

Untutored Fancies That Grew Into Art

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ONE of Barbara Head Millstein's responsibilities as the associate curator of painting and sculpture at the Brooklyn Museum is "to look for art wherever it is." She has found it in a five-room railroad apartment on 16th Street in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn.

"The call came on Feb. 7," Ms. Millstein recalled. Vincent Kelley, a real-estate developer in Brooklyn, told her he was dumbfounded by what he saw when he entered the recently vacated apartment.

Within an hour, Ms. Millstein was introduced to the work of Joseph E. Furey, a retired ironworker. Starting just before his wife's death in 1981, but mainly between 1982 and 1988, Mr. Furey glued and nailed thousands of pieces of decoupage - as well as navy and lima beans, mussel and clamshells and the occasional oyster shell - to all the walls, ceilings, doors and moldings of his apartment. Just about every inch was covered in quiltlike geometric patterns.

Found objects - shells, glass beads and wooden spools, among them - also figured in the work of another unlikely folk artist, Thomas Trapani. A shirt maker who lived in Brooklyn and New Jersey before his death in 1962, he had a second, unheralded career as a furniture maker. He, too, began his complex decorative work after his wife's death, which

occurred in 1918. About 25 esoteric Trapani pieces - including mirrors, planters, an eight-foot-high sink enclosure and a seven-foot-high shrine - are now at 280, a Manhattan gallery.

The Furey and Trapani work is in the tradition of eccentric and original expressions like Simon Rodia's Watts Towers in Los Angeles and the cement, mosaic and glass monument by Joseph Ferdinand Cheval near Hauterives, France.

"In the case of certain people, in the latter part of their lives, there comes a burst of artistic creativity that lasts 10 years," Ms. Millstein said. With the support of the Brooklyn Museum, she has energetically begun the effort to document and save the Furey apartment.

"It may not be art in the usual sense, but it certainly is extraordinarily attractive," she said. "It's a personal statement of love in primitive terms. Unfortunately we can't take the heavy plaster and lath walls out of there. It would have to be preserved on site."

Mr. Furey, who was born in Camden, N.J., in 1906, worked on the Golden Gate and George Washington Bridges. In the late 1920's he met Lillian Fleming in Prospect Park, and they were married during the Depression. The Fureys moved into the apartment, in a small, late-19th-century limestone row house, in the mid-1930's and raised five children there. He moved out last summer, after being robbed there..

Of his decorative work, Mr. Furey said in a telephone interview last week, "it just sort of came in my head." Now 83 years old, he lives with his son Joseph Jr. in Chester, N.Y.

"The bathroom was the first room," he said. "Then the living room; then the kitchen; then the hallway. I went from room to room. There are only seventy or eighty thousand pieces, that's all." "To my knowledge, there's nothing like it in New York City," Ms. Millstein said. "It's a creative work of primitive art with a special iconography. It just comes from his imagination. He had no frame of reference. The only museum he ever visited was the American Museum of Natural History once, and the Alamo."

Mr. Furey's children, particularly Joseph Jr., who spent Thursday nights with his father after his mother died, were amazed. "Every time I went down there, he had done a bit more," said the younger Mr. Furey. "It just grew and grew." Doors were decorated on both sides, the stove hood was tiled, and mirrors were edged with cutouts. Mr. Furey made a scaffold to work on the ceilings.

In the hallway, he used nails - hundreds of them - to affix the shells, which were filled with cement to make them less fragile. In other places, he used glue.

"My sisters collected the jumbo shells from Breezy Point, where we had a cabana," Joseph Furey Jr. explained. "Some of the seashells came from a deli on Prospect Avenue, and in the winter, when we ate frozen stuffed clams, we saved the shells." His father also used shells he had collected while working in Venezuela in the 1940's.

Ms. Millstein said dotted cardboard squares represent the dice Mr. Furey played with in the Navy, starfish and shells recall his seafaring years, and crosses his Roman Catholic background. In the dining room, a mural depicting a western scene is overlaid with paper cutouts of butterflies, monkeys and dogs.

There are lots of bow-tie shapes, some with polka dots. "That's to represent the sporty quality Joe admired in his best friend, known as Bow-Tie George," Ms. Millstein said.

There are also dozens of small plaster birds, each made by hand and placed on its own pedestal. "The birds represent the couple's peaceful life together," Ms. Millstein said.

But hearts dominate every room and surface. Cardboard cutout hearts are in a colorful quiltlike pattern along walls and on ceilings. Hearts made from shells and painted ceramic hearts edge the shelf unit in the living room. "It's a five-room love story," Ms. Millstein said.

Already Mr. Furey's delicate work is deteriorating. The bathroom ceiling has collapsed, and some bits and pieces have come unglued. "Every time I come in I find a bit more on the floor," Mr. Kelley said. He said the apartment, in a building that he is converting to co-ops, would probably bring about \$65,000 if sold.

"My goal is to document and save it," Ms. Millstein said. "Joe was such a petunia in an onion patch. This was an epic work, but he had no compulsion to hold onto it."

JIMMY GALLAGHER, a partner in 280, a gallery of 20th-century furniture and decorative arts at 280 Lafayette Street (Prince Street), discovered the work of Thomas Trapani about six months ago at an estate auction of furniture and household objects in Long Island City, Queens.

Mr. Gallagher was particularly taken with an eight-foot-high cabinet enclosing a sink. Made from an arched fireplace grate, it is adorned with plastic figures and painted flowers.

He started tracking more of Mr. Trapani's work, decorated with spools and porcelain religious figures, dried and plastic flowers, moss, shells, coral and aquarium bridges and figures. In six months, he and his partners, Alesh Loren and Rick Gallagher (who is not related to him) accumulated about 25 pieces.

He made an unexpected find at a Manhattan flea market. "A chance in a million," he said. "I stared at this stuff in a cardboard box and then realized that there was a photograph of Trapani and his three children kneeling at his wife's grave."

All the objects, which the gallery hopes to sell as a group, were made between 1920 and 1950. Jimmy Gallagher said that after Mr. Trapani's death in 1962, his daughter kept his house as it was. When she died some years ago, the estate was dispersed. There are no photographs of the interior of the house, which Mr. Gallagher has not seen but says was in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn, so the works themselves are the only remaining evidence of his output.

Small figures still parade around the empty spools atop Mr. Trapani's sink cabinet. Tiny animals await water at his fanciful fountain. Scenes of Oriental inspiration decorate his furniture panels and dioramas.

"Everything was decorated," Jimmy Gallagher said. "For him, everything was a religious and artistic obsession. He went to open a door, and there was the story of Moses. Now it's all gone."

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