

# DOWN TO A FINE ART

If you happen to hear Led Zeppelin blaring from a boom box on the Dyke Road around 2 o'clock in the morning in Falmouth, NS, look for lights in a barn. That's where you'll find Jim Tracey whittling away making folk art.

"During the day I don't think right," Tracey says with a grin, adding, "When they first started calling me a folk artist, I said, I don't call you names, so why are you calling me names? This whole 'artist' thing. I just whittle stuff, why do I have to have a label?"

In the next breath Tracey shares how he got started, and how he eventually ended up showcasing his work at the Nova Scotia Folk Art Festival, held in Lunenburg every summer.

Although born in the Annapolis Valley in Nova Scotia, the artist spent part of his youth living on Vancouver Island. "I took a woodworking class in high school, thinking it would be an easy credit," Tracey says. In the process, a friend taught him how to make a Haida carving, which gave him not only a passing grade, but a love for working with wood. After Tracey joined the army, he made scores of wooden toys and gave them away to kids in his neighbourhood at Christmas.

Fast forward to the late 1980s; Tracey moved back to his home province with his wife Alica. After a few years working in the gypsum mines close to Windsor, they bought a home in Falmouth and he devoted more time to making zany things. When he placed a life-sized headless horseman, 8-foot sidewinders and cows with three heads on his front lawn, people took notice.

One day, he decided to set up a table on the side of the road close to a roadside flea market. A chap who kept looking at Tracey's work finally said, "You shouldn't be here."

Tracey replied, "We'll move further down the road if someone kicks us out."

"No. You don't belong here. You've got to take your stuff down to the Lunenburg Folk Art Festival."

"Never heard of it. Don't know what that is."

**From humble beginnings, quirky folk artists are finding their way into the mainstream**

BY SANDRA PHINNEY



right here



JACKSON PRODUCTIONS INC.

Jim Tracey of Falmouth, NS, says he does his best work late at night. His work varies from tabletop sculptures to full-sized statues, and often is laced with humour.



"It's what you are doing here. This is folk art."

The chap was none other than Garnet McPhail, a well-known folk artist, who opened the door for Tracey to get involved in the prestigious Nova Scotia Folk Art festival. "This gave me a chance to see that I wasn't the only crazy person out there!" That was over a decade ago and continues to be the highlight of each year.

Coming up to his 60th birthday, Tracey keeps telling people he's going to retire. Yet, he knows too well that the urge to whittle is carved into his DNA. "Every time I look at a piece of wood I see something," he says. "Sometimes it's a fight between me and the wood, but once I've done it I'm thinking—that's cool!"

To complicate things, when the artisan sees a house under construction he knows there's a scrap pile nearby and his heart skips a beat. Friends who work in lumber mills also keep an eye out for pieces that will make Tracey's eyes light up. Then it's

back to the barn where he cranks up Led Zeppelin and whittles the night away.

**The artists**

Upwards of 50 folk artists and 1,500 pieces of their work go on display at the Nova Scotia Folk Art Festival—one of North America's premier folk art shows—a one-day event that takes place every summer in Lunenburg. Although the doors don't open until 12 noon for the four-hour extravaganza, people start to line up at 8am.

Hika Wagner—one of the growing number of women who have been identified as folk artists—has been displaying her work at the festival for the past five years.

Back in 2001, Wagner started collecting driftwood at the Fort



JACKSON PRODUCTIONS INC.



SANDRA PHINNEY

Point Road Beach close to her home in Weymouth. That year, she received some acrylic paints for Christmas. Over the holidays she saw a wild rabbit and was inspired to paint a bunny on driftwood. Before long she was painting images of cats, hens, dogs and deer and selling them at yard sales and a local farm market. Her repertoire grew; she added pigs, owls, fish, fox, dragons, moose, and lizards—usually bedecked with polka dots. She also paints animals on large pieces of Masonite or plywood.

And, yes, she takes special orders. Her most memorable request? "One guy asked me to paint his whole family on a toilet seat," she says with a straight face, "including his wife, kids, grandkids, the dog and cat."

Although relative newcomers to the realm of folk art, Tracey and Wagner are fairly typical of a group of people that anthropologists and historians refer to as "the Folk." Usually characterized by leading lives reflecting simplicity, truth, work and virtue, the Folk generally lived in fishing and farming communities, were close to nature, and self-sufficient. Not much has changed although much has been written about the Folk and the art they produce.

Names like the Naugler Brothers (Leo, Bradford, Ransford), Joe Norris, and Eddie Mandaggio are legendary, as well as Barry Colpitts, William Roach, Joanne and Larry Fancy... The list goes on, and continues to grow in Nova Scotia, arguably the province with the most folk artists in Canada.

**Maud Lewis: larger than life**

Some people credit Maud Lewis (1903-1970) with elevating folk art to the realm of "art." Although small in stature, Lewis was larger than life. Her work graces homes of admirers all over the world, including former staff of the White House.

Her paintings—always cheerful, colourful and bright—portray the simple things of life, often in a humorous way. In spite of numerous physical challenges, Lewis painted every moment she could, on every imaginable surface from dustpans and windowpanes, to scallop shells and the stove in her home in Marshalltown—a 12x13-foot, one-room abode with no running water or electricity.

In the 1960s, salesman David Corning travelled regularly between Shelburne, Yarmouth and Digby. His son, Jim Corning, recounts, "In the course of his travels, my father noticed Maud's sign advertising paintings for sale. He had heard about Maud's artwork, and was aware that she and Everett lived very modestly. As is common in small Maritime



SANDRA PHINNEY



SANDRA PHINNEY

Hika Wagner's work is created on driftwood she collects from local beaches in Digby County, and is often bedecked with polka dots.



COURTESY OF KEVIN COATES

Kevin Coates of Winterton, NL, has been carving figures for 18 years, creating more than 5,000 pieces in the process.



COURTESY OF KEVIN COATES

Art Gallery) says that conditions were right in the early 80s for folk art to flourish. For example: the Nova Scotia Museum and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (now NSCAD University) provided both an academic perspective and knowledge of the art form; the general public were being informed via newspaper and magazine articles, books, TV and film documentaries; and both collectors and dealers were on the hunt.

Asked to define this art form, Riordon says, “Folk art is extraordinary work done by ordinary people. Folk artists reside outside the mainstream. They tend to be untrained and basically don’t do it out of any preconceived notion. Their work is simple, honest, and often humorous.”

#### Quirky and humorous art

Although Nova Scotia has scores of folk artists, others are making a name for themselves in other parts of Atlantic Canada. For example, several years ago Kerras Jeffery from Laurretta, PEI, started making wooden “things” to augment his income as a labourer on a potato farm.

Jeffery’s creations were quirky and often incorporated everyday items like old toasters, baseball bats and bits of farm machinery. Sales were slow—until a dealer from Ontario dropped by one day and bought \$2,000 worth of his work.

“Now, I look forward to going to work,” says the artist who gets up between 5 and 6am and heads to “the shop” behind his home. The stairs and upper level of the shop are loaded with thousands of items all neatly grouped together, from baskets of metal hinges and door knobs, to pots and pans, deer antlers, old tools, chandeliers, cow bells—*ad infinitum*. In addition, he has a cargo van behind the shop brimming with larger items, and a stash of stuff in his parent’s barn up the road.

When visitors come by, they can’t help but laugh. More than one person has asked the artist what he’s been smokin’.

Want a custom order? No problem. One client asked for a moose; Jeffery rounded up some discarded oil tanks and went to work.

He also loves making ghost doors—functional doors with carved images and painted scenes depicting a person walking through the door. “One side is the person’s frontal coming through while the other side is the arse end going through.” Scenes have varied from an Englishman walking his dogs through the door to pirates and mermaids doing whatever pirates and mermaids do.



COURTESY OF KEVIN COATES

communities, my father decided to help them and purchased Maud’s paintings as a way to offer support.”

One day, Maud agreed to pose for a photograph with a painting that he had just bought; it is now a family treasure.

In 1984, the Province of Nova Scotia purchased the house and property for the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (AGNS). Fourteen years later, the Scotiabank Maud Lewis Gallery opened to the public, featuring the completely restored Maud Lewis Painted House.

As the founding director of the AGNS, Bernard Riordon was instrumental in getting this project off the ground. Riordon (currently Director Emeritus of the Beaverbrook



JOHN SYLVESTER

Once, a customer requested a door showing a woman baking in her kitchen, holding a rolling pin. “She wanted everything but the breasts poking through with deep cleavage—in case the priest came.” A few months went by and the woman called Jeffery. “I think I want the breasts,” she said, which he promptly made and shipped off.

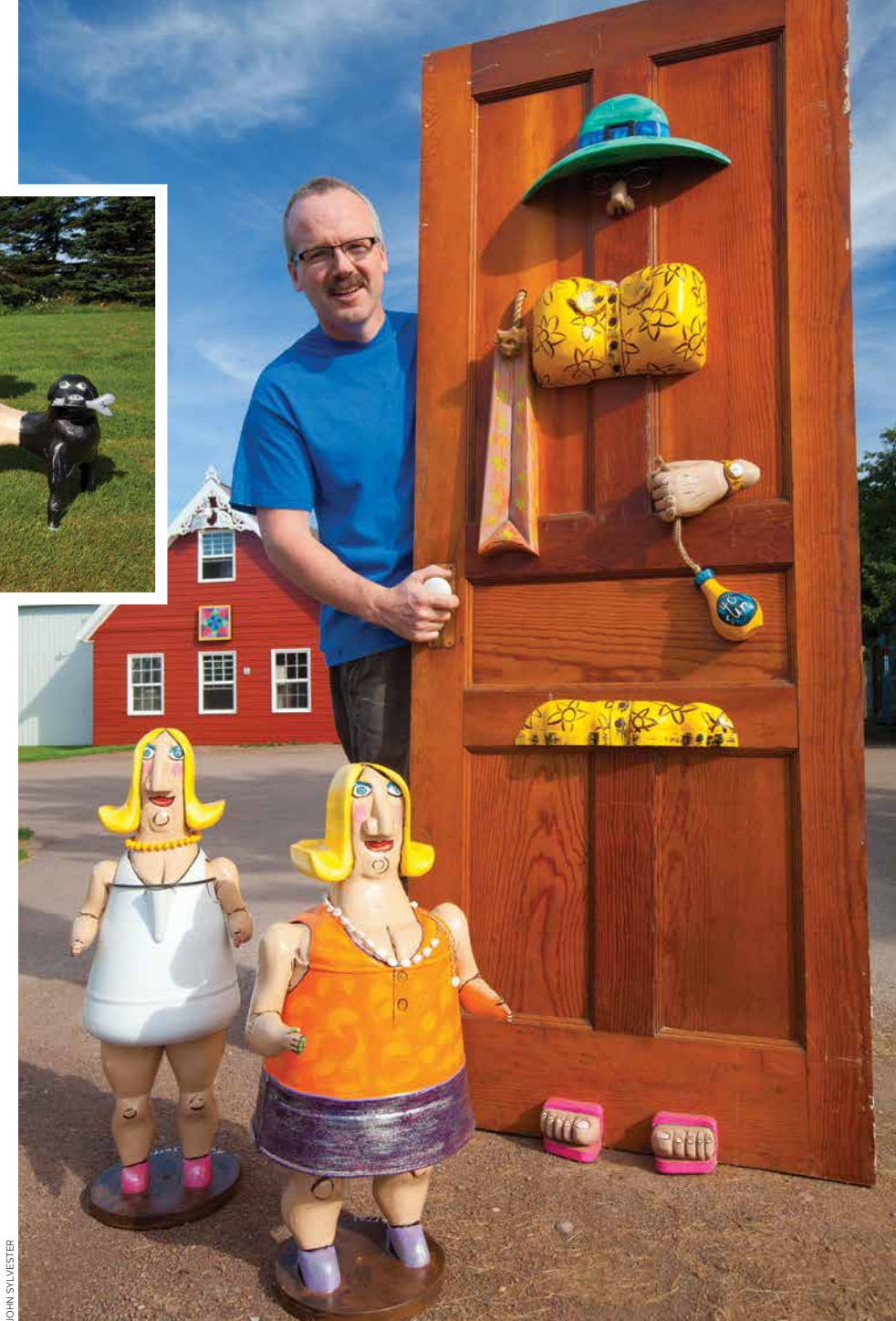
Over in Winterton, on Newfoundland and Labrador’s Trinity Bay, Kevin Coates has been carving caricatures since he read an article about carving 18 years ago. “I thought it was so amazing that someone could take a block of wood and whittle a little person from it,” says the folk artist. “I got ideas about doing all the old fellas I remembered around the wharves. Some would smoke a pipe; others chewed tobacco. They were characters.”

With lots of subject matter in his head, he ordered a chip carving knife from Lee Valley. “That was a big mistake. They are not meant for carving figures. I sliced my fingers so many times that the Band-Aid company likely seen a boost in sales.”

Now he uses a fish splitting knife formerly used to remove the backbone of codfish, as well as a Flexcut roughing knife, and a fish-filleting knife. He’s created numerous special orders including a chess set, and caricatures of Canada’s prime ministers.

“My work is much better today than when I started. I keep trying to improve on it.” Although the folk artist has carved more than 5,000 plus pieces in the last 18 years, he doesn’t have one carving to call his own. “Maybe one day I will do one I am happy with and keep it for myself.”

It’s been said that art teaches us to see



JOHN SYLVESTER



JOHN SYLVESTER

Kerras Jeffery of Laurretta, PEI, started making wooden “things” to augment his income from working on a potato farm. The pieces often incorporate everyday items like bits of farm machinery or kitchen appliances. Among his most popular pieces are the ghost doors, functional pieces with carved images depicting a person walking through the door.

into things, while folk art allows us to see outward from within things. Something to mull about, eh? But don’t tell a folk artist. They’ll be the ones grinning. 🐼