

## Everyday Treasures Gaze Out to Sea



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A hickory ship captain cane, by an unknown, probably 19th-century artist, is one of the American Folk Art Museum offerings.

The American Folk Art Museum barely avoided extinction last year when it was forced to sell its ill-suited building on West 53rd Street in Manhattan and retreat to its much smaller branch space at 2 Lincoln Square. Now it is modestly spreading its wings and trying to set more of its great collection before the public by collaborating with other institutions.

**ROBERTA SMITH**  
ART REVIEW

It has, for example, lent 14 works to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for its new American Wing galleries. Another fruit of this approach is the exuberant and wide-ranging "Compass: Folk Art in Four Directions," a dense exhibition of nearly 200 works shoehorned into four galleries in the

### Compass

Folk Art in Four Directions  
South Street Seaport Museum

early-19th-century row houses that are now the home of the South Street Seaport Museum. The show reflects two struggling museums joining forces. Like the Folk Art Museum, the Seaport Museum has recently faced financial problems, which greatly reduced its curatorial staff, and it is, for the moment at least, being overseen by the Museum of the City of New York.

"Compass" has been organized by the

Folk Art Museum senior curator Stacy C. Hollander. Including both classic Americana and 20th-century outsider art, it shows off the breadth and depth of the museum's unparalleled collection but is also at times resolutely site specific. Ms. Hollander frequently tailors her selections to Lower Manhattan's history as a thriving seaport and mercantile center — the engine that initially drove the development of New York's urban environment. That is, after all, the focus of the show's host museum. In addition she explicates her selections with sharp labels that expand on the area's history.

Ms. Hollander has built the show around

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Coverlets, from sometime between 1820 and 1840, on display at the South Street Seaport Museum. A Turk figure is at the left.



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At the South Street Seaport Museum: a child's chariot, about 1887, and a paint-on-wood Santa Claus, with mica flakes, from 1923. Both are from the American Folk Art Museum collection.

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seafaring, commerce, social life and that all-important factor, the weather, but not too tightly. She follows these themes into the hinterlands, around the world and into literature and also takes poetic license while ranging effectively between masterpieces and relatively generic examples of visual culture.

A section called "Exploration" examines several layers of reality around lives at sea and then heads for more imaginative realms. It includes walking sticks and boxes that sailors fashioned primarily from whale bone or ivory during long voyages; especially impressive is an elliptical "ditty box" incised with neo-Classical buildings from around 1845. There are portraits of sea captains and their wives and a mourning picture attributed to Jane Otis Prior commemorating the loss at sea of her father, a ship's captain, and her brother. Several paintings feature sailing ships in the background, sometimes with a barren little tree or stump that seems to raise a bedraggled branch in sad farewell on the shore.

Other paintings show explorers hunting whales and polar bears in Arctic waters. A cluster of 19th- and 20th-century sculptures portrays a small zoo of animals mostly from foreign climes: a penguin, a gorilla, a kangaroo, a porcupine and a wonderful painted wood tiger by the 20th-century self-taught New Mexican sculptor Felipe Benito Archuleta (1910-91). A hand-painted world map dotted with scores of animals and bordered in stenciled garlands that may have been used in a Connecticut girls' school hangs near an amazing appliqué quilt from late-19th-century Canada that renders Noah's ark and its array of fur-, feather- and scale-covered passengers two by two.

A section rather too contemporarily titled "Social Networking" builds on the seaport as a center for recreational and professional interactions. A display of painted tin coffeepots, teapots, tumblers and mugs, and a hand-painted checkerboard, speaks to the coffeehouses that were once among the early occupants of the seaport museum's buildings. A painted trade sign for the E. Flitts Jr. Store and Coffeehouse indicates how one such emporium (albeit one somewhere around Shelburne, Mass.) would have announced its presence. A beguiling painting of the shop's interior is



A tiger, 1970, by the artist Felipe Benito Archuleta.

on its reverse side, replete with bins for coffee and tea and trays of baked goods.

In a subsection titled "Doing Business" you'll find a late-19th-century tattoo pattern book and an account book whose title page is festooned with floral designs, both attesting to some basic human need to make images. More personal networks are indicated by an array of embellished family records from Maine and the distinctively lettered "love tokens" that presage the modern valentine.

The section titled "Shopping" is especially lively, with Jacquard double-cloth coverlets, glazed stone crocks and a selection of anniversary tins — lighthearted shiny sculptures that were given as anniversary gifts to married couples. Those here include a man's top hat (with eyeglasses) and a woman's bonnet and pair of shoes. Their sleek, buoyant forms can remind you how much the early Polish-American modernist sculptor Elie Nadelman learned from American folk art.

The craze for fancy furniture (that is, painted) is explored in a display dominated by a chest-of-drawers that fairly explodes with wet-on-wet painted patterns in white and gray. The grouping



Works, with paint on plaster of Paris, in the show "Compass: Folk Art in Four Directions."



A display of a sculptured sheep, part of a hanging shop sign from the mid-19th century.



A teapot and other works, paint on tin plate, from 1798 to 1835, at the museum.

ONLINE: 'COMPASS'

More images from the exhibition:  
[nytimes.com/design](http://nytimes.com/design)

alternates between one-of-a-kind hand-painted versions and those that were relatively mass produced using stencils. They're all amazing fusions of decoration and function.

The walls in this gallery feature portraits of citizens in their luxurious Sunday best, most notably the tautly dignified "Gentleman in a Black Cravat" and its consort, "Lady in a Gold-Colored Dress," painted around 1835-40 by the great American limner Ammi Phillips (1788-1865). And there are plenty of signs of commerce to come. A shop sign in the form of a hanging sheep would appear to be a precursor to the familiar Brooks Brothers golden fleece. An early-20th-century painted-wood figure of Santa Claus may be from the 1920s — it's by a sculptor named Samuel Anderson Robb (1851-1928) — but as Ms. Hollander reminds us in a label, his red-cheeked persona was already codified in the United States by the 1820s.

The show's final section, "Wind, Water and Weather," takes on the elements and is largely a contest between vigorous depictions of water, with and without ships, and a selection of figureheads, weather vanes and whirligigs, including one of a windmill and rooster by the talented outsider assemblage artist David Butler (1898-1997). The British cargo steamship *Skulda*, which collided with another vessel and sank off Scotland in 1906, is commemorated in a painting by an artist known only as R. Johnson, working in the Bronx around 1960.

Niagara Falls is the subject of a marvelously robust hooked rug from the 1920s, while the outsider artist Maceptaw Bogun (1917-95), also of the Bronx, worked oil paint into a ruglike wooliness (with a little help from some carpet) in another waterfall image, this one from 1971. The tour de force here, though, is "Harbor Scene on Cape Cod," a combination of slapdash rough water, coruscating shores and a jaunty yellow-decked three-master that an unknown artist painted in the 1890s.

Ms. Hollander ends her exhibition with a figure who looms large in the history of outsider art and the American Folk Art Museum's collection: the reclusive genius Henry Darger (1892-1973) of Chicago. He is represented here by five examples of the two-sided panoramic watercolors from a 1,500-page epic that narrates the trials, tribulations and frequent battles of his often androgynous Vivian Girls. Darger had a special sensitivity to weather, partly because of a traumatic childhood encounter with a tornado. In the watercolors here his figures are shadowed by stormy, lightning-streaked skies. Equally interesting is a touch-screen presentation of one of the relatively unknown daily weather journals Darger kept in the 1950s and '60s, competitively comparing meteorologists' forecasts with actual weather conditions. The entry for July 31, 1961, reads: "He said high in the mid-70s. It was 75 all right. He said westerly winds. It was north-east."

Chicago in the 1960s is a long way from Lower Manhattan and the Eastern Seaboard, in their heyday as a nexus of maritime activity, but Darger watches the skies as intently as any anxious sea captain. And somehow Ms. Hollander makes it all work, alternately taking liberties and staying on message, building an intricate constellation of connected artworks, histories and concerns and repeatedly revealing her museum's collection to be one of New York City's great treasures.



A porcupine, about 1981, by David Alvarez.

"Compass: Folk Art in Four Directions," organized by the American Folk Art Museum, continues through Oct. 7 at the South Street Seaport Museum, 12 Fulton Street, Lower Manhattan, (212) 748-8600, [southstreetseaportmuseum.org](http://southstreetseaportmuseum.org).