

CURATOR'S CHOICE

ART ELICITS MANY REACTIONS from viewers. It can inspire, evoke strong feelings, or move us to reflect upon its form or meaning. It can also tell us much about the time and place in which it was created, as these examples from the Minnesota Historical Society collections show.

Peter A. Peterson or “Whiskey Pete” captured in his woodcarvings the spirit of country life. Born in Alvdalen, Sweden, in 1884, Peterson emigrated with his family when he was about 17, settling in rural Dalbo in Isanti County. This hard-working, church-going, mostly Swedish farm community is where Peterson learned to carve wood. His subjects point to the world and the personalities he saw around himself, people like lumbermen, the pastor, and members of a Swedish band and choir. His carvings (below) range from 4 inches to 40 inches, but most are less than a foot tall. They speak to us of the world as seen through Peterson’s eyes. Since the figures are painted, we can only guess at Peterson’s methods and materials. He probably carved soft, local wood such as balsam fir with a whittling tool or small knife. Oral tradition holds that Peterson did not carve for money; he gave his work away, traded it for a few goods, or sold it for whiskey—thus, his nickname. After his death on October 21, 1964, these figures eventually found their way to a New York auction house, where the Minnesota Historical Society purchased them as fine examples of folk art. Now they have come back to Minnesota to inspire and remind us of Peterson’s world.

In a similar folk-art tradition, a new form is emerging: chainsaw art. Chainsaw sculptures are showing up at fairs, along roadsides, and as commissioned art projects in cities and private homes. Stillwater carver Perry Carlson, who has been working with wood for 15 years, is also of Swedish descent, with a brother and father working in this art form as well. Perry’s recent tool of choice is the chainsaw, which greatly assists him with “getting at” the wood. From the variety of his sculptures, his clients favor these friendly two-to-three-foot tall “Welcome Bears” for their porches or decks up at the cabin. Carlson mostly works with trees already down or wood already cut. Another of his specialties is the “story pole” made from trees that are diseased or need to come



down. Carlson carves a story into the tree, saving it from complete removal and creating beauty that adds meaning to the place where the tree has stood for many years.

Pete Peterson and Perry Carlson represent craftsman that are part of a long and enduring legacy of woodcarving. The Minnesota Historical Society will continue to collect the work of historical and contemporary carvers both to document the art form and remind us of ourselves and our sense of place.

— CYNTHIA HALL,
MHS Museum Collections



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