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Different Strokes: Something for Everyone at Folk Art Exhibit

The Folk Art Collection of Elie and Viola Nadelman at the New-York Historical Society



A Riverboat Excelsior pull toy (c. 1870) by George W. Brown & Co. is part of the 'Making It Modern: The Folk Art Collection of Elie and Viola Nadelman' exhibit at the New-York Historical Society. *PHOTO: NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Not everyone would encounter a 19th-century roach trap and see it as art.

But for Elie and Viola Nadelman, art extended into some unusual realms.

Over the course of the 1920s and '30s, the couple acquired things like kitchen implements, children's toys and weather vanes. Their collection includes at least one giant wooden woman from the bow of a working clipper ship.

All those and more feature in "Making It Modern: The Folk Art Collection of Elie and Viola Nadelman," on view through Aug. 21 at the New-York Historical Society. The

exhibit showcases more than 200 pieces from one of America's first and foremost collections of the genre.

The idea that folk art was worthy of connoisseurship was unique at the time, and the Nadelmans approached it with idiosyncratic taste.



'Fire Chief Harry Howard' (c. 1855) by an unidentified American maker of New York City. *PHOTO: NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY*

Elie Nadelman was himself a distinguished sculptor, with standing among the likes of Picasso in the development of early modernist art. Viola was a noted woman of taste, with wealth from a late husband who made a fortune in New York real estate. Together, the Nadelmans amassed nearly 15,000 objects.

“Making It Modern” serves as a tribute of sorts to the personal museum the couple created on the grounds of their country home in the Riverdale section of the Bronx. Known originally as the Museum of Folk and Peasant Arts, it drew visitors from the city’s art and social scenes and included an eclectic array of paintings, sculptures, utilitarian objects and playful gewgaws spanning six centuries and 13 countries of origin.

Their definition of folk art was uncommonly wide-ranging for the time, said Roberta Olson, curator of drawings at the New-York Historical Society and co-curator—along with museum director Margaret Hofer—of the show. The Nadelmans’s collecting encompassed not only works of American ingenuity, but European antecedents the couple discovered during their extensive travels.

Between the wars, when U.S. culture was asserting itself with a nationalist fervor, Ms. Hofer said the Nadelmans “ran counter by saying, ‘Look, it’s all across the ocean there.’”

The exhibition opens with a culturally diverse grouping of 19th-century cigar-store figurines: a sailor, a Scotsman, an African-American field worker. Inside, objects are interspersed with Elie Nadelman’s own work, including jaunty, curvilinear ’20s-era sculptures like “Dancer” and “Piano Player.”



Three milliner’s heads (c. 1820-1870) from France PHOTO: NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

“We don’t aim to say there was a direct influence, but there are so many intersections,” Ms. Hofer said of similarities between things like folksy wind-up toys and Nadelman sculptures, several on loan from the Whitney Museum of American Art.

“There’s a kind of insouciance and charm; you feel that in everything,” Ms. Olson said.

Reaching off one wall is “Rosa Isabella,” a windblown woman in pinewood that once

adorned a boat made in Germany. Nearby is an 18th-century baby walker with a circular standing-support system and wheels.

“If you squint, you’d think it could say Fisher-Price. The form hasn’t changed at all,” Ms. Hofer said.

New Yorkers might appreciate the 19th-century roach trap from Pennsylvania, a contraption in clay with holes to coax pests toward molasses poured on the inside.



Elie Nadelman's 'Piano Player' (c. 1921) PHOTO: ESTATE OF ELIE NADELMAN/HARVARD ART MUSEUMS

Then there is an elaborately decorated “fire engine condenser case” from one of New York’s first volunteer fire companies. Painted circa 1832, it mixes a call to civic duty with allusions to Roman classical form.

“This is the conundrum of folk art: It was for a practical use, but it is an allegory with

classical elements to add a dimension of nobility,” Ms. Olson said.

Other objects like quilts are more homespun but decidedly abstract in their designs, an aspect that probably appealed to Mr. Nadelman the sculptor.

“The modernists were looking for sources that would free things from an academic vocabulary, and folk art did that,” Ms. Olson said.

The Great Depression wiped out the Nadelmans’s finances, forcing them to downsize and sell their beloved collection. They found an eager buyer in the New-York Historical Society, but it has only been over the past five years that the collection has been fully cataloged and, now, put on view.

“There was something for everyone—I think that’s what they hoped for,” said Cynthia Nadelman, the couple’s granddaughter and an art critic who has researched Elie and Viola’s enduring work. “It’s nice to see it all put together.”