

April 24, 2009
Art Review | Ulysses Davis

A Barber's Carved Legacy, Finished With Rhinestones and Shoe Polish

By KAREN ROSENBERG

Most artists have day jobs at one point or another, sometimes for life. A few are lucky enough to enjoy their work as well as their art. Rarely do they achieve the symbiosis of creative and occupational activity enjoyed by Ulysses Davis (1914-1990), a Savannah, Ga., barber who whittled and carved wooden sculptures in his shop when business was slow.

In the catalog for the excellent show "The Treasure of Ulysses Davis" at the American Folk Art Museum, he is quoted as saying: "I love to barber. It's something that keeps your mind together. If I had to choose between cutting hair and carving, I don't know which one I would choose, because I love to cut on wood." Art and life were inseparable and interchangeable. Sometimes Davis used his hair clippers on the wood; sometimes he gave impromptu lessons in art history to his clients in Savannah, Ga.

Davis was self-taught but savvy about the ways history crowns artists. He had visited enough museums to know that his sculptures would be most impressive if they were kept together. He rarely sold a piece, turning down many collectors. After his death his son Milton arranged for the King-Tisdell Cottage Foundation in Savannah, dedicated to local African-American history, to acquire most of the sculptures.

About three-quarters of the 100 or so works in this exhibition are first-time loans from the King-Tisdell. "The Treasure of Ulysses Davis," which comes from and was organized by the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, is by far the largest presentation of Davis's sculpture to be seen outside Savannah.

It makes clear that he wasn't just a patriotic folk artist, or an African-American artist affirming his heritage, or an inward-looking visionary artist. He was all of these, which is to say that no single cliché of "outsider" art quite fits him.

Until now Davis has been best known for his carvings of historical figures: a set of mahogany busts of all the presidents (through [George H. W. Bush](#)) and similar portrait heads of the Rev. Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#), the Kennedys and other leaders from the civil rights era. These works, which make up the first section of the exhibition, mix caricature with ardent patriotism. They make you wonder what Davis might have done with the image of the 44th president.

Yet they're hardly his most inventive sculptures. As this show reveals, he also portrayed biblical characters, strange beasts and hydra-headed figures. Some of these creations show the influence of African art and history, filtered through printed images and reconfigured by Davis's imagination.

Davis worked with many kinds of wood, including mahogany, cedar and poplar, sometimes obtained from friends who worked as longshoremen on the Savannah docks. He typically worked without the aid of preliminary drawings, using hatchets and band saws to rough out the form before picking up a chisel or knife. He fashioned some of his tools himself, using metalworking skills he learned during a stint as a railroad blacksmith.

Some of his carvings are painted, stained or rubbed with black shoe polish and adorned with rhinestones and pearl beads. He also used metal punches and stamps, of his own design, to create lizardlike surface

textures, as in the pair of serpentine sculptures “Beast With Wings” and “Created Beast With Many Heads.”

Other figures seem to have sprung from B-movies or circus sideshows. These include the self-explanatory “Creature From Another Planet With Two Noses” and “Two-Headed Bearded Man.” A futuristic hybrid titled “Emperor of Mars” has Yoda’s face and two extraneous, swanlike heads.

Davis took a similar approach to the African art he studied in library books, synthesizing motifs from different parts of the continent. His “Makonde,” a version of the “Tree of Life” found in sculpture from Tanzania and Mozambique, includes a Janus-like divinity out of Yoruba cosmology.

He also relied on popular representations of Africans, basing one series of sculptures on illustrations of warrior kings from a 1970s Anheuser-Busch promotional calendar. (For the presidents he used a similarly down-to-earth source, a paper schoolbook cover.)

And he wasn’t looking only to Africa. Included here are a potbellied Buddha and an armless figure with features resembling those on Himalayan masks (“Red Lips”).

His most intricate works are the decorative objects he referred to as “twinklets”: tiered boxes that look like wedding cakes, adorned with beads and crystals. He also made canes, tables and other functional pieces. “The Garden of Eden,” his last and largest work, depicts Adam and Eve nestled between the legs of a table. A grinning serpent rises from the tabletop.

The installation, by the American Folk Art Museum curator Brooke Davis Anderson, stumbles a bit toward the end. Groups of related sculptures (including the African kings) are distributed among several wall-mounted cases. This creates variety but makes Davis seem more eclectic than he was.

Throughout the show there’s a powerful sense of deferred gratification. (In a self-portrait, the only one here, he’s a diminutive figure with a pipe and glasses.) Davis never doubted the spiritual, material and aesthetic worth of his art, but he chose to keep it close and to make his living cutting hair. More than a career in art, he wanted a legacy — and he got it.

“The Treasure of Ulysses Davis” continues through Sept. 6 at the American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, near Sixth Avenue, (212) 265-1040, folkartmuseum.org.