

## Iowa Folk Artists/Backyard Visionaries: Grassroots Art in the Midwest

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Remaining at Iowa, Hubbard found mentors at the university, but made his own path. He worked hard at his family life, just as at his job, reading to his five children at bedtime and then returning to his laboratory, remodeling family homes, and organizing automobile vacations. He strove to help and inform, lending the university's black fraternity his basement for meetings, speaking at "numerous little churches" in Iowa towns on "Race Relations Sundays," and becoming president of Iowa City's Kiwanis. Launched on a second career in academic administration in the midst of the 1960s, he took what came his way—"I merely developed plans, did my part, and expected others to do likewise" (126)—as he moved the university away from *in loco parentis*, forged ties with historically black colleges, and oversaw construction of the Iowa Center for the Arts.

That Hubbard accomplished so much is a tribute to his personal qualities and his priorities. Because of its detail, his memoir is a valuable account of race relations in the urban Midwest, of American academic life at mid-century, and of the University of Iowa. It supplements Stow Persons's more analytical *The University of Iowa in the Twentieth Century* (1990), which, like most of the academic leaders Persons chronicles, slights race in the university's history.

*Iowa Folk Artists*, by Jacqueline Andre Schmeal, photographs by Charles Brill. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1998. x, 126 pp. Illustrations, bibliography. \$24.95 cloth.

*Backyard Visionaries: Grassroots Art in the Midwest*, edited by Barbara Brackman and Cathy Dwigans. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998. xiv, 146 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$39.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY GREG OLSON, MISSOURI STATE ARCHIVES

Our tendency to use the term *folk art* to refer to anything from a traditional Amish quilt to a backyard grotto, coupled with our insistence on viewing nonacademic artists as bizarre outsiders, have helped to derail our understanding of the place these artists and their creations occupy in our society. The authors of two recent books examine the work of several folk, grassroots, and contemporary artists in an effort to better understand their social function and the nature of their inner visions.

Jacqueline Andre Schmeal's *Iowa Folk Artists* is a portrait of 16 artists whose work represents a cross section of contemporary and folk art. Schmeal includes two types of artist in her survey: those who are actively carrying on traditional folk arts, and those who use traditional

materials, such as clay, wood, and fiber, to express their own artistic visions. While Schmeal's essays, which are accompanied by Charles Brill's earthy black-and-white photographs, explore the working methods and artistic insights of her subjects, they also give us a glimpse of the everyday environments in which these artists work.

The contemporary artists featured in *Iowa Folk Artists* interpret the world around them through their work. Bob Anderson, whose ceramics include silo-shaped teapots with handles in the form of cows, strives to reflect the people and environment of Iowa. Pam Dyer Walters's whimsical wooden sculptures often mimic the personalities of her friends and neighbors. Donna Wood presents sanguine views of farm life in her hand-painted "primitive" scenes.

Many of the traditional folk artists included here, such as wood-carver Harley Refsal, tinsmith Bill Metz, and basket maker Joanna Schanz, reveal that their work satisfies a desire to remain connected with their heritage. For Amish quilt maker Susie Hostetler, traditional arts were handed down within the family. Clock maker Rodney Seitz, on the other hand, learned his craft from a master whose own children expressed little interest in carrying on the tradition. It is disappointing that Schmeal does not include traditional folk artists from Iowa's rich Hispanic, Asian, or African American communities in any of her essays.

Most of Schmeal's subjects touch on the theme of community. The artists who are perpetuating traditional folk arts see their labors as a way to hold onto a communal sense of the past, while the contemporary artists often rely on their communities for inspiration and economic support.

Unlike Schmeal, who does not attempt to categorize the various art forms and traditions she examines, the editors of *Backyard Visionaries* analyze a specific form of nonacademic art, one they call grassroots art. Barbara Brackman and Cathy Dwigans have assembled a collection of essays that study works of grassroots art in Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Nebraska in an attempt to define their shared characteristics and comprehend their social function.

Although historical parallels for grassroots art do exist, it rarely springs from a particular ethnic folk tradition. Instead, grassroots artists, who typically have no formal art training, manipulate nontraditional materials, such as bottles, concrete, wire, and hubcaps, to express their own deeply personal visions. In the book's opening essay, "Aesthetics and Grassroots Art," Carl Magnuson provides a useful exploration of grassroots art from a social perspective. While pointing out that grassroots artists often create environments that play off of their personalities, he warns against romanticizing these artists as shamans who exist

outside of society. They are, after all, "creative people who simply seek . . . to communicate to others" (6).

Two of the essays that follow explore well-known examples of grassroots art that have survived intact long after the death of their creators. Father P. M. Dobberstein's Grotto of the Redemption in West Bend, Iowa, and S. P. Dinsmoor's Garden of Eden in Lucas, Kansas, continue to attract thousands of visitors each year. Other works of grassroots art, however, are endangered and require restoration to ensure their survival. Collectors Dan Dryden and Don Christensen chronicle their preservation of Emery Blagdon's displaced "healing machines." Members of the Kansas Grassroots Art Association offer accounts of their work to restore Ed Galloway's concrete totem pole in Foyil, Oklahoma, and to find permanent homes for the sculptures of Ed Root and Inez Marshall. Besides contending with the physical challenges of restoration, these preservationists openly contemplate the ways their intervention has altered the artists' original intent.

Brackman and Dwigans's attempt to define grassroots art is helpful, but their effort to place this art in a social context is even more gratifying. Artists of all types bewilder us, especially those unorthodox practitioners whose visions are flamboyantly exhibited in suburban yards and along rural roadsides. In attempting to understand the way nonacademic artists live and create, both of these books help to demystify the artistic process by placing it in the sphere of everyday life.

*The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. v, 291 pp. Tables, appendixes, notes, index. \$27.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY PATRICIA MOONEY-MELVIN, LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

How does the public connect with and use the past? How different are the popular understanding and uses of the past from those of academic historians? The search for answers to questions such as these led Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen on a journey of exploration into the dynamics of popular history making. From an analysis of the results of a national survey on how Americans understand the past, Rosenzweig and Thelen found that while the past was important to Americans, history as defined and presented in textbooks and history classes was not. In addition, the authors discovered that racial and ethnic identification could shape the ways specific groups interacted with and interpreted the past.

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