



Kentucky By Design

The Decorative Arts And American Culture
At The Frazier History Museum

By Kate Eagen Johnson

LOUISVILLE, KY. — “I worked on this for 30 years and now it has come to fruition. It was my idea, I did the research and the Frazier Museum picked it up and put it all together.” American folk art collector and researcher Allan Weiss described how his “personal odyssey” to learn about the inner workings and artistic output of the Works Progress Administration’s Index of American Design project in Kentucky had involved decades of sleuthing. As a major aspect of his study, he set out to find the very artifacts that artists had depicted in their graphite and watercolor renderings for the Index. “Kentucky by Design: The Decorative Arts and American Culture” is the noteworthy outcome of his mission.

On view at the Frazier History Museum through February 12, the exhibition showcases more than 100 examples of works on



Storage vessel by J.H. Miller, Brandenburg, Ky., 1844–84. Salt-glazed stoneware, 15¼ by 13½ inches. Collection of Jerry McKinley. Born and trained in Strasburg, Va., James H. Miller moved first to Indiana and then to Brandenburg in the early 1840s. He operated a pottery there until 1884.

—Bob Hower/Quadrant photo



Shaker pictorial rug with a horse, circa 1870–75. Cotton and wool, 36¼ by 41 inches. Shaker Village at Pleasant Hill. —Bob Hower/Quadrant photo

paper, decorative art, musical instruments, costume and tools drawn from some 20 public and private collections. The display of select Index of American Design renderings created in Kentucky juxtaposed with the actual model objects or near equivalents is one of its special features. A companion catalog was published in 2015.

Active from 1936 to 1942, the Index of American Design was part of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project. Officials devised it not only as a way to employ out-of-work artists during the Depression, but also as a vehicle for documenting historical design of significance and for ascertaining what was distinctive about the nation's craft traditions. Thirty-five states and the District of Columbia participated. The resulting visual archive,

now in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, contains approximately 18,000 renderings, with more than 200 of these created by George V. Vezolles, Orville A. Carroll and other artists assigned to the Kentucky project.

As Weiss, a Louisville mediator and arbitrator, related in conversation and in the catalog foreword, he was introduced to this important arts resource through Clarence Peterson Hornung's *Treasury of American Design and Antiques: A Pictorial Survey of Popular Folk Arts Based Upon Watercolor Renderings...*

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Illustrated in the companion catalog to the show, this sugar chest is from Kentucky and dates to circa 1835. George V. Vezolles illustrated a somewhat similar Kentucky cherry wood chest for the Index. Cherry and fruitwood, 33½ by 30 by 17½ inches. Liberty Hall Historic Site. The distinctive form of the sugar chest is associated with the Backcountry South. —Bob Hower/Quadrant photo

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