of Joseph Youhon Sr.’s tabletop. It was a number that probably surprised even Youhon since he recorded the information on the back of two photographs that show him standing by his creation. He also noted that it took him three years to finish the project, completing it in 1925, and that he used 82 different varieties of lumber. The technique he used of piecing together sawn bits of wood, called marquetry, required skill, an eye for design, and patience. To make something so elaborate must surely have been a labor of love.
The son of Hungarian and Italian immigrants, Youhon spent most of his life in the small town of Houtzdale, Pa., where he worked in the coal mines. He and his brother John sketched several drawings of that dark and dirty world on the back of their coal charts, used to track the amount of coal each dug for payment. Work dominated his daily routine and his philosophy. "The first thing to do is to fall in love with your work," he wrote on a piece of paper. Family members recall that he spent his spare time in his woodshop — building furniture, carving wooden toys, and fitting together his marquetry designs piece by piece. But Youhon did not receive a formal art education, nor did he apprentice as a carpenter or cabinetmaker. In fact, he attended school only to the fourth grade and probably picked up his woodworking skills from a relative. In defiance of his lack of formal training, he produced beautiful objects that ornamented his surroundings and visually documented his world, leaving behind creative works that many would call folk art.

Classifying Youhon's works as folk art seems reasonable, even though the term itself is rather nebulous. Identifying what is and is not folk art has become a vexing exercise of interpretation, but mostly, folk art refers to those creative works that do not meet commonly held expectations of an "academic" fine, or decorative arts tradition or appearance. Some scholars and collectors have defined folk art as the antithesis of fine art, though that definition is certainly debatable. One early scholar categorized folk art as the art of the common man, and quite frequently that statement has truth in it; folk artists have often tended to be ordinary people who produced lively and expressive works in spite of a naive technical approach. Good folk art, however, like good art in general, reveals a vitality and inner spirit that elevate it above craft, mere representational depictions, and consumer tchotchkes. Truly, folk art is in the eye of the beholder.¹

That said, it is also safe to say that folk art can be found wherever folk have lived or continue to live, Western Pennsylvania being no exception. The search for regional folk art and artists has been an exciting expedition of discovery spanning more than 200 years. Some of the oldest forms of folk art, in fact, reveal much about the traditions and customs brought to the region by early settlers. German immigrants, especially, who came from eastern Pennsylvania or directly from Swiss and German states, carried with them their love for boldly decorated household furnishings, colorful paintings, and lively ornamentation. In the truest sense of the word "folk," these decorations originated with the farmers and peasants of central Europe who used them to brighten their surroundings.²

One of the quintessential and most recognizable Pennsylvania German folk arts is the fraktur. These bright and highly decorated certificates commemorated births, baptisms, and marriages, recorded penmanship, and highlighted title pages. Some were drawn purely as cheerful tokens of friendship and affection. German settlements in Westmoreland and Somerset counties produced some the most striking examples of this folk art form west of the Appalachian Mountains.

The Geburts and Taufshein (birth and baptismal record) designed by John George Bushyaeger for Daniel Muhleisen features a colorful border of leaves, berries, and a tulip, typical German motifs, surmounted by a neoclassical urn, probably borrowed from Anglo-American sources. Bushyaeger emigrated from Germany in 1802 and by the following year had settled in Adamsburg, west of Greensburg. He served as schoolmaster for the local German school and must have spent considerable time drawing fraktur for the community; approximately 35 percent of known Westmoreland...
Tune books he saw among German friends and neighbors. Traditional German folk elements appear in other forms throughout Western Pennsylvania, such as the engravings decorating a long rifle made by Armstrong County gunsmith William Schreckengost. The compass ornaments and foliated vines he used turn up frequently on painted furniture and fraktur from German settlements. Other German craftsmen developed specific folk decorations unique to their communities, making their products distinctly identifiable.

Cabinetmakers in the tightly knit Mennonite community of Soap Hollow, Somerset County, decorated their furniture with gold and silver stenciled motifs such as horses, stars, flowers, birds, and squirrels. Their use of grained surfaces, red and black paint, and the frequent inclusion of the maker’s name or initials stenciled on the surface make Soap Hollow furniture easy to recognize. A blanket chest brazenly stenciled “MANUFACTURED BY CHRISTIAN C. BLAUCH,” features fanciful paint graining and gold stenciled designs, including the initials J.S., probably for the owner, and the date 1854 (see image, p. 37). While the chest was constructed using sophisticated cabinetmaking techniques, its folk quality derives mostly from its applied decoration, which more closely reflects German folk elements than refined, high style examples. Blauch’s family emigrated from Switzerland in the mid-18th century, settling first in Lancaster County but moved into what became Somerset County by 1767. Like most residents of Soap Hollow, he was a farmer, concentrating on cabinetmaking only during a brief period in the 1850s.

Jacob Knagy, another cabinetmaker from Somerset County, though not a member of the Soap Hollow community, decorated his furniture with similar graining and stenciled designs. The small stand he made for Barnert Staup, dated 1848, visually demonstrates the shared influence of a distinctive folk style within Somerset County.
Some folk arts entered Western Pennsylvania by way of occupational organizations and through gender-oriented schools and traditions. For example, workers at regional window and bottle works occasionally made fragile glass whimsies as gifts for family and loved ones, though more often crafted beautiful glass canes to carry in parades. The tradition of including products of one's labor in marches and other festivities can be traced back to European guilds. Glass workers making bottles and window glass were generally not trained to manipulate glass into decorative objects, like glass workers of tableware, and the glass available was generally of lesser quality and color. Nevertheless, they created stunning pieces with the skills and material at hand.

As part of a young girl's training for her role as caretaker of the home and family, learning to stitch and sew was very important. Since the Middle Ages, schools in Europe, initially religious in nature, instructed girls in useful and decorative stitching, giving them the skills needed to make clothing, bed coverings, and table linens. Girls frequently embroidered samplers, worked rectangles of linen cloth, which gave them the opportunity to practice their stitching and simultaneously keep a record of various designs. The simplest samplers served as marking documents, recording alphabets and numbers that girls referred to when marking household linens. They may also have provided young girls with the basic lessons for reading. By the 19th century, female schools were teaching young girls a greater variety of subjects and more decorative needlework as reflected in more ornate samplers. Schoolmistresses passed along their own designs and techniques to students, thus giving samplers stitched at various schools their own unique look. These embroidered pieces are charming examples of folk art that continued a longstanding tradition in female education.

Samplers stitched in Western Pennsylvania reveal diverse stylistic trends and patterns, but also show personal interpretation from the young girls themselves. Rebecca Pudder made one such sampler under the direction of Jemima Dumars. The 1840 Pittsburgh directory lists a Mr. and Mrs. Dumars on Third Street, who offered schools for both boys and girls and taught "needle work of every description." Apparently Rebecca attended their school; the floral border she used to enclose her piece appears on other Dumars school samplers and may have been a pattern developed by Jemima. Rebecca, however, has included a more personal design: a log house stitched near the bottom. According to Rebecca's obituary, she was born in a log cabin on Ferry Street in 1822. When she stitched her sampler she may still have been living in the same building.

Another identified school of samplers originated with Mary Tidball, who probably operated and taught a female school in Washington County. Several distinctive samplers bearing her name have been uncovered recently. A beautiful example by Sarah Tidball, Mary's niece, boasts a vast vocabulary of design elements unique to the Tidball school, including over-sized plants, palm trees, hummingbirds, swans, and a Georgian style house.

While close to a dozen samplers from Mary Tidball's school have come to light, works from other schools in the region are still relatively unknown. Margaret Sturgeon's sampler stitched at the Braddock's Field Seminary is the only one so far known (see image, pg. 36). This long-lived girls' school was founded in 1825 by Mary Olver, who later renamed the school Edgeworth Female Seminary after Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth. The work features an elaborate center scene depicting a large pedimented building, possibly the first seminary building in Sewickley. The school moved from Braddock to Sewickley...
Tradition has played an important role in the look and proliferation of certain forms of folk art, but not all folk artists have been guided by ethnic, occupational, or gender-based practices. For some, the local landscape and city views have served as inspiration. Those without formal art training have felt compelled to capture their immediate surroundings on canvas and paper just as those with years of education and experience. The town and country scenes created by untrained artists frequently lack correct perspective, shading, and depth, but their landscapes still overflow with life, color, and movement, enough to make them sympathetic to reality.

Pittsburgh’s best-known 20th-century self-taught artist, John Kane, painted numerous scenes of the city, its suburbs, and rural hinterlands. When asked why he chose to paint Pittsburgh’s mills, bridges, valleys, and rivers, he commented: "Because I find beauty everywhere in Pittsburgh." Even the lankiness of the first Bloomfield Bridge, completed in 1914, caught Kane’s eye as a thing of beauty. In his painting of the bridge, completed around 1930, he shows it gracefully poised above Skunk Hollow enlivened by three steam engines that chug along like toy trains.
Peter Contis, a Greek immigrant who settled in Pittsburgh in 1910 and entered the restaurant business, admired his adopted city so much that he too began to paint its buildings and neighborhoods. His flat, frontal approach, seen in many of his works, probably originated from Byzantine frescoes viewed in his homeland. In his view of downtown Pittsburgh, the city’s skyscrapers seem to sprout from the Point like crystals. Other self-taught artists have painted Pittsburgh scenes with strong personal connections. The Southside Slopes were home to Lee Dittley, a sign and house painter who turned his commercial experience with paint to more artistic endeavors. In one landscape, he depicts several brightly painted buildings set against a robin’s egg blue sky. The green building in the center was his home.

Trolleys and rivers have played a large part in Pittsburgh’s history, and they show up in many folk paintings. Bloomfield native Andy Flanigan began working as a trolley conductor for the city in 1918 and continued with the Port Authority until 1964. After his retirement, Flanigan began painting; his quirky but bold image of a trolley car, making its way along a curved track, pays tribute to his life’s work. Meanwhile, a painting by Ines Hess, another self-trained artist, captured the riverfront excitement of the Oakmont Regatta (see image pg. 32). The scene is filled with activity, from the sky, the river, and even the spectators on land. Its charm lies in the abundance of people and things that keep the viewer’s eye moving from one to another.

The birds and beasts that inhabit the earth have long held fascination for human beings. Folk artists too have created representations of creatures, often transforming their very nature. As art historian Kenneth Ames has suggested, "animals frequently
undergo metamorphosis" by folk artists, making birds and beasts seem quaint and unthreatening. Their humorous stares and facial casts take on human qualities that make them appear familiar as fellow beings. A carved wooded bull's head provokes smiles from its comical expression, which only conceals its darker purpose: to sell meat. The head reportedly hung in a Greensburg butcher shop. Whether the carver intentionally designed his bull to lighten the mood or merely had limited skills to give it a more realistic demeanor is unknown. The result, however, is delightful.

The same can be said for a rigidly stalwart cardinal sculpted by an unidentified New Alexandria carver, and the contemplative, hunchbacked raven attributed to artist David Gilmour Blythe. According to local histories, Blythe carved the raven in response to Edgar Allen Poe's melancholy poem of the same name, which Blythe alludes to in his own writings. He apprenticed with Pittsburgh carver and furniture maker Joseph Woodwell in 1831, then left after six months (though he apparently learned enough to carve a fairly realistic statue of General Lafayette for the courthouse in Uniontown). His raven is more whimsical in nature and thus more characteristic of folk sculpture.

Self-taught artist Norman Scott "Butch" Quinn of Oil City also finds amusement in animals. His, however, are born from logs, scraps of wood, bed springs, and carpet remnants found around his neighborhood. His version of the mythical phoenix sprang from a pile of discarded wood cuttings. Quinn normally paints his creatures with bright colors and occasionally adds plastic gemstones and feathers to give them a jewel-like appearance.

Wearing more somber colors is a tanware spaniel produced in Greensboro in the late 19th century (see image, p. 36). The potter, named Cleavanger, based his canine on more finely molded and glazed ceramic...
statues imported from Staffordshire, England. His version assumes a less pretentious air due to its humble substance. Tanware, a type of brown decorated stoneware unique to the potters of southwestern Pennsylvania, was manufactured mainly as a decorative specialty ware. Advertisements and order sheets for area potters never mentioned it, suggesting that it was produced on a sporadic basis. Customers may have had the chance to purchase tanware souvenirs at the potteries or place orders for custom-decorated pieces.

Folk artists have also been moved to commemorate loved ones, revered people, momentous events, and memorable experiences. Well-known, 20th-century folk artist Grandma Moses commented that “memory is a painter,” suggesting that she and others reconstructed reminiscences of the past in their artwork. The commercialization of her art made her world-famous, yet she was not alone as a painter of memories. William H. West from Trafford, Pa., also painted scenes based on his memories growing up in a rural community. His landscapes depict farms, outbuildings, and activities common in the country. One colorful painting, Making Shingle on the Farm — 1888, from 1974, depicts several ant-like figures cutting trees, splitting logs, and sawing individual shingles. West would have been seven years old in 1888, and could have remembered witnessing a similar sight, but certainly after so many years, his recollections were guided partly by nostalgia, evoking a more pleasant memory of the past.

When Sarah Bright Anderson Lea worked her ambitious Civil War quilt, depicting appliquéd and embroidered scenes of camp life and military exploits, she may have relied on the memories of her husband, Benjamin F. Lea, who served as a private in the 101st Pennsylvania Volunteer Regiment. Since Benjamin spent most of his time on guard duty at Camp Reynolds in Braddock, Pa., he probably saw few of the actual places and events depicted on the quilt. Most likely Sarah designed it to pay tribute to the war itself as well as her husband’s participation. She may also have made it to commemorate his joining the G.A.R., a Civil War veterans’ organization, in January 1889. An American flag having 42 stars (two more were added
decorates the back of the quilt, further supporting that Sarah made the quilt in the 1880s.20

Other, less earth-shattering events and happenings have been commemorated in folk art, some with ironic wit. A tanware pitcher bearing the bold inscription “J. J. Fitzpatrick/In memory of high water, July 10, 1888” at first appears to honor Fitzpatrick’s weathering a local flood, but it may have been purely the decorator’s sense of humor that led him to record such a statement on a water pitcher. Equally amusing is a painting by self-taught artist William K.C. Truschel, Egg Salad Days. Very little escaped the satirical wit of Truschel, including summer camp in Bradford Woods. Here the artist has tempered the nostalgic innocence of camp with a healthy dose of adolescent mischief.

Even more than events and places, folk art has commemorated people. So often a work has been dedicated to or made specifically for an individual, such as the quilt worked for Jarret Coventry of Washington County by his mother, Letitia Coventry. Bold appliquéd flower baskets and vines stretch across the surface of the quilt along with Jarret’s name in neatly cut letters. According to family history, Letitia made the quilt for Jarret while awaiting his return from military service in the Civil War.

Portraits, too, are commemorative works that pay homage to loved ones and respected leaders. They record the sitter’s physical likeness in order to prolong their memory, and occasionally capture their inner spirit and personality. The near life-sized painting of Sophie Wurster painted by Fredrick G. Wagener presents the onlooker with a charming woman, dressed in a deep aubergine gown, standing in front of a lilac bush. Fredrick, a German immigrant, rented living quarters in Sophie’s home on South Atlantic Street in Pittsburgh’s East End. Despite his rather primitive style, Sophie appears as a genteel and sensitive woman. And the lilacs that surround her? Flowers have often been used in art as symbols of virtues, emotions, people, and places. According to sentimental Victorian writers lilacs signified first emotions of love, an appropriate choice for Wagener’s portrait of Sophie. According to neighbors, Wagener fell in love with his landlady and even asked her to marry him. Sophie refused but
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the two remained close friends; some say lovers. Fredrick also painted large murals on the walls of Sophie's house, scenes on window blinds and folding screens, and on nearly every inch of the house interior. The portrait, finished in 1940, was Fredrick's most remarkable creation.21

The range of folk art from Western Pennsylvania provides a glimpse of the traditions carried into the area by immigrants, craftsmen, and educators. It offers charming and historic views of the landscape and city activities. Some folk art makes us smile as we observe whimsical interpretations of the creatures around us, while other works remind us of the events and people who have shaped our region's society and culture. Folk artists are ordinary people who overcome challenges to enliven their world, and eventually our world, with inspiration and creativity. John Kane stated it best in his autobiography: "The object of my life has been to find beauty. That I have had to do sometimes in the face of many hardships, against the necessities of daily life. In toil and sweat and the clang of the hammer and the roar of the blast furnace I have not lost sight of the most important thing in life, the search for beauty."22

1 See Holger Cahill, American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750 – 1900 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932). S. Kenneth L. Ames, Beyond Necessity: Art in the Folk Tradition (Winterthur, Del.: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1977) is a thought-provoking essay that has attempted to unravel the "paradox of folk art" by dispelling certain myths about both objects and makers. His work, however, still leaves one questioning if folk art can be objectively defined and classified.


5 Beatrice T. Rumford and Carolyn J. Weekley, Treasures of American Folk Art from the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center (Williamsburg, Va.: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1989), 162-64.


11 My thanks go to Harley Trice for providing information about both Rebecca Pudder and Jemima Dumas.

12 Larry and Lee Lacquement have been researching Tidball samplers and their makers and are preparing what promises to be an interesting forthcoming article. See also, Betty Ring, Girlhood Embroidery, 464, 465; and, Hollander, American Radiance, 517, 518.

13 A description of the Edgeworth Seminary from a former student of the 1860s and an early 20th-century postcard showing a sketch of the first building closely match the structure on Margaret's sampler. Both records are owned by the Sewickley Valley Historical Society, Sewickley, Pa.


15 See, David Lewis, Byzantine Butterflies: The Folk Paintings of Peter Contis and Helen Contis (Woodstock, N.Y.: The Overlook Press, 1995).

16 Ames, Beyond Necessity, 44-62; quote from p. 44.


20 Wyoming and Idaho were the 43rd and 44th states admitted in July, 1890. The two added stars represent these two states.


22 Kane, Skyhooks, 102.