Folk Art
Working with Shapes
Pilgrims and

"I WOULD HAVE LOST MY MIND TO DO." — EARLY NEW

Today, if you want an item such as a blanket, or a new backpack, you stop at a store and pick one up. And, if you need a picture of yourself or someone else, you get instant results by using a camera. These

The image of a strict 17th-century New England preacher has been created using simple geometric shapes.

John Foster (1649-1681), Mr. Richard Mather, 1670, Woodcut, 6 1/8 x 4 7/8 in. Photo courtesy Houghton Library, Harvard University
Patriots

IF I HAD NOT HAD MY QUILTS
ENGLAND FARM WOMAN

days, when getting anything you want usually takes a matter of minutes, it's hard to imagine living in a time when that was not possible. In early America, even the simplest item had to be made by hand. Ordinary people had few possessions, and those they had they usually made themselves.

Many useful handmade items created in the past have survived to the present day. You can find them in antique shops, museums, and sometimes even in your own home. But only a few, such as the examples shown here, can be called "folk art."

In 1670, when the portrait (above left) was done, photography hadn't even been thought of. The artist carved a flat, stylized likeness into a woodblock, rolled ink on the block, and printed the image on paper. The simple, flat, black geometric shapes that make up this portrait don't just show how this New England preacher looked, they also capture his stiff, strict personality.

The wooden box (right), created 100 years later, is not only a work of art. It was also designed to hold clothing. The red, rounded, outlined shapes that depict the well-dressed 18th-century man on the lid indicate the richness of the box's contents. The repeated curved shapes around the edge suggest a closet full of hangers. Like almost all early folklore, the figure featured on the cover of this magazine had a practical purpose. Liberty with the American flag was part of a New Hampshire boathouse, used as a post for tying up boats.

Many early folk artists were women who lived on farms. The main needs of early farm people were food, shelter, and staying warm. In 19th-century New England, cloth was very hard to get. The women would take scraps of worn-out clothing, curtains—anything they could find—and sew them together into quilts. Quilts kept people warm, but also gave their creators a way to express themselves. Quilt artists developed complex, colorful patterns as visually pleasing as any modern abstract painting. Many, like the one (below, left), made 150 years ago by Mary Jane Smith and her mother on an upstate New York farm, are based on themes from their everyday lives. All the complex patterns in this work are variations on one single shape, the square. In this Log Cabin Quilt, loglike rectangles are assembled into concentric (one inside the other) squares which are then joined together. Fabric pieces lighter in value make up half of each concentric square. These light areas form diamond shapes (squares turned on their sides), illustrating the second half of the quilt's title, Barn Raising Variation. The diagonals of the diamonds stand for peaked barn roofs.

▲ A stylized 18th-century gentleman decorates this box made to hold clothing.
Painted Wooden Splat Box, 18th century, Pennsylvania German, 1 x x 2 1/2 in. © 2002 Board of Trustees National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

▲ What single shape is the basis for the complex pattern of this hand-sewn 19th-century quilt?

Mary Jane Smith (1833-1869) and Mary Morell Smith (1798-1869). Log Cabin Quilt, Barn Raising Variation, 1861-65. Cotton, wool, 81 x 74 in. Collection of the American Folk Art Museum, New York City. Gift of Mary D. Brewster. Photo © Schecter Lee/Foto

Scholastic Art 3
Southern Visions

"My whole life has been dreams. No one taught me to paint them. They just came to me." —Minnie Evans

During the last century, a number of gifted African American artists were quietly creating unique and important works of art. Of the three featured here, one artist was born into slavery, one spent most of her life working as a security guard, and one had the use of only one arm. None of them had any formal art training. During their lifetimes, hardly anyone even knew their names, let alone the fact that they were artists. But their works are now featured in art-history books and their paintings hang in museums and galleries all over the world.

Horace Pippin didn't begin making art until he was in his 40s. Disabled in World War I (1914-1918), Pippin taught himself to paint by holding the brush in his injured right hand and pushing it across the canvas with his left. In Cabin in the Cotton (above), Pippin has created his version of a plantation in the old South. The artist compares hardworking tenant farmers on the right with the lady of the plantation, sitting idly in the center. The solid, dark, geometric shape of the cabin in the foreground contrasts with the round, white shapes that make up the cotton fields in the middleground. Cotton—which affects all these people's lives—dominates the entire painting. Circular cotton shapes surround the house. They are echoed in the background clouds and repeated in the shape of the landowner's

H. Pippin, 1944.

"I go over a picture in my mind, and when I am ready to paint it I have all the details I need." —Horace Pippin

white puffy dress.

Regarded as one of America’s most unique visionary artists, Minnie Evans turned her dreams into art. Working as a gatekeeper at a botanical garden in North Carolina, Evans had a spiritual experience on Good Friday in 1925 which inspired her to begin creating art. Once she began drawing, nothing stopped her for the next 50 years—not poverty or her lack of training as an artist. Working with colored pencils and notebook paper, Evans created fantasy-scenes whose images reflected nature and the Bible. Works like *Untitled* (right) were inspired by the shapes and colors Evans saw in the gardens around her. The focal point of the composition is a human head, which also forms the body of this insect-like creature. Its colorful butterfly or angel wings are made up of eyes, plant-like shapes, and rainbows. The artist’s symmetrical composition (the same on each side) suggests her view of God’s perfectly ordered universe.

Bill Traylor was born into slavery on a plantation in Alabama in 1854. He spent almost 80 years working on the land—first as a slave, then as a laborer. At 85, while sitting on the sidewalk, Traylor began drawing with pencil and poster paints on discarded sheets of cardboard. He drew and painted scenes from his rural days and the people he saw in the street around him. Most of Traylor’s works told stories. This drawing (right) depicts a man balanced on the roof of his house trying to recapture one of his chickens. The artist emphasizes the comic qualities of this potentially serious situation by simplifying and exaggerating all the elements. The diagonals formed by the man, hat, stick, and bird intersect suggesting tension, movement, and potential disaster. The bright-blue texture that covers the two makeshift buildings forms an abstract, geometric pattern. These scratchy brushstrokes also capture the structures’ rundown quality, and are balanced by the flat, red color of the windows and doors.

> “I have no imagination. I never plan drawings, they just happen.”
> —Minnie Evans


> “These pictures jes’ come to me.”
> —Bill Traylor


Western Symbols

"My paintings combine my inner and outer worlds."—Kay Miller

On these pages you see three very different kinds of images, all reflecting aspects of the many cultures that make up the Western United States. The roads and railroads that brought European settlers west, colorful mosaic tiles from Mexico, and symbolic Native American pictograms are all represented.

The earliest work (above, right) took its creator an entire lifetime. In 1921 an Italian laborer, Simon Rodia (Row-DEE-ya), bought a house and a tiny piece of land in the Watts section of Los Angeles. Rodia, using a tile setter's tools, began building a tower out of steel rods, wire mesh, and concrete. He didn't use scaffolding, but stood on the part he had finished in order to build the next section. Working by himself, Rodia tore down and rebuilt sections until he was satisfied. The artist collected discarded items and covered the wet concrete with a complex mosaic of found objects—glass fragments, seashells, broken dishes, and tile. During the next 33 years, Rodia built nine towers, one nearly 100 feet tall. Watts Towers, now a National Historic Landmark, are surrounded by a scalloped wall of colorful tiles. Rodia left the property in 1954, disappeared, and never returned.

The drawings of Mexican-American folk artist Martin Ramirez are as small and simple as Rodia's project was large and complex. Ramirez came to the U.S. around 1900 to work on the railroad. But his life fell apart, and he ended up in a mental institution. There he began sketching on scraps of paper, gluing them together to make large drawings. Using only colored pencil and crayon, the artist
important element. The eye represents illusion, while the feather, a Native American symbol, stands for liberation. The Seer depicts Miller’s “two-word world” inhabited by people not fully incorporated into today’s culture. The images appear to be very different in color, complexity, and placement. But if the eye were rotated to stand on end beside the feather, the two oval images would be very similar in shape and size.

Contemporary painter Kay Miller had years of formal art training, so she can’t really be called a folk artist. But her Comanche heritage makes her work serve as a bridge between the new West and Native American tradition. Seeking a spiritual union between “urban and tribal views, white and Indian cultures,” many of Miller’s paintings are made up of two thickly painted, brightly colored, highly simplified shapes. Works like The Seer (left), make the viewer wonder how these two seemingly unrelated objects—an eye and a feather—are connected. Are they opposites, are they somehow the same, or are they different forms of the same message? While the ragged, whirling shapes that make up the eye are more dramatic, the artist feels the static shape of the feather is the more

"I had in my mind to do something big—and I did."
—Simon Rodia

Simon Rodia (1879–1965), Watts Towers, 1921–1954, Overview and detail with found objects. Photos by Marion Rand

Scholastic Art 7

“Martin Ramirez is neither a precursor nor a predecessor: He is a symbol.”
—Octavio Paz, Mexican poet

Martin Ramirez (1906–1968), Untitled, 1954, pencil, colored pencil, watercolor, and crayon on paper, 52.7 x 33.9 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City. Photo by Ellen Lappesi ©The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation
Hoosick Falls, N.Y. in Winter
by Grandma Moses

The first folk artist to become a superstar was Anna Mary Robertson Moses, better known as Grandma Moses. She began her art career late in life, after she "retired" from the farm, so she didn't become famous until she was in her 80s. Luckily, she lived till 101, so she was able to enjoy her popularity. In the 1940s and 50s, this elderly, homespun farm woman appeared on radio and television, and her life and art were featured in all the magazines. In fact, Grandma Moses became the most famous female artist of her time.

Like all folk artists, Grandma Moses was self-taught. She invented her own original style based on the subjects she knew and the materials she found around her. In works like Hoosick Falls, N.Y. in Winter, she simplified, or abstracted, her shapes, reducing them to symbols with which viewers could immediately identify. In this work, the curved shapes of the mountains serve as a unifying white background. The straight, geometric line of the railroad cuts through and contrasts with the natural, organic curve of the river, leading the eye around the composition.
Folk Art Updated

“In my work, I try to present ancient symbols as contemporary and relevant without losing a feeling of the past.”

—Harry Fonseca
Many American artists working today draw on early folk-art traditions to create their very contemporary images. The up-to-date design on the left was made by Native American artist Harry Fonseca as the trademark for a chain of Southwestern restaurants. The composition's focal point is the animal in the center. This figure is Coyote, an important symbol in Native American culture known for his energy and cunning. In many of his works, Fonseca places his sneaker-wearing, camera-carrying, sunglasses-clad Coyote in different contemporary settings. Here, Coyote's stylized, black, silhouetted figure dances to a modern tune. The positive and negative squares under his feet suggest a tile dance floor, while the sharp, yellow bursts surrounding him could be lights, stars, or flashbulbs going off. The brilliant colors and abstracted shapes link early Native American pictograms (simplified prehistoric drawings scratched into rocks) with high-powered corporate logos.

Unlike early Southern folk artists highly trained, Georgia-based, African-American Beverly Buchanan has several masters degrees. But her images (right) come from memories of the small shacks she saw while traveling through rural South Carolina in the 1940s. These primitive houses were built by tenant farmers from discarded scraps of wood and tin. Buchanan's drawings and sculptures document the shacks' architecture, while her accompanying texts record the stories of the people who lived in them. The artist's diagonals and broken lines capture the sag and lean of the handmade shacks. The scribbled backgrounds and warm colors symbolize the life, energy, and closeness of the families living inside.

Contemporary artist Miriam Schapiro uses materials as well as shapes associated with folk art. The lives of the early American farm women who made quilts were very restricted. The complex quilt patterns they developed served as one of their only means of creative expression. In The Poet (left), Schapiro has combined fabric scraps to comment on the difficulties facing female artists. The figure is confined in a rigid, geometric shape that resembles a house. A bouquet of flowers occupies the negative space where her head should be. The apron she wears symbolizes domesticity. Her dress is made up of a repeat pattern of leaves and blossoms, the sleeves are folded as if no one is inside. The diagonal patterns in the background either radiate energy, or stand for outside forces further constraining the figure in the frame. The symmetrical composition suggests the regularity and repetition of the household tasks still performed mainly by women.

"An artist should be able to shape her own life." — Miriam Schapiro


"The shapes of these small houses are meant to capture a sense of the life that occurred inside." — Beverly Buchanan


"Sometimes I forget that Coyote is wild. He's a dog, and he can bite very, very hard." — Harry Fonseca

Harry Fonseca, b. 1946. Coyote Cafe Loop, 1986. Courtesy Coyote Cafe Ltd., Santa Fe, N. M.
Although 18-year-old Cynthia Bergeron did this award-winning piece on a computer, her colorful, abstracted images (above) have the simplicity, energy, and humor of traditional folk art. Her swirling, repeat shapes vary in size, texture, and dimension. Cynthia did this work in her senior year at Central High, in Manchester, New Hampshire. She enjoys designing Web pages saying, “I love the computer; you can distort shapes and make them all look completely different.” Cynthia will be attending Southern New Hampshire University in Manchester to pursue a career in graphic design, Web design, or sports management. “I love art and sports, and I want to do both,” she says. “I hope college will help me decide which direction to go in.”

How did you first get involved with art?
I’ve always created art. But my third-grade teacher was the first to tell me she thought I had talent. She said I had a way with colors, I knew how to put them together. It wasn’t until junior high that I started to take art seriously. Then in high school, I took most available art classes because I loved it so much.

What is it about creating art that you enjoy?
I love to explore color in all types of mediums and styles of art. But I especially love thinking about what I’m going to create, and using it as a way to express my personality. For instance, if I was going to create a race car on paper, I’d think about making it reflect the kind of person that I am.
Swirling Shapes

How did you happen to create this award-winning piece?
It was a project for computer class. Our teacher gave each student a phrase, and we had to define it using images we created on the computer. We couldn't pick up existing images, we had to create our own from scratch. Otherwise, you could do what you wanted. The phrase my teacher gave me was "All that glitters is gold," which is the title of this piece.

How did you get your idea?
At first I didn't know what to do. I didn't really know how to interpret "All that glitters is gold," and I still don't. After a day or two, what came into my mind was the image of stars. I knew I wanted to work with stars in some way. So I jumped onto the computer and started working.

How did you start?
First, I drew a star shape on the computer using Adobe Illustrator. When I finished the star, I saved it and copied and pasted it over and over again in the same file. I moved all the stars to the right and added color, moving from yellow to orange within each star. I didn't want all the stars to look exactly the same, so I decided to change some. I especially liked the wood-grain effect, which makes the shapes linear, not solid. The lines give the piece some interesting texture. Then I got stumped and didn't know what else to do. I just had a bunch of stars on the right side of the page.

So, what did you do next?
I started fooling around with shapes. I created a person on the bottom left-hand side of the page. I liked how it looked, so I copied and pasted a few more people. Then I started to fool around with them. I flipped some of the figures, made others small, then large. And I also tried twirling some. Filling the page with all these different black shapes added an energetic feeling to the piece, as if they were dancing. I felt the images were in keeping with the title. Next, I added the small stars in between. Finally, I created the background, a green to blue-green gradient.

Were you satisfied with your piece when you were done?
Yes, I thought it looked cool. I also thought the piece illustrated the phrase. If you notice, all the people look like they're reaching for a star as if all that glitters is gold." But some of them are swirling as they reach. I think I was trying to say when reaching for the stars or your dreams, it can be fun. It doesn't all have to be so serious.

What was the biggest challenge for you in creating this piece?
Trying to come up with a concept for "All that glitters is gold" without having the piece be about royalty or fame. That would have been the obvious way to go, but I wanted to create something more unique.

What advice do you have for aspiring artists like yourself?
First, reach for the stars yourself. Don't ever give up on a project, just keep at it. Also, make sure you're creating something you like. If you don't like a piece, make it personal. Once I was assigned to do a still-life drawing that bored me. After putting something of my own in there, I got into the drawing. The most important thing for me is to have fun while creating. If I like what I'm doing, it's going to be my best work.

"I flipped some of the figures, made others small, then large. And I also tried twirling some. Filling the page with all these different black shapes added an energetic feeling to the piece, as if they were dancing."
As you've seen, folk artists were able to capture the essence of their subjects by reducing them to their most basic shapes. To do this, many folk artists worked with stencils. Stenciling is an easy, fast, and inexpensive medium as well as a very effective way to create repeat patterns.

In this workshop you'll select a theme, translate it into shapes, and arrange them to develop an original stencil pattern.

**Materials**
- Variety of theme magazines, such as nature or sports
- Variety of 18 x 24 in. paper (construction, fadeless, velour)
- 9 x 12 in. newsprint (for practice)
- 18 x 24 in. tracing paper
- Water-soluble printing ink or tempera *(Dick Blick is best)*
- 1-3 in. bristle brushes, house brushes, stencil brushes
- No. 2 school pencil
- Vinyl eraser
- X-Acto knives
- Scissors, ruler, and compass
- 180 lb. 2-ply oak-tag paper (tag board)
- Paper towels
- Masking tape
- Cutting board or heavy cardboard
- Margarine containers (for storing paint and water)

**Step 1**
Look though nature theme magazines for organic forms or geometric patterns found in nature. Select photos that are easily recognizable (avoid cartoons), and remove. Come up with a theme/idea (sports, love, AIDS, family, environmental concerns, etc.). Draw stylized, simplified shapes eliminating all nonessential details. Think in terms of distinctive silhouettes which can be cut out for your stencil. Combine shapes into a visually interesting, balanced square or rectangular composition.

* SCHOLASTIC ART WORKSHOP

Capturing Shapes

To create this jungle scene, Whitney used four colors (the tree is black, the monkey dark gray) on white paper. The frame is a single stencil pattern, repeated three times.

Adam developed his underwater theme using a single stencil sheet. Two colors of ink were brushed onto blue paper.

Eliot has used three stencils and three colors on green paper. The red frame is a single repeat stencil; a separate orange circle overprints the yellow sun.

Multiple stencils were used by Merrie to create her beach scene. The shells and waves are one repeat stencil. The wave stencil was turned upside down and textured for the sky.

Annah cut out moon and star shapes, and printed yellow ink on blue paper. She then stenciled the red pattern on the bottom and overprinted the large black dog.

Geometric shapes balance Susan's symmetrical composition. White shapes were stenciled onto pink paper, then overprinted by black shapes.

USE A TRADITIONAL FOLK-ART TECHNIQUE TO CREATE YOUR OWN NEW AND ORIGINAL STENCIL DESIGN.

STEP 2
Transfer or enlarge drawing to 18 x 18 in. or 18 x 24 in. tracing paper. When drawing, remember to leave areas, or stencil bridges, between cut shapes to hold stencil together (bridges narrower than 1/8 in. tend to fill in). Keep a minimum 2-in. border around the stencil for support. Trace final composition on oak-tag board. Using X-Acto knife and cutting board, cut out stencil shapes.

STEP 3
Consider colors; limit number to three (four with color paper). Practice brush technique before stenciling. Paint should cover evenly, brush should be fairly dry so brushstrokes are soft and shaded. Begin at edges and move toward center. Stenciled shapes should have clean outlines. Your design will determine your stenciling order; large images and images which will be overpainted should be done first. Mix enough color for each area; not too thick or too thin. Once you start to stencil, do not stop working even for several minutes—paper stencil will weaken and paint can dry. For patterns that repeat, put stencil between paper towels to absorb paint. Let area dry before overpainting. As you work, use free hand to press down edges of stencil opening closest to area being stenciled. Can use pencil to hold down narrow bridges.

SOME QUESTIONS
Will your format be vertical, horizontal, or square? Will you use geometric or organic shapes? On what kind of background will your theme work most effectively—white or color; smooth or textured paper? Which kind of composition will best communicate your idea—symmetrical (same on both sides), asymmetrical (each side is different but visually balanced), or radial (based on a circle with center as focal point)? What will be your main focal point? Will you incorporate repeated shapes for which you can use one stencil? Will you be varying your use of these repeat shapes—by placing them upside down, backwards, overlapping them, making them different colors, different textures, using mirror images, or using both positive and negative versions?
Patchwork Puzzles

Can you identify the images in the "patchwork quilt" below?

One of the most important forms of folk art was the quilt. Quilt artists combined shapes and images from various sources to create new patterns. The quilt below is made up of details of pieces featured in the issue. Below that is a list of phrases and artists' names. Next to each, write in the letter of the most appropriate visual (or visuals).

___ 1. Concentric squares
___ 2. Grandma Moses
___ 3. Minnie Evans
___ 4. Three-dimensional shapes
___ 5. Diagonal pattern
___ 6. Texture
___ 7. Horace Pippin
___ 8. Flat, stylized shapes
___ 9. Positive/negative shapes
___ 10. Miriam Schapiro
___ 11. Symmetrical shapes
___ 12. Martin Ramirez
___ 13. Comanche
___ 14. Harry Fonseca
___ 15. Mary Jane Smith
___ 16. Anonymous
___ 17. Geometric shapes
___ 18. Folk-art superstar
___ 19. Cotton
___ 20. Bill Traylor
___ 21. Kay Miller
___ 22. Coyote
___ 23. Shaded shapes
___ 24. Simon Rodia
___ 25. Watts
___ 26. Beverly Buchanan
___ 27. Eye
___ 28. Outlined shapes
___ 29. Straight man-made line
___ 30. John Foster
___ 31. Silhouette
___ 32. Scribbled shapes
___ 33. Mary Morrell Smith