



Fig. 1: *Mrs. John D. Rockefeller Jr.* (1874–1948), by Robert Brackman (1898–1980), 1941. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

A Premier Folk Art Museum Celebrates Fifty Years and a New Home

by Carolyn J. Weekley

This year the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum in Colonial Williamsburg celebrates its fiftieth anniversary and its new home. Relocated two blocks from its previous address, the building is adjacent to the DeWitt Wallace Museum on Francis Street. The new space showcases both the museum's premier collection founded by Mrs. John D. Rockefeller Jr. and the many pieces added since the museum opened in 1957.

Mrs. Rockefeller began collecting folk art in the late 1920s (Fig. 1), when few people considered the work of untrained painters, carvers, and other trades people as anything other than quaint, curious, or perhaps of some historical interest. Her awareness of the innate artistic skills of folk artists provided fresh insight into the American past that Mrs. Rockefeller enthusiastically pursued. Her interest in folk art was also a direct result of her appreciation of contemporary art. A founder and active supporter of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), her search for works by modernists led her in 1928 to Edith Gregor Halpert (Fig. 2). Halpert not only represented

Fig. 2: Edith Gregor Halpert (1900–1970) in front of a Charles Sheeler painting. She is wearing a dress made of fabric designed by Sheeler. Photograph by Charles Sheeler, detail. Courtesy of the Downtown Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



new artists and appreciated the contemporary look of folk art, but also sold nineteenth-century folk art and weather vanes in her Downtown Gallery in Greenwich Village, New York.

Mrs. Rockefeller was undoubtedly drawn to the abstract and often colorful qualities of folk art, which she most likely considered important background for her collection of modern American art. It was the aesthetic content of these objects that fascinated her and a small number of collectors, museum scholars, and modern artists who admired the material. Other pioneer collectors of folk art included Clara Endicott Sears of Harvard, Massachusetts, who published the first book on “primitive” New England portraits; Isabel Carleton Wilde, a Boston dealer; and the modern artists Elie Nadelman, Charles Sheeler, and Robert Laurent. A view of Laurent’s home (Fig. 3) shows some of the folk art he owned. Mrs. Rockefeller later acquired the image of the *Dover Baby* that Laurent included in his painting (Fig. 4). Mrs. Rockefeller bought some of the best pieces from the Wilde and Nadelman collections in the early 1930s (Fig. 5).

Assisted by Halpert and a small number of other dealers, Mrs. Rockefeller acquired over 400 folk paintings and sculptures during the late 1920s and 1930s. Among her earliest purchases were *Child with Dog* (Fig. 5) and *Baby in Red Chair* (Fig. 6), both acquired from Halpert in 1931; her last acquisitions included the portraits of John and Ruth Stanley Mix (see Hurst, page 229).

Newark Museum curator Holger Cahill¹ was the first museum professional to recognize the importance of Mrs. Rockefeller’s collection. In 1930 and 1931 she loaned anonymously a selection of folk paintings and sculptures for two exhibitions Cahill



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Fig. 3: *Making Music*, by Bernard Karfiol (1886–1952), probably Ogunquit, Maine, circa 1920. Oil on canvas, 39¾ x 47½ inches. Photograph courtesy of a private collector.

Fig. 4: *Dover Baby*, unidentified artist, probably New Jersey, circa 1815. Oil on canvas, 26 x 21 inches. Courtesy of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum.



organized. These seminal shows were among the first to discuss the aesthetic concepts so important to establishing public understanding and appreciation of the material.

In 1932, MOMA, where Cahill was serving as acting director, organized the first comprehensive exhibition of Mrs. Rockefeller's collection (Fig. 7). *American Folk—The Art of the Common Man, 1750–1890*, curated by Cahill and assisted by Dorothy Miller and Elinor Robinson, was accompanied by a catalogue in which Cahill explored the definitions and contextual origins of folk art. The exhibit traveled to six museums across the country, including the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Mrs. Rockefeller's hometown, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. A landmark show for American folk art it accomplished exactly what Mrs. Rockefeller wanted for her collection and what became the mission of the museum bearing her name—to foster a greater understanding and appreciation for

American folk art and its artists.

Few visitors to the exhibition realized that, with the exception of one carving loaned by Cahill, the unidentified lender-collector was Mrs. Rockefeller, although her name soon became associated with the collection. By 1934 Mrs. Rockefeller had agreed to loan a principal part (about 250 objects) of the collection to Colonial Williamsburg for exhibition in the restored Ludwell-Paradise House on Duke of Gloucester Street (Fig. 8). She had toured the house with her husband, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. who was deeply involved in the restoration of buildings in the historic Virginia town. The house had been purchased for the Williamsburg Restoration in 1926.² The folk art collection was on view there from 1935 to 1955.

Cahill and Halpert were engaged to help with the exhibition in Williamsburg. While Cahill supervised the packing of pieces in New York in November 1934, Mrs. Rockefeller continued to buy, and sometimes substituted

newly acquired and better quality examples for those slated for Williamsburg. Cahill also was engaged to prepare a reference manual for the costumed hostesses, who would provide visitors with information about folk art and the objects on view.

When the Ludwell-Paradise House exhibits opened in March 1935, public response was immediate and there was considerable local and national press coverage. Julia Sully of Richmond's *News Leader* commented that "as a record of the social life of the American

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Fig. 5: *Child with Dog*, unidentified artist, circa 1770–1790. Oil on canvas, 24 x 15 inches. Found in Massachusetts by Isabel Carleton Wilde and purchased by Mrs. Rockefeller from Edith Gregor Halpert, Downtown Gallery, NYC, in 1931. Courtesy of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum.

Fig. 6: *Baby in Red Chair*, unidentified artist, possibly Pennsylvania, circa 1810–1830. Oil on canvas, 22 x 15 inches. Purchased by Mrs. Rockefeller from Edith Gregor Halpert in 1931. Courtesy of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum.



Fig. 7: A view of *The Art of the Common Man in America* exhibition while at the Pennsylvania Museum of Art (now the Philadelphia Museum of Art), Philadelphia, Pa. 1933. Courtesy of the Rockefeller Archive Center, NY.

people, it is quite as important as the most conspicuous achievements of the restoration of the ancient capital [Williamsburg].”

The popularity of the exhibit and Mrs. Rockefeller’s wish to keep the objects together led to her decision in 1939 to give this portion of her collection to Williamsburg. Halpert was again enlisted to assist with research and reinstallation; she also prepared a catalogue of the collection published in 1940. Although she made few folk art purchases after 1940, Mrs. Rockefeller’s interest in the collection and its Williamsburg exhibits continued until her death in 1948.

She also furnished Bassett Hall, the Rockefellers’ Williamsburg home (Fig. 9) with a variety of folk art pieces—chiefly chalk ware, weather vanes, children’s portraits, theorems, and memorial pictures. Folk art enthusiasts who visit Colonial Williamsburg will also want to see Bassett Hall, an exhibition building since 1979.³

In March 1954, *The Magazine, Antiques* carried the announcement that Mrs. Rockefeller’s folk art collection would soon be housed in its own museum building adjacent

Fig. 8: Interior of the Ludwell-Paradise House, Williamsburg, Va., with Mrs. Rockefeller’s folk art on view, circa 1937. Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.





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Fig. 9: The morning room in Bassett Hall, Williamsburg, Va., restored to its 1930–1940 appearance. Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Fig. 10: *Noah's Ark*, attributed to Joseph Henry Hidley (1830–1872), Poestenkill, N.Y., circa 1870. Oil on wood panel, 25¼ x 26¾ inches. This painting was acquired after Mrs. Rockefeller's death. It was purchased in 1957 from the J. Stuart Halladay and Herrel George Thomas collection, Sheffield, MA. Courtesy of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum.

to Williamsburg's historic area and that the museum would be built and maintained through funds provided by John D. Rockefeller Jr. Mr. Rockefeller's support enabled Colonial Williamsburg to establish this country's first folk art museum. The Museum of Modern Art generously returned forty folk art items to the collection, while fourteen pieces were transferred from The Metropolitan Museum of Art by action of its board and as the gift of David Rockefeller. Among the pieces from The Met was *Baby in Red Chair*, one of the public's favorites.

Within months of its opening in 1957, Mr. Rockefeller established an endowment fund that included funding for acquisitions. Over 100 works were purchased during the museum's first year of operation, many from the private collections of Mrs. Halpert, Holger Cahill, and Mrs. James Law Robertson. Some of the well-known pieces included Edward Hicks's *Leedom Farm* (see Hurst, pages 225–226), *Noah's Ark* by Joseph H. Hidley (Fig. 10), and *Harmony Child Wight* (see Hurst, page 228) by the Beardsley Limner.

Acquisitions multiplied sevenfold between 1957 and 1987, pushing the building's capacity to the limit. In 1992, these problems were resolved by the construction of a wing that served the institution well for several years. However, continued growth of the collections and the need to serve an even greater audience led to the construction of the new museum. Larger, more flexible exhibition space and areas

for educational programming, shared with the adjacent DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum, enhance the new museum.

The primary goal of the Folk Art Museum has never changed. It remains committed to fostering understanding and appreciation of American folk art. The reevaluation of existing information, continued acquisitions, and the presentation of new ideas, research, and discoveries through exhibits, publications, and programs will continue to be an important part of the museum's focus. Among the eleven new exhibits at the museum are the evolution of portraiture in early America, nineteenth-century American stoneware, mourning imagery, and folk musical instruments. The new museum is located at 325 West Francis Street, Williamsburg, Virginia. For information call 757.220.7286 or visit www.ColonialWilliamsburg.org.

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1 Cahill was employed as a curator at the Newark Museum, NJ, when Mrs. Rockefeller first met him in the 1920s. He later served as the acting director of the Museum of Modern Art. Cahill later became director of the art program for the Works Progress Administration in Washington, D. C.

2 The Williamsburg Holding Company and then Williamsburg Restoration were early names used for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. In these early years the Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin, rector of historic Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, often made such

property purchases on behalf of Mr. Rockefeller. Mr. and Mrs. Rockefeller realized that the folk art collection consisted mostly of objects from New England and the Mid-Atlantic states that never would have been in 18th-century Williamsburg. But it was believed that there were strong relationships among what might have been in early Williamsburg homes and the craft-derived materials, techniques, and aesthetics of folk art. It was felt that the folk art collection could help education visitors about the lives of early Americans.

3 The Bassett Hall property was inherited by John D. Rockefeller 3rd, who maintained the interiors as his parents had furnished them. When the property was given to the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in 1979, the rooms looked much as they had in the 1930s and '40s. Research in recent years has resulted in a more accurate furnishings plan and a full restoration of the house, the gardens (designed by Arthur Schurcliffe), and the outbuildings. The project was made possible by a grant from Abby and George O'Neill.

