

All of Life's a Stage: The Aesthetics of Life Review

by Mary Hufford

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Expressive Culture and Stages of Life

We think of growing up as something that happens in stages. The conventional stages of the human life cycle include infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, and old age. While in reality there are no strict boundaries between them, we celebrate the crossing of their imaginary borders in rituals like baby showers, christenings, bar mitzvahs, commencements, weddings, and retirement banquets. Within the stages marked by those borders, we become responsible for different parts of our culture — and our scripts and our audiences are modified as we grow.

If we think of folklife as a kind of embroidering on the chores of being — chores that are universal and inescapable, such as eating, raising children, seeking shelter, and moving about, we might examine the ways in which members of each stage of life approach the same set of chores differently. Consider a motor skill such as walking. Children **never** walk. They skip, run, dance, or diddle sideways to get where they are going. They master locomotion by playing with it. While old people cannot play with locomotion in that way, the task of walking about can be spruced up with an imaginatively wrought walking stick — something that may endure and become a reminder of the person who used it.

The material culture of children is ephemeral. Their art is a kind of salvage art that transforms materials of everyday life into paper airplanes, paper footballs, clothespin pistols, grassblade whistles, cootie catchers, Chinese jumpropes, skellies pucks and hopscotch boards. Their playhouses are not meant to last, built as they are of scraps borrowed from the real world of older people: sheets draped over chairs, books stacked on top of one another, discarded plywood, tarpaper and trees, or perhaps even a lilac bush. Sand and snow are also valid media. Thus their play might be seen as a rehearsal for roles they'll assume in later life. They invest their dwellings not with memories but with mimesis.

Among adults we find a kind of artistry that commences at some point in late mid-life, often triggered by a life crisis, such as retirement, or the death of a loved one. For his medium as well for his content the older artist often reaches back into his youth and to the old people he knew then. A skill such as quilting, fiddling, canning or carving may be revived. That skill may have been acquired in youth under the tutelage of an older relative or neighbor and abandoned in the middle years when there was not time for such activities.

At first it may seem that the revived skill is simply a way to pass the time that has suddenly expanded. On closer inspection, however, we find two other needs being met: the need to interpret and integrate one's life and



Children often express facets of their present and future lives, temporarily recasting them, for example, in miniature townscapes of sand.
Photo by Sue Samuelson



"This is my husband in 1914 with his new horse and buggy. . . This is not a very good picture of my husband. He was a handsome man, but you can't do much with a needle and thread." Ethel Mohamed

the need to educate the new youth, to supply them with the skills and materials that they can unpack in their own elderly lives. Thus, in contrast to the ephemera of children, the creations of old people are made to endure. Their hobbies take an autobiographical bent, their task the performance of life review.

Life Review Projects

Autobiographies do not always take the form of books. Folk art exhibits are filled with life-review projects that comprise a kind of three-dimensional reminiscence for their makers, whereby the past bursts into tangible being.

Many of the artists whose works are exhibited and performed on the Mall this year exemplify the pattern described above. Although Ethel Wright Mohamed learned the art of embroidery early in life from her mother, she did not practice the craft in earnest until her husband died in 1965. After forty-one years of marriage she said she felt like a ship without a rudder. She began to feel a need to recapture and relive the memories of her married life, and the medium she chose was needlework. In her first "memory picture" she relived her wedding day.

Within a decade Ethel Mohamed produced ninety embroidered memory pictures—enough to stand for her autobiography. In them her past is bound to existence, a past represented not only by landmark events, such as the birth of a new baby, but scenes from everyday life, like her husband's bedtime story hours with the children. The images spring not only from her own remembered experiences but from the memories she received from her parents and grandparents. She imagines on fabric the wedding of her great-grandparents and the departure of her great-grandfather for the Civil War. Thus, not only is her personal past bound to existence in her needlework, but it is bound to the great historical events that comprise the national past.

In Chelsea, Vermont, in 1939, when Ina Hackett Grant was in her late fifties, she began to stitch together a memory quilt. Seven years later, the

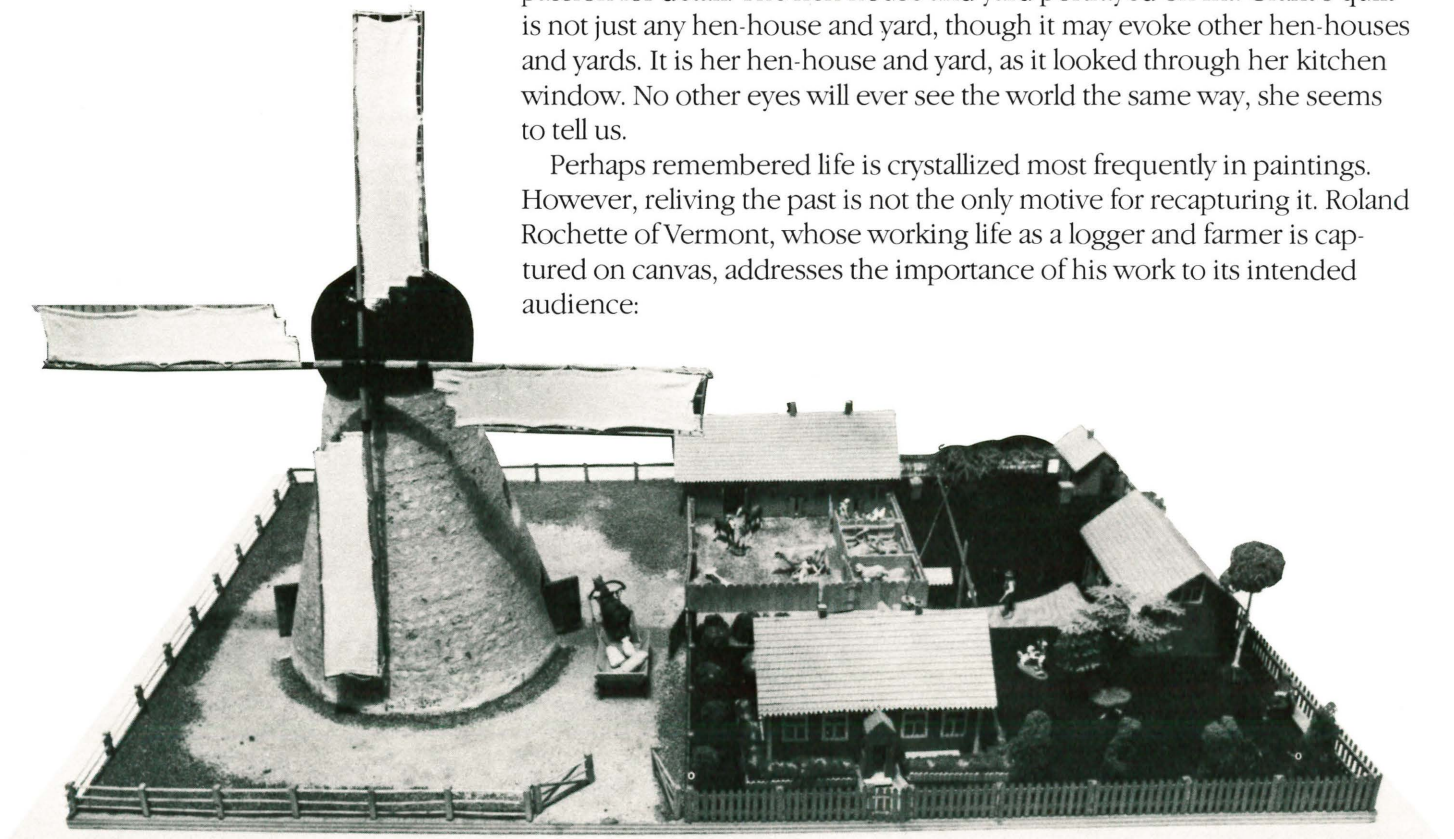
quilt, consisting of one-hundred and seventy-two decorated blocks, won the first prize at the Tunbridge World's Fair. On the blocks she depicted various farmhouses, each one distinguished as the site of an important event, such as the birth of a child. She also celebrated regional activities, such as maple sugaring, the use of horses in the now vanished farming technology of her childhood, her son's foxhound, and the United States flag.

We find another example in the art work of Elijah Pierce, the son of an ex-slave. Born near Baldwin, Mississippi in 1892, when Pierce was nine years old his brother gave him a pocket knife and he has been carving wood ever since. As a preacher and a barber he became a central figure in his community. At some point in his mid-sixties while working in his barber shop he began a project that would take him twenty years to complete: an elaborate walking stick on which are carved scenes from his life. Like Ethel Mohamed's stitched autobiography, Pierce's carved past combines family history, Biblical references, life cycle events and images from everyday life—the tools of his trade, the cross with a halo, the funny story that a customer once told him—all rescued from miscellany and uniquely combined into one artistic statement that stands for his life.

From far-flung parts of the country, and from divergent cultures the variations on recurring themes emerge. However, while some of the themes may seem to echo those represented in popular nostalgia paintings (covered bridges, farmhouses, and pastoral scenes in general), it is important to recognize the profound difference underlying the two genres. While popular painting generalizes about the past, the life review project recreates specific experiences. In the former we see the elimination of detail in an effort to appeal to a wider audience; in the latter we see a passion for detail. The hen-house and yard portrayed on Ina Grant's quilt is not just any hen-house and yard, though it may evoke other hen-houses and yards. It is her hen-house and yard, as it looked through her kitchen window. No other eyes will ever see the world the same way, she seems to tell us.

Perhaps remembered life is crystallized most frequently in paintings. However, reliving the past is not the only motive for recapturing it. Roland Rochette of Vermont, whose working life as a logger and farmer is captured on canvas, addresses the importance of his work to its intended audience:

80-year-old Vilius Variakojis of Chicago, Illinois, reproduces a scene from his childhood in Lithuania in this model of a windmill village. Photo by Carl Fleischhauer



I like to do things that the younger generation haven't seen. I think it's kind of instructive for the younger people. Younger people, a lot of them, don't believe what the older people did and how hard they worked.

For elderly immigrants the removal from the homeland creates a gulf not only between themselves and the past, but between themselves and the future, as embodied in their children. Neng Vang, a member of our most recent immigrant group, the Hmong, speaks of the difficulty of bridging those twin chasms:

It is difficult for us since we are not Americans. We were not born here, we have migrated here. There is no good way for us [elders] to look to the future . . . the only way is through the young. It is the hope of all the heads of the families that the youngest sons and daughters will learn so that they will help us.

In his basement in Chicago, 80-year-old Vilius Variakojis recreates in miniature models the scenes from his childhood village in Lithuania. His basement is regarded as a museum, often visited by Lithuanian children for whom their cultural history is twice encapsulated in his models. First, they depict a place that literally no longer exists as it is remembered, and second, through the models something of their parents' childhood is retrieved. The models, featuring the windmills typical of the region, serve to evoke the place in its absence. They sparkle with specificity. Describing Variakojis's work, Elena Bradunas writes:

The windmill model recreates one that stood near his family farm. He remembers swinging on the sails of the windmill with his childhood friend, the miller's son. The adjacent farmstead is his own: the family house, outdoor sauna, animal barn, granary sheds and outbuildings are constructed according to scale and arranged exactly as they once stood — even the flowerbeds, trees, and grandfather's bench under the birch.

The flowerbeds call to mind another form of folk art that is often ritualized among older people. In producing miniatures we can deliberately invoke, inspect and contemplate the multi-faceted past. In gardens the life-cycle itself is miniaturized, and the past evoked in unpredictable ways. A garden comprises entities with life cycles that recur each year. In experiencing a garden our senses are fully engaged. The repeated experience of a garden throughout our own life cycles is one way of achieving continuity with the self of other stages. The yearly cycle of a garden builds up a residue of associations with other stages in our own lives, bound as they are to seasons. Beyond this, in tending a garden we assist in the creation of a beauty that we can behold with pure pleasure. Tom Brown, a 73-year-old woodsman in South Jersey interweaves his garden with his mythology, in naming it Paradise Acres. Several years ago he planted the following poem at its center:

Here in my garden I spend many an hour
Planting my vegetables and my flowers
The Lord sends the sunshine and the showers
I harvest my vegetables, enjoy my flowers
Here I relax and rest and enjoy
Peace and Happiness

Suggested reading

Beck, Jane, ed. *Always in Season: Folk Art and Traditional Culture in Vermont* (exhibition catalogue). Montpelier, Vermont: Vermont Council on the Arts, 1982.

Dewhurst, C. Kurt and Marsha MacDowell. *Michigan Hmong Arts: Textiles in Transition* (exhibition catalogue). East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University, 1983.

Jones, Suzi, ed. *Webfoots and Bunchgrassers: Folk Art of the Oregon Country* (exhibition catalogue). Eugene, Oregon: Oregon Arts Commission, 1980.



Plaque by Tom Brown, 73 years old, of Millville, New Jersey, showing his magnum opus to be his garden.

Photo by Joseph Czarnecki