INGRAINED IMAGES & OUTSIDE INFLUENCES:

Recent and Current Family Art Traditions in Appalachian Kentucky

Highly expressive or imaginative works by academically untrained artists currently occupy a kind of critical no-man's land that has remained in dispute since the 1970s. In Kentucky, most interested curators, critics, and other commentators appear to be comfortable using the term "folk art" to describe such art. But because these works rarely fit the textbook criteria for identifying folk art, many folklorists and other experts disavow that characterization. Meanwhile, the even more problematical term "outsider art" enjoys increasing currency among this art's enthusiasts, particularly those drawn to the romantic ideal of the isolated artist working without official permission and outside the so-called mainstream of art and society.

All such specialized terms presume a necessity to distinguish this art from what is commonly called contemporary fine art. But the rationale for such compartmentalization looks more and more suspect in an art world that no longer revolves around the old Eurocentric-academic value system in which these designations are based. The notion that art schools and art museums as we've come to know them constitute a "mainstream" within contemporary culture is a quaint anachronism. If there is a current mainstream, it is a vast, multicultural and multitraditional river, surely broad enough to encompass the likes of Kentucky artists Minnie Black, Tim Lewis, Donny Tolson, and others whose art is under consideration here.

To be sure, many aspects of their work and that of others who share their independence from academia are firmly rooted in longstanding folk traditions of

Southern Appalachia and of their local communities. Artists Charley and Noah Kinney, for example, were widely recognized for their skilled and spirited renditions of old-time mountain tunes on fiddle and guitar respectively, and many of their sculptures and drawings depict aspects of traditional Appalachian life with origins predating the twentieth century. But there was apparently no precedent in their families or communities for their visual-art activities. Minnie Adkins began carving wood as a child growing up in a part of Kentucky where woodcarving skills were common among the male population, but she taught herself the craft and only began seriously working at it in the late 1980s. The late Edgar Tolson took up woodcarving on his own after being disabled by a stroke he suffered in the late 1950s. His son Donny Tolson and nephew Ernest Patton, who lived nearby, followed in his footsteps and continue to work in styles which, however distinctive, are clearly derived from the elder Tolson's.

These artists and others from similarly non-academic backgrounds are sometimes described as being "unaffected by outside influences," and while such language bolsters the myth of the outsider, it doesn't square with the evidence. The late twentieth century's ultimate outside influence is, of course, television, and this pervasive medium has touched the life of every artist under discussion here except, possibly, the Kinneys. In addition to experiencing the impact of newspapers, books, magazines, popular music, movies, and most recently videotapes and computers, most of the artists represented here have grown accustomed to receiving frequent visitors from all over the country and beyond, providing them with still more outside influences. Their work offers ample evidence of the enlivening impact that such influences have exerted on the artists and their work.

The work of these and other Kentucky artists working in related veins have been exhibited together and discussed in print on a number of occasions since 1975, when a landmark survey show titled “Folk Art of Kentucky” was presented in Lexington at the University of Kentucky Fine Arts Gallery. A consideration of Kentucky families in which more than one member is an artist serves to further highlight some of the previously cited problems of definitition and cultural inflluence.

*

Sitting on his sister’s back porch near Campton one late spring afternoon in 1994, Donny Tolson (b. 1958) patiently shaves microscopic slivers from the work-in-progress he holds in his lap--a poplar log carved in the image of the biblical Eve, a favorite subject, with the serpent, the agent of her temptation, wrapped around her body and peerin over her left shoulder. Reflecting on his decision to take up woodcarving at the outset of the 1980s, when he was twenty-one, he recalls an exchange that he and his father had at the time: “After I told Daddy I was going to try it, he said, ‘There’ve been people all over the world who tried to duplicate my carvings, and nobody’s ever been able to do it.’ And I told him, ‘I ain’t going to duplicate yours; I’m going to make something of my own.’” (Note: All artists’ quotations herein are from the author’s in-person and telephone interviews with the artists in June 1994.)

This declaration of artistic independence was premature at best, as the younger Tolson’s first work was a stark Garden-of-Eden tableau that was overtly derivative of his father’s art in both form and content. Mounted on a flat base, the figures were stiffly posed and unpainted, with wide, staring eyes. But from the beginning, and increasingly as he progressed and began to develop more of his own style, Donny’s work was more

detailed, polished, and refined than his dad's. And while Edgar's repertoire of figures was mainly limited to blblical characters and common people, Donny's has grown far broader, encompassing historical figures like Daniel Boone, as well as various pop-culture icons, including rock singer Bob Seger, University of Kentucky basketball player Kenny Walker, and (his largest piece to date) Colonel Harland Sanders, who founded the Kentucky Fried Chicken fast-food restaurant chain.

Ernest Patton (b. 1935) began carving in the mid-1960s, by his recollection, when he was in his late twenties. His first piece was a small rooster that he carved from a hunk of cedar. After he saw his uncle Edgar Tolson carving a small effigy of an ox one day in the early 1970s, he followed suit, producing a small ox and several other animal forms on a similar scale. Soon he moved on to carve human figures, biblical scenes similar to those in Edgar Tolson's work, and, eventually, a series of human-animal hybrids based on stories of mythological beings. While Tolson's influence remains evident in his art, Patton has developed his own distinctive style of figuration. Characteristic examples include his carved and painted devil figurines, which expand on his earlier variations on mythological creatures and on Donny Tolson's renderings of Satan. Typical of Patton's approach to the subject is a piece that takes the form of a coal-black, winged satyr with huge yellow and green eyes, a prominently exposed penis, an upturned, s-shaped tail, and a pair of sharp-pointed white horns that match his fangs. In his right hand this fiendish creature grasps the handle of a long, blood-red-tipped sword, while his left arm is extended as if he's about to shake your hand and welcome you to Hell. This sculpture looks far more menacing than the younger Tolson's smaller and usually unpainted counterparts.

Aside from the Campton area, where the Tolson and Patton families live, Kentucky's most important center of contemporary woodcarving is Isonville, in Elliott County, home to at least seven significant practicioners. The key figure among them is Minnie Adkins (b. 1934), whose example and encouragement have helped spark a small artistic renaissance in her community. Adkins' focused pursuit of woodcarving after 1985 was, for her, a matter of practical necessity stemming from the fact that she and her husband Garland had fallen on hard economic times. The impetus for her return to this former childhood pursuit was a chance visit she and Garland made to a gallery that art dealer Adrian Swain operated in nearby Morehead, the seat of Rowan County. There she saw a number of wood sculptures and other pieces by Noah Kinney, Carl McKenzie, Mack Hodge, Minnie Black, and others. Inspired by their examples and her discovery that a market existed for such things, she went home, sharpened her carving knife, and set to work. Husband Garland (b. 1928), a heavy-equipment operator and construction worker who was then unemployed, soon joined her in this activity, taking a few pointers from her and quickly finding his own style.

The Adkinses were quick to develop a sharp, self-critical eye, and from the outset they have continually sought to refine their creative skills and improve the quality of their work. "I'm embarrassed to look at them old things we made," Garland says of their early work. Minnie counters that she remains proud of their early pieces, but she acknowledges, "The work's gotten a lot better-looking since we started. We use better paint, better wood, and we've learned how to shape the pieces a whole lot better than we used to. Now we can make animals that look like they're walking instead of just standing straight-legged."

Both Minnie and Garland are adept at carving, but she generally does the job of painting their finished carvings. The bird and animal figures are lively and animated, with cartoonishly exaggerated features--sleek red foxes with elongated sharp noses, for example, and black bears on all fours with mouths frozen in absurdly big smiles that bare rows of huge, pointy teeth. In the years since they began their exceptional little cottage industry, they have not only improved their techniques but also expanded their repertoire substantially to include portrait sculptures, compositionally sophisticated biblical tableaux, and, most recently, pieces that incorporate found objects. Among the latter are the dot-patterned smiley-face deer antler trophies Minnie produces whenever she finds a set of antlers. She has made tentative forays into quilting, and she recently acquired a computer, whose potential as a creative tool she is presently exploring. She deviates further from the stereotype of the isolated outsider in her activities as a collector of works by her peers. Far from being disinterested in and unaffected by what other artists are doing, she owns and strongly appreciates pieces by Georgia's Howard Finster, Gerald C. "Creative" DePrie of West Virginia, and fellow Kentuckians Minnie Black, Noah Kinney, Carl McKenzie, among other artists.

Minnie Adkins has also played a vital role in supporting and promoting the work of other artists in her community and farther afield. Hardly more than hollering distance from her and Garland's Peaceful Valley Farm live other gifted artists who all acknowledge her as an inspiration and guiding force. Among them are members of the Lewis family--brothers Tim and Leroy and their cousin Erma "Junior" Lewis--and the Barkers, Linvel and his wife Lillian.

In discussing how he came by his ability to carve, Linvel Barker (b. 1929) reminisces, “When I was growing up, just about everybody could whittle things. My daddy made his own axe handles, but that was just something everybody did in those days, and I learned how to do it too, just by making things.” But he says that he didn’t begin carving in earnest, and in the distinctive style that characterizes his work, until after he retired from a thirty-year career as a boilermaker in an East Chicago steel mill . Encouraged by Minnie Adkins as well as by his wife Lillian, he began carving effigies of chickens in 1985, two years after he retired, and soon branched out to carve other animals, including dogs, cats, horses, and cows.

Barker’s animal figurines look nothing like those of the Adkinses or any other present-day representational wood sculptors. Streamlined, vertically elongated, and unpainted except for their dark eyes, they call to mind the more abstract forms of Constantin Brancusi. Nearly a decade of crafting such pieces has given Barker a new and sharpened perception of the world. “I had been around animals all my life on farms and in zoos,” he explains, “but when I went to make one out of wood, I found out I didn’t really know what they looked like, because I’d never really looked at one. So I started looking for details more in anything I looked at, and I found out that after you do that for a while, you see more beauty in nature, or in anything--the smallest thing, like just a leaf. You know, we go through this life, and some of us never even see where we are or what we’re looking at.”

Lillian Barker (b. 1930) paints the eyes on her husband’s carvings, and she also makes her own paintings, which illustrate scenes from the Bible. Her painting *Jacob’s Dream*, depicting a group of angels on a ladder in an idyllic landscape, is somewhat

reminiscent of Marc Chagall's more fanciful work as well as the memory paintings of Anna Mary Robertson "Grandma" Moses, Mattie Lou O'Kelley, and her fellow Kentuckians Jessie Cooper, W.R. Mays, and Betty Wallen.

The varied sculptural works that Leroy, Tim, and "Junior" Lewis produce are generally more detailed and otherwise far more elaborate than Linvel Barker's elegantly stylized pieces. Like their grandfathers and their fathers, Leroy Lewis (b. 1949) makes handcrafted furniture, most notably his trademark chairs with split-bark seats and pairs of in-the-round heads carved on the back-support posts. Placed so they stare over the shoulders of anyone seated in the chair, these heads are like sentinels, symbolic guardian spirits typically carved to resemble American Indians wearing traditional hairstyles and headgear. Leroy has produced a number of variations on this motif, including carefully painted sculptures of standing Indians. Leroy says these weren't inspired by the old cigar-store-Indian commercial displays but simply embody the great respect with which he regards Native Americans.

When he began carving wood in the late 1980s, Leroy was the first member of the Lewis family to pursue this creative activity, and at the time he wasn't aware of the art that Minnie and Garland Adkins had recently begun making nearby. In addition to his chairs and his straightforward American Indian portraits, Leroy has carved a number of horses and bears, several variations on a portrait of a woman wearing a long dress, and a less modest, bare-breasted *Desert Storm Girl* wearing camouflage-patterned boots and a U.S. flag bikini bottom.

Leroy's cousin Erma "Junior" Lewis (b. 1948) started working with wood as a youngster enlisted to help his father in the crafting of handmade chairs, but he didn't

start carving until the late 1980s, after Minnie Adkins suggested he try it. Since then he has carved canes, totem poles, small boats, and tableaux based on nursery rhymes and biblical scenes. But he is primarily known for his signature bleeding-devil heads, outrageously gory pieces distinguished by their horns, sharp fangs, and predominantly black and white paint scheme, with additional rivulets of brilliant red strategically applied to suggest blood streaming from every orifice. These works developed from a simpler and far less startling masklike carving that he made early on, an unpainted visage with neither horns nor fangs. His story of how that development took place exemplifies the impact that market forces can have on the work of self-taught artists. When he took the earlier, far less gruesome head to the folk art sales gallery at Morehead State University, in hopes of selling it there, he recalls, “They said for me to paint it and make it look evil. So I took it home and painted it like that, put the horns and sharp teeth on it, and brought it back, and they sold it. So I’ve been making it like that ever since.”

Tim Lewis (b. 1952) is the family member who has most recently ventured into the art arena, and he has quickly established himself as the most versatile and prolific artist among them. He startd carving and painting wooden canes in 1988, and about a year later took up the more difficult medium of stone. His rich imagination and creative ingenuity are evident enough in his canes, such as his tribute to the space shuttle Endeavor, with its handle carved to represent the shuttle itself and a shaft painted with yellow stars against a black night-sky background. But his most impressive works are the stone sculptures, which range from relatively simple forms such as a mermaid, a human skull, and various animals, to far more complex works such as *Ezekiel’s Vision*. The four heads across the top of this stele-like piece are vaguely reminiscent of those

on figures by the late African American stonecarver William Edmondson, while Lewis' handling of the wings on the backs and sides recalls the carved renderings of plumage on the feathered-serpent effigies prominent among some of the preColumbian ruins of Mexico and Central America.

Another Kentucky carver whose first piece was a cane is Lonnie Money (b. 1949), who lives with his wife Twyla (b. 1952) on their farm near East Bernstadt. Other than a ball-topped cane he carved as a child for his grandfather, Money's first pieces were small carved animals he made for his own amusement during the 1970s. In the early '80s he did piecework for the crafts-marketing program at nearby Berea College, cutting and carving out the basic forms of animal figurines on which other craftsmen did the finishing work. Then in 1986 he met art dealer Larry Hackley at a crafts fair, and Hackley encouraged him to try creating pieces based on his own designs. Money took the advice, devising distinctive patterns for the figurines of chickens, roosters and other birds and animals he began to carve and paint during the late '80s. A few years later, around 1990, he expanded his one-man cottage industry by letting Twyla take over most of the painting responsibilities.

In a related vein but more varied in their subject matter are the wood sculptures of Calvin Cooper (b. 1921), whose earliest woodworking experience consisted of making willow-twig furniture for his family during the Depression. Similarly early on he began making silhouette cutouts from scrap wood using a handsaw and patterns he copied from how-to books. Years later, when he retired in 1986, he set out to earn a small income selling such pieces. "It's what I call 'craft'--little painted cutouts of ducks, flowers, and things like that," he said of them. For a while he sold these pieces through

a co-operative near Prestonsburg, but the prices he received were hardly worth the time he spent turning them out. Then a collector who met Cooper offered a suggestion: “He said if I carved this stuff a little bit, it would bring real money instead of just pennies.” Adapting techniques he had used to make twig furniture, Cooper began gathering small maple and dogwood trunks and branches sprouting multiple limbs, which he cut up and transformed into the torsos, legs, wings, and heads of chicken and rooster figurines. Soon he branched out to make other lively bird and animal forms and portray various human figures, including oridinary people, biblical figures such as Adam and Eve, and historically significant individuals like Abraham Lincoln.

About the same time Calvin Cooper began his woodcarving activities, his younger brother Ronald (b. 1931) was also making his first attempts at creating art, just a few miles away at his home in Flemingsburg. But Ronald’s motivation was directly related to his recovery from a 1984 car accident that crushed his legs and disabled him for more than three years. Ronald’s wife Jessie (b. 1932) had drawn and painted for her own pleasure since her childhood in the 1930s, and Ronald made miniature furniture as a hobby when he was in his twenties, but it was only during his recovery from the accident that they both began to create art in a more serious, concentrated manner. Jessie started painting scenes from the Bible, her own life, and her dreams in a narrative memory-painting style, initially on canvasboard, while Ronald’s first works were bandsaw cutouts that Jessie painted--the kinds of pieces his brother refers to as craft. Like Calvin, Ronald and Jessie sold these early pieces through the co-op near Prestonsburg. There a few of Jessie’s works were purchased for Morehead State

University's folk art collection and sales gallery (now the Kentucky Folk Art Center), which soon began to offer pieces for sale by both Jessie and Ronald.

The Coopers' association with the gallery exposed them to the work of other self-taught and traditionally based artists in nearby communities, and it also showed them that a thriving market existed for handmade expressions of their own personal experience and religious views. Ronald's work in particular began to evolve in surprisingly inventive ways at this point. Around 1988 he began an aesthetic descent into hell that has kept him occupied ever since, producing the first in an ongoing series of intense tableaux that depict his vision of eternal damnation and infernal torment. Often these are painted and constructed on the exterior and interior surfaces of functional objects such as wooden boxes, kerosene heaters, or articles of furniture--a technique that both artists discovered around 1990. Ronald blieves that "Hell is just as real as Heaven," and in explaining his artistic strategy he says, "My work has a lot of humor to it, but most everything I make also has a serious message to it that might help somebody who's not living right." He uses plenty of violent, startling imagery, he explains, because "if you don't get people's attention first, you're not going to be able to get your message across."

While Ronald's work is mostly fire and brimstone, Jessie's is sweetness and light. She has continued to paint nostalgic memories from her childhood, scenes depicting her notion of what heaven looks like and other usually comforting images, most often on a miniature scale. Like Ronald's newer pieces, her recent paintings often incorporate texts, and most are painted on old furniture, animal skulls, and other unconventional surfaces. Sometimes the two work together on a single piece that plays off the sharp

contast between their respective styles and favored subjects. Between the two of them, they have produced an extraordinary body of work that forcefully conveys their views on the value and meaning of life.

The latest members of this eastern Kentucky family to begin making art are the Coopers' son Tim (b. 1957) and his wife Ruthie (b. 1967), who also live in Flemingsburg. Since 1990 Tim has created a variety of wood sculptures in the form of angels, various animals and insects, long-haired motorcyclists, and pop-culture figures including Elizabeth Taylor, Cindy Crawford, Madonna, Michael Jordan, Dwight Yoakum, and others. About two years ago Ruthie started making figural assemblages from animal bones. In only a few years these two young artists have produced convincing evident of their emerging talent.

Representing an earlier generation of Kentucky folk artists are the Kinney brothers, Charley (1906-1991) and Noah (1912-1992), whose recorded music and surviving artworks provide vivid testimony to their multiple talents, generous spirits, and long, experientially rich lives together on the family farm in Lewis County. Both brothers began drawing as children and made art in one form or another for virtually their entire lives. Charley's early artistic activities were motivated in part by the fact that a birth-defect had left him unable to perform hard manual labor. Art, crafts, music, and sleight-of-hand tricks provided him with varied ways of earning extra income while other family members handled the more physically demanding farm work. A skilled basketmaker, he also taught himself to sculpt with clay while he was still relatively young, and for a number of years beginning in the 1940s his oven-fired clay figurines were sold to tourists in Kentucky state parks. He painted autobiographically based narrative scenes

in a rawly expressionistic style, and he created a whole family of slapdash string-puppets, roughly half life-size, with movable joints and bodies patched together from scrap wood and cardboard, wire, cornsilk, and old socks and underwear, among other scavenged materials. Using an ingeniously jerry-rigged contraption powered by a foot-pedal, he could make these amazingly animated rag-bag characters dance while he played fiddle, Noah played guitar, and Noah's wife Hazel assisted. Those who knew the Kinney brothers report that they would entertain visitors with such performances for hours on end. (Note: Information on the Kinneys is drawn from *Kentucky Spirit: The Native Tradition*, Owensboro Museum of Fine Art, 1991; *Local Visions: Folk Art from Northeast Kentucky*, Morehead State University, 1992; *Remembrances: Recent Memory Art by Kentucky Folk Artists*, Kentucky Art and Craft Foundation, 1986; and discussions with Hazel Kinney on June 9, 1994, and folk-art dealer Larry Hackley on June 9 and 10, 1994.)

Although he had always enjoyed drawing and regularly found time to play music with his older brother, Noah Kinney only began regularly making art in the 1970s when ill health curtailed his farming activities. Despite failing eyesight and painful arthritis, he spent much of his time during his final twenty years sculpting a variety of human and animal figures from wood and other materials. His arthritis rendered him unable to carve in the traditional Appalachian style, using a pocketknife, so he devised his own technique, shaping his pieces with a coping saw and augmenting them with wood putty before painting them in typically bright colors.

Neither of the Kinneys had any children, and Charley never married, but Noah is survived by his much younger widow Hazel (b. 1929), who now lives in Flemingsburg and continues to produce small, simple drawings of animals and biblical scenes.

Born earlier than Charley Kinney or even Edgar Tolson, and still in remarkably good health and spirits at ninety-five, is Minnie Black (b. 1899), whose fairly unconventional medium is gourd sculpture. Black made her first gourd sculptures in the late 1960s. Her working method has evolved and grown more sophisticated over the years, but it has continued to involve further articulating the forms she perceives in the gourds' natural shapes by augmenting them with malleable molding materials and objects including doll's eyes, fabric scraps, and pieces cut from smaller gourds. The early pieces represented birds, lizards, and other small animals, but as she gained more control over her materials she grew more ambitious and began creating larger works whose subjects were more challenging. After creating her first gourd portrait--of her sister Myrtle--she went on to portray herself in several variations and several of her other acquaintances, as well as pop-culture figures such as Mickey Mouse and Elvis Presley. More recently she has created gourd caricatures of former U.S. Vice President Dan Quayle (as a quail) and President George Bush (as a bush). She also makes fanciful bug-eyed monsters, dinosaurs, and other creatures of her continually active imagination. Examples of her lively and varied work are displayed throughout the small stone bungalow that her late husband built for them to live in almost fifty years ago. Also on display are a few pieces by Black's daughter Ruth Mitchell (b. 1927), who uses gourds as the raw materials for another kind of art form. Mitchell lives in Henderson, Kentucky, and she uses woodburning tools and felt-tip pens to elaborate on the blotchy

mold-stain markings found on the surfaces of dried gourds. She transforms these irregularly shaped stains into contorted faces and idiosyncratic figures that constitute a kind of free-form surrealism.

The sign on the whitewashed facade of the boxy concrete-block building next to Black's house reads "Minnie's Gourd Craft Museum." Floor-to-ceiling shelves in its main room serve as display racks for dozens of her quirky lizards, dinosaurs, and other gourd critters, while elsewhere in the room are a few of her biblical tableaux, a couple of her caveman figures, her rendition of an albino gorilla, and a baseball-size replica of President Dwight Eisenhower's head on a trophy-style plaque, among other surprising artworks and artifacts, including several exceptionally long-handled gourds that haven't been artistically modified. The museum also contains Black's collection of musical instruments made from gourds, several of which are her own inventions. She has even organized a group of friends in her community to form a musical group to play these instruments together--an outfit she likes to call the world's only all-gourd senior citizens' band. Her collection also features some instruments she made but didn't invent, and these are in some ways the most surprising things to be found in this little building full of surprises. For example, there's Black's berimbau, a traditional Brazilian percussion instrument resembling a wire-strung archery bow with a decorated gourd attached to it, serving as its sound chamber. Also on display are her gourd *cuica*--another percussion instrument from Brazil--and a West African *djembe*, along with two or three other variations on traditional African drums painted in rainbow-colored geometric designs. In explaining the presence of these exotic items, Black recalls that in the late 1970s she was visited by Bale McKnight, an African American percussionist and musicologist who

was then living in Louisville and seeking special gourds to use in making his own drums. They became friends, she gave him some gourds, and he showed her how to make the traditional Third-World instruments now on display in her museum. This nonagenarian Appalachian white lady's international, multicultural assembly of beautifully crafted musical instruments stands as a fitting object-lesson for those who might be inclined to think of her as an outsider disconnected from the rest of the world.

Despite her advanced age, Minnie Black remains highly open to the outside influences she happens to encounter. At the same time, she has maintained a singularity of vision that makes her work--most of it at least--instantly recognizable. She has incessantly experimented with new forms and tecniques, meanwhile sharing information and ideas with an ever-expanding network of fellow artists, collectors and others who have been drawn to her little corner of the world. She is an amazing exponent of a generation that is almost gone, but--more to the point, for current purposes--she is a uniquely important contemporary artist.

Most of the other artists discussed here work in styles and mediums that are more directly rooted in local and regional tradition. But they, too, maintain a spirit of openness to the larger world of art and culture stretching far beyond the Southern Appalachians, and their work reflects that spirit as much as it does the artists' family and community values. Although it comes from rural locales, it is decidedly cosmopolitan and contemporary.

Originally published in slightly different form in Generations of Kentucky*, the catalog for a traveling exhibition organized by the Kentucky Art and Craft Foundation, 1995.*