Essay Review

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS AN AMERICAN?

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Grandma Moses and the Primitive Tradition, Bennington Museum, Bennington, Vermont, 11 June 2011–30 October 2011.

WHO counts as an American artist, and who does the counting? In the exhibition *Grandma Moses and the Primitive Tradition,* we learn how—in words, acts, and images—one painter, Anna Mary Robertson Moses (1860–1961), as well as her critics, dealers, and admirers regarded and responded to these then-pressing questions.

My interest in Moses originated in 1948, when *LIFE* magazine featured a story about her (25 October) soon after she celebrated her eighty-eighth birthday. This "little old lady is one of the best known and best paid painters in America," the piece declared. "Admirers make pilgrimages to see her." My art-attentive parents took note, and in time they wrote to ask the artist if we might visit her. Her positive response brought us to Eagle Bridge, New York, close to the Vermont border. A bright-eyed Moses welcomed us into her cozy white house that Thanksgiving weekend. It was filled with paintings, and when I gravitated toward a large, painted, wooden trunk, she told me that it stored her art secrets: the stencils she cut from stiff, old greeting cards. From this repository, she selected forms of men, women, and children, horses, dogs, and turkeys, tracing their contours to populate her wide-open landscape vistas.

My father proudly announced, "Diana is going to be an artist." The painter (not much taller than I, who was seven and a half at the time) turned to me and said, "Diana, if you make a picture for me, I will give you a painting of mine." To seal the pledge, she handed me an

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oil picturing her little white house, which glistened with snow she had rendered with white pigment mixed with sparkles. I wanted to BE her.

Fast forward ten years to 1958, when *The New York Times Magazine* published "Portrait of the Artist as an American," the yellowed clipping of which I recently found folded into one of the first of many art history books I have acquired over the years. In it, *New York Times* art critic Stuart Preston charted his vision of the New York art world I aspired to enter, illustrating it with a full-page photograph of Jackson Pollock, standing in his studio surrounded by huge cans of house paint. Though Preston struggled to define "the American artist," he specifically excluded the "marginal performers—housewives emulating Grandma Moses."[1]

Fast forward fifty-three more years. I had come to Bennington in spring 2011 carrying my Moses painting (the one she gave me in 1948) and one of mine, a Bennington House portrait, to lend to the museum's upcoming exhibition, brain child of curator Jamie Franklin. After Franklin and I passed objects and papers, we walked into the museum's Moses Gallery. At the entrance to its green-walled space hangs a portrait of Anna Moses by Lisel Salzer, who had painted the celebrity sitter in pinks, tans, and pearly grays, which she applied in thin, dilute layers. At the long gallery's far end, I glimpsed and heard a television show. Closer up, I recognized "See It Now," with Edward R. Murrow interviewing the painter, whom he addressed fifteen times as "Grandma."[2] Moses's oeuvres, with their bright, photogenic colors, were perfect for showcasing this first-ever *color* broadcast, which also followed the artist's hands at work. Elsewhere in the gallery, among many Moses paintings, were more scenes she had painted directly onto her wooden painting table, as well as other relics, like her spent metal paint tubes.

Later in 2011, I returned to see the exhibition *Grandma Moses and the Primitive Tradition,* installed in three more of the museum's eleven galleries. Because the museum owns the world's largest collection of the artist's publicly available art, the big exhibit could have been easily confined to its holdings; however, Franklin wisely chose to focus not simply on Moses but on the art that influenced her as

[1] Stuart Preston, *New York Times Magazine,* 27 April 1958, pp. 34–37.

[2] Taped July 1955, for "Two American Originals: Grandma Moses and Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong," aired 13 December 1955, text transcribed by Paul Lang, for the Moses Archive, Bennington Museum, Bennington, Vt.

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well as on her era's responses to her. He explained to me how the exhibit took shape: "I really started the research for the exhibit in 2009, [when] I saw our Moses-centric permanent gallery as *not* [my italics] providing our visitors with a full understanding of the reasons behind Moses' fame."[3] So Franklin decided to explore those two questions with which I began: Who counts as an American artist, and who does the counting?

Grandma Moses and the Primitive Tradition testifies to how extensively Anna Robertson Moses participated in the customary art practices of her time and place. To understand his subject, Franklin turned to biography: Who was this girl born Anna Mary Robertson in 1860, the year Lincoln was elected? What old graphic and visual forms did she absorb from her childhood? What novel images stimulated her visual interest? Where did she encounter paintings, and where did she observe the process of art making? The exhibit investigates such matters in two of its three segments: "Historic Roots"—which exemplifies the artistic culture available to a young girl in postbellum rural New England—and "Family Tradition"—which traces art making through generations and into our present age.

Anna's father, Russell King Robertson, painted landscapes, even covering the walls of his home in the manner of Rufus Porter. As juxtapositions suggest, Anna's early landscapes share elements of her father's work. Though not explicitly stated, the pattern of parental influence, which art historians long have identified in the lives of European painters, is evident here: female artists tend to learn their skills not from their mothers but from their artist-fathers.

Another source of inspiration for the young Anna were the decorated functional objects she encountered in her home. To represent the kinds of objects she may have seen and studied, Franklin located a painted, faux-grained, wooden shelf at an antique shop. Built into its base is a landscape painting, which the shelf above serves to frame. The decorative object, which hangs next to one of Anna's landscapes, bears a kinship of format and color and thus suggests the sources from which she drew her artistic vision. In another pairing in "Historic Roots," Anna's profile *Self Portrait* (c. 1933) is juxtaposed with a profile by artist Ruth Henshaw Miles Bascom (1772–1848). Both women began painting for the mere pleasure of it, and in time both came to be recognized and paid for their work. Again, Franklin makes no claim of direct influence; rather, with each pairing, he

[3]Jamie Franklin, e-mail to author, 3 October 2011.

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illustrates how throughout the nineteenth century countless people enjoyed outlining, cutting, and coloring profile portraits. Another example from the mid–1820s is from then-young Bostonian Thomas Gold Appleton, who wrote home that at his Connecticut River Valley boys' school, Round Hill, the students cut profiles of each other as a form of cheap yet "cultured" entertainment. "The rage up here is to make shades. & I have a considerable collection."[4]

In the section "Family Tradition," Franklin demonstrates how Moses, influenced by her father, went on to share her art skills with her siblings and her children, who in turn taught their own children. A cross-generational sampling of their works are on display. "Historical Roots" and "Family Tradition" thus coalesce into a single argument for how thoroughly art making is learned by observing and imitating. Moses and her nineteenth-century peers drew their visual models from what surrounded them: painted fire screens, ornamental painted shelves, wall paintings, pictorial needlework, and quilts. They were also heirs to a booming industry of pictorial printing, as exemplified in the exhibit by a Currier and Ives lithograph, but products of the wood engraver's art—illustrated books and printed advertising cards—also clearly contributed to Anna Robertson Moses's graphic vocabulary.

In the exhibit's third unit, "Modern Primitives," Franklin presents seventeen artists who, like Moses, have been labeled "primitive," among them John Kane, Joseph Pickett, and Israel Litwak. He then goes on to explore the role of dealers, collectors, and curators in establishing the artists' reputations.

Moses was effectively launched in 1938, when New York art collector Louis Caldor spotted a few of her works—oil paintings and wool-embroidered scenes—on display in a drugstore in Hoosick Falls, New York. Caldor bought the pieces and brought them to New York, expecting to excite the interest of dealers. For a year nothing happened. Then, in 1939, Caldor showed his Moses finds to newly arrived Austrian Jewish art dealer Otto Kallir, who was in the process of opening his New York Galerie St. Etienne.

Kallir was clever, and he was informed. He knew that Alfred Hamilton Barr Jr., director of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which had opened only a decade earlier (in November 1929), wanted to promote European modern art, stock with which Kallir had been

[4]Thomas Gold Appleton to Nathan Appleton, 1 January 1826, in possession of the author.

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familiar in Berlin and then Paris. With the onset of World War II, however, some dealers and collectors were beginning to shift their interest to primitives, including two men of influence at MoMA. Museum trustee Frank Crowninshield, Barr's mentor, admired John Kane (1860–1934); Sidney Janis, a member of MoMA's advisory board since 1934, collected Picasso, Matisse, Dali, Mondrian, and the "self-taught" French painter Henri Rousseau (1844–1910). In 1935, Janis displayed his personal collection, presumably including the primitive Rousseau, in the museum's members' (only) room. The next year, members viewed "Masters of Popular Painting," which featured twenty primitive works by John Kane. By that date, "members only" shows had taken on the character of insider trading. From 18 October until 18 November 1939, this select group of members and invited guests were introduced to the art of Grandma Moses in a display of "Contemporary Unknown American Paintings." No wonder that, in 1940, Kallir was keen to present the American Moses at his Galerie St. Etienne in her first one-woman show.

The painters Franklin displayed in the "Modern Primitives" were each a favorite of a particular dealer or curator. Holger Cahill, director of the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration, admired the art of primitive Joseph Pickett (1848–1918). Cahill, who had only recently met Barr, served as MoMA's acting director in 1932, when he curated *American Folk Art: Art of the Common Man, 1750–1900.*[5] Pickett's work hung in several MoMA shows.[6] John I. H. Baur, curator of the Brooklyn Museum, offered advice and exhibit space to primitives Morris Hirschfield (1872–1946) and Israel Litwak (1868–1960). In each case, were it not for the encouragement and promotion by a particular curator, dealer, or collector, the painters would have remained obscure. In 1942, Sidney Janis gave a colossal boost to the primitives with his book *They Taught Themselves,* which lent the thirty artists treated a verbal, intellectual, even psychoanalytic validity. Having settled on the misnomer "self-taught," he admitted that each artist was skilled in a craft: milliner, suit manufacturer, house painter, sign painter, cabinetmaker, etc. In Moses's case, she is listed as "farm wife." In Janis's book the primitives are workers whose products he would elevate to the status of art so that

[5]See Holger Cahill, s.v., Dictionary of Art Historians, at www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/cahillh.htm; accessed 7 December 2011.

[6]Sidney Janis, *They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Dial Press, 1942), p 113. Barr wrote the book's foreword.

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they might appeal to an art-buying public. With seductive, highfalutin, even Freudian vocabulary, he conveyed without ambiguity the primitives' place in the collections of New York's cognoscenti.

"The rest is part history, and part hysteria," as Peter Schjeldahl wrote in *The New Yorker.* The elderly woman's art became a "runaway marketing phenomenon" that, according to Schjeldahl, "helped Hallmark cards sell 16 million greeting cards in 1947 alone." The marketing of Moses capitalized on a false intimacy—"*Grandma*"—and was sustained by a curious designation, "American Primitive." She was heralded as "self-taught," a term Schjeldahl rightly calls "sterile," a marker "educated classes like to use to protect the culture of credentials."[7] Even as late as the nineteenth century, "real art" was still being associated with Europe. Therefore, art produced in the American hinterland—whether sculpture, portraits, and landscapes or tools, weathervanes, and furniture—was exempt from consideration. I suspect the twentieth-century marketing of "Grandma Moses" may have still been ensnared in such old habits of thought—but with an interesting, new twist.

During World War II, dealers sought to create an alternative to the often ugly complexities of dealing in art in war-torn Europe. Those who had emigrated from Europe were trying to establish new markets at the same time as Americans were trying to regain their balance following the Great Depression. "American-born primitive artist" was a new classification, free of corrupting European influences; it valued work, innocence, and indigenous influences. Here was freshness, perhaps even wildness, what Janis called "entrepreneurship and courage."[8]

Anna Moses, Joseph Pickett, John Kane, Morris Hirschfield, and others stood in marked (and market) contrast to "Jack the dripper," as Preston called Pollock. Some dealers, like Sidney Janis, profited handsomely by straddling both worlds, promoting and selling "high art" as well as American primitives, but generally art purveyors and art consumers planted their feet firmly in one camp or the other.

In the "Modern Primitives," Franklin makes it clear that Moses considered the art market's classifications to be both irrelevant and foolish. In essence, dealers lifted Moses out of her landscape and "collaged" her art onto New York's crowded art scene. Being labeled primitives brought some painters a flash of success, but Moses's

[7]Peter Schjeldahl, "The Original," *New Yorker,* 28 May 2001, p. 136.

[8]Janis, *They Taught Themselves,* p. 8.

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art has endured. Perhaps as a centenarian, she embodied post-war American dreams of longevity, creativity, and even posthumous fame. I agree with Schjeldahl, who commented in reevaluating Moses's art a decade ago, that her work is "never rote, her choices emit a constant mild bliss of invention"; her art is "always engaging, sometimes marvelous, and—as good as new."[9]

Grandma Moses and the Primitive Tradition allowed the viewer not only to glimpse the rightness of Schjeldahl's judgment but also to see Moses as both a player in and pawn of the new and burgeoning twentieth-century American art market. Moses is generative (indeed, having given paintings to many individuals, generous), whereas the art business in which she became implicated traded in illusions of scarcity, that is, rarity. This exhibit and our growing distance from the twentieth century art world allow us to view not *Grandma Mos*es but Anna Mary Robertson Moses, the influences on her and from her on others. Freed from the art market's dictates about which artists "count," I felt released to savor the sprightly painter who, with her few-haired paint brush, moved mountains.

[9] Schjeldahl, "The Original," p. 136.

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