



Earl Cunningham: Painting an American Eden. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1994; pp. 17-55+134-135.

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Earl Cunningham: Painting an American Eden

Disenchanted with life, King Arthur and Queen Guinevere in Lerner and Loewe's musical *Camelot* wonder how simple folk cope with reality. Their speculations about the so-called simple folk are indicative of many sophisticates who periodically indulge in fantasies about an uncomplicated world. Such an indulgence was voiced in a review of the groundbreaking 1924 Whitney Studio Club exhibition that featured the work of American self-taught artists. Apropos this exhibition, the critic Charles Messer Stow commented, "In the midst of a sophisticated existence it is refreshing to turn to something that totally lacks sophistication. And these early paintings give that refreshment."¹ But the folk and their attitudes are not nearly as naive as Lerner and Loewe's musical and Stow's review suggest and as new historians intent on an upstairs/downstairs reversal of traditional hierarchies are discovering. The popular culture specialist Fred E. H. Schroeder has pointed out: "The expressive *forms* of popular arts . . . must be simple, but the underlying ideas, concepts and philosophies may be most profound. . . . It is my contention that the popular audience, if it is given a choice, will always tend toward the more profound meanings, so long as the aesthetic demands of simplicity and clarity of expression are not violated."²

This book on the art of Earl Cunningham (1893–1977)—a marine painter working mostly in Maine and Florida from the teens to the 1970s—will examine his not-so-simple vernacular art from a

*Earl Cunningham seated on table in
back room of Over Fork Gallery, 1970.
Photograph by Jerry Uelsmann*

number of contexts, including the artist's personal world, the realm of intuitive art, and mainstream culture. Rather than segregating his Edenic views into a separate realm where they can mainly be appreciated as charming and idiosyncratic, this study will examine them in relation to some of the major historical and cultural debates of their time: the significance of belief in a country attuned to skepticism, American isolationist views versus the country's international commitments, and the role of the past in a culture dedicated to both the present and the future.

According to Robert Bishop, who was director of the Museum of American Folk Art, which cosponsored in 1986 the New York City showing of Cunningham's paintings, this artist is a "truly great painter" whose work is "not in many ways unlike that of [Henri] Rousseau from France."³ He considered Cunningham remarkable for "his technique [which] is considerably more painterly than that possessed by most 20th century self-taught artists" and "a master colorist."⁴ Regarding the Cunningham exhibition as "the rediscovery of a major twentieth century American folk artist," Bishop wrote, "Today his work remains at the forefront of the 'historical fantasy' evolution of twentieth century American folk art."⁵ Bishop thought that Cunningham would achieve as important critical standing as Grandma Moses, an assessment that the artist himself would have disputed, since he regarded Anna Mary Robertson as important but not daunting competition. Cunningham collected clippings on Grandma Moses and no doubt studied her paintings to see

how he could improve on her style.⁶

Cunningham was a painter with messianic zeal about his work, which he wanted to be the basis of a museum. In the 1960s he told the photographer Jerry Uelsmann that he hoped to create a total of one thousand paintings for this museum.⁷ Sometime in the 1920s this self-taught painter first began to build a museum on his twenty-five-acre farm in Maine, which he named "Fort Valley." Located near the road but situated in a draw with a pond, the farm, which he purchased from his family, was both protected and accessible to traffic. According to Robert Cunningham, his nephew, Earl "always had irons in the fire and was full of ideas and excitement."⁸ He may have intended his first house on the property to be a museum since it contained many collections, which were destroyed in a fire that took the house in the 1920s.⁹ He later continued to pursue the idea and in 1940 purchased a fifty-acre farm in Waterboro, South Carolina, where he subsequently raised chickens for the United States Army during World War II. After the war Cunningham relocated to St. Augustine, where from 1949 until his death, in 1977, he operated an antique shop and an art gallery, which served as a temporary museum. He called this combination business/museum "The Over Fork Gallery."¹⁰ His friend Charles Brigham has related that the antique shop itself was organized as a museum, and sometimes Cunningham would take people on tours through the shop, telling them stories as if they were visiting a history museum. He once admitted to Brigham that he had been refused a job as a curator somewhere in Maine,



New England Autumn. 16×20". Collection of Samuel B. and Marion W. Lawrence



Earl Cunningham standing in front of Over Fork Gallery, 1970. Photograph by Jerry Uelsmann

but Brigham did not give this story much credence.¹¹ According to another friend, John Surovek, who was director of the Museum of Arts and Sciences, Daytona Beach, where Cunningham's second retrospective was held, Cunningham was the director, docent, art historian, and author of his collection of paintings.¹²

Although he sold a variety of antiques in his shop, Cunningham was reluctant to let go of his paintings. To Surovek he stated, "Every one of my paintings are brothers and sisters. I can't separate my family of paintings."¹³ He even made a sign stating, "These paintings are not for sale," which he displayed prominently in the gallery. On occasion he traded paintings for necessary services and such goods as a used car and wood,¹⁴ but he sold only a small percentage of his works because he wanted to preserve them for his museum. He evidently believed that the sum total of 450 extant works that he managed to keep in his possession until the end of his life represented an important statement about the world. In addition to his reluctance to part with his paintings, Cunningham was not receptive to commissions. According to Surovek, Cunningham would not incorporate the Daytona Museum of Arts and Sciences into a painting even though he would have been generously paid for his efforts.¹⁵

Cunningham's gallery on St. George Street was an almost sacred enterprise that he was unwilling to share with the great numbers of people frequenting his shop in the heart of historic St. Augustine's tourist district. Only a few visitors were allowed into the locked gallery adjoining the shop. It was

located in a space that had been a restaurant, and a few booths remained from that time. Whenever Cunningham decided to open the gallery, he would close the antique shop, even if he had to ask prospective customers to leave. Then he took the honored guests into the museum.

A curmudgeon with a sense of humor, Cunningham, who became known as “the Crusty Dragon of St. George Street,”¹⁶ admitted that the locked door made his museum all the more intriguing. He relished telling the story of the former major and U.S. senator Walter B. Frazier, who “bought a spring and called it the Fountain of Youth and built a six-foot fence around it, and . . . used to say, ‘You can take the Fountain, just leave me the fence.’”¹⁷

Cunningham might have joked about the museum, but he was also deadly serious about both it and his identity as an artist. He was fond of wearing a beret as a way of reinforcing his artistic identity. When he painted, he also wore an artist’s smock with a crest on the back bearing the name “Over Fork.” The crest, with the addition of the words “Over Fork Over,” was the same family seal that he used to advertise his gallery. This crest served as a wry badge of approval, and, strangely enough, it legitimized both the museum and the shop, which Cunningham had indicated on a number of occasions was operated solely for financial reasons. To imply his primarily mercenary attitude toward this business without alienating customers, Cunningham used “Over Fork” as the name for his gallery.¹⁸

Even though Cunningham left no written record about his museum, his collection of paintings



Earl Cunningham working on wooden angel sculpture c. 1972. Photograph by Robert Mullis



Summer Day at Over Fork. 22½ × 43"

Summer Day at Over Fork (*detail*)

fortunately has been preserved almost in its entirety. An investigation of major themes in this collection reveals some important concerns of this self-taught painter whose art offers an important alternative to the values and concerns of mainstream culture. In works filled with a sense of fantasy about the past as well as a subtle and disarmingly charming critique of the present, Cunningham presents a new symbolic genesis of America. His paintings re-create the past to give a halcyon view of what America could have been and might still be. In many of his paintings Cunningham symbolically reenacts the beginnings of America by bringing early Norse explorers and Native Americans together with the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century sailing vessels of his youth. To reinforce the great antiquity of the Norse ships, the artist would often paint patches on the sails. An individual tormented with inner conflicts and deep suspicions about others, Cunningham used his art as a way of reaffirming an Edenic view of the world. His own inner turmoil makes the harmonies of these works all the more significant because they represent momentary victories over the doubts plaguing him.

Cunningham wished to honor his artistically constructed memories in his museum. These memories are significant fabrications that reorder reality to meet the artist's present needs. The sense of nostalgia pervading these works is key to the way that Cunningham re-presents the world rather than merely reflects it. Although the term "memory painter" often is used for such individuals as Cunningham, in his case it is particularly confusing

because it suggests that his creations are mere reflections of his youth rather than a highly symbolic and necessary reconstitution of it. To call him a memory painter would thus trivialize and invalidate his creations by implying that his broad cultural reassessments are merely charming and inaccurate recollections.

In order to understand the problematic implications of the term memory painter, it is helpful, for the purposes of comparison, to consider the case of Anna Mary Robertson Moses, a contemporary of Cunningham who came to be regarded as a special disseminator of nostalgia. In keeping with this role, Mrs. Moses, who signed her works simply with her last name, was called Grandma Moses by both the press and her gallery, even though her own grandchildren called her at first "Bonny" and later—probably as a concession to the media—"Gram."¹⁹ In order to jog her memory about her youth, Mrs. Moses relied on Currier & Ives lithographs, which were then widely reproduced, as well as a host of mass-produced images, including greeting cards and illustrations in magazines and newspapers. Her nostalgia is thus a socially and culturally encoded construct that depends as much on the popularity of the American past, beginning in the 1930s, when American Regionalist art became important, as it does on her own memories of her childhood in rural upstate New York. The term memory painting is thus inadequate to describe Moses' paintings and also Cunningham's work because it considers memory to be a true reflection of past reality rather than a distinct re-creation of the past that frequently



Seminole Village, Brown Water Camp. 17×29"



Pawleys Island. 22×29"



Over Fork Over, Cunningham's coat of arms. Oil on board, 24 × 20"

compensates for the inadequacies of the present.

Although Cunningham usually is labeled a folk artist, this study will avoid the terms folk artist and naive painter. The first term is inaccurate in its assumption that there is a common folk tradition from which Cunningham and other like-minded artists originate. While folk art adequately charac-

terizes established groups such as the Shakers and the Moravians, it is less appropriate for such self-taught painters as Cunningham because it implies that he subscribed to a vocabulary of forms commonly accepted by a distinct subculture. Robert Bishop stated that "to confuse Earl Cunningham with folk art seems rather naive these days. His contributions were that of a unique visionary artist."²⁰ To regard Cunningham as a folk artist denigrates by implication his individuality and originality. The term naive is also problematic because it connotes a simplicity of thought that is inconsistent with the nature of Cunningham's art, particularly the complexity of his symbols, the range of his artistic sources, and his sophisticated use of color. While Cunningham was innocent of such established academic techniques as one-point perspective and the classical way of rendering human anatomy, he was sophisticated in his use of a number of ideas germane to modern art. The term that suits Cunningham is "vernacular art." John Hubenthal has summarized its special usage:

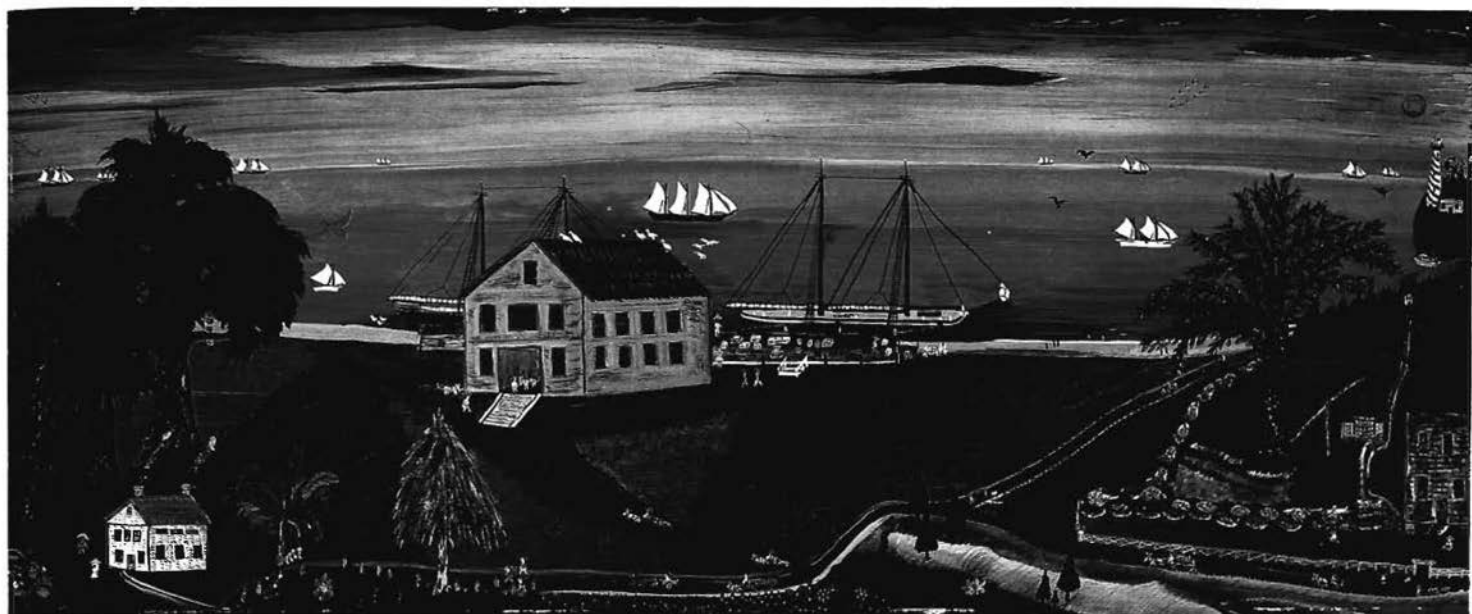
*Vernacular art is not folk because it is at best marginal to tradition. It is not popular because it is outside the system of mass production which is inherent in the industrial nature of popular culture. It is not outsider because it is not severely marginalized with regard to its culture. It is not fine art because it lacks the self-conscious historicity of the art of the elite. It is the spontaneous art of people who are within the contemporary system without patronage.*²¹



Working Drawing. *Mixed mediums on paper, 18 × 40 1/2"*



Safe Harbor. 16×37"



Warehouse at *Hokona* Settlement. 20 × 47 3/4"



In recent years a number of folk-life specialists have become highly critical of the ways that folk art has been colonized by mainstream culture in general and by modernist aesthetics in particular. Among these critics, one of the most articulate is Simon J. Bronner, who has pointed out that aesthetic considerations have trivialized folk art by keeping it exotic and strange. In addition, Bronner believes that such judgments have masked a series of latent desires to keep the folk suppressed. "The folk art object," Bronner has written, "is converted into the fine arts system of painting and sculpture, patronage and appraisal, dominance and control."²² He also has pointed out the inadequacies of the term folk art: "For those stressing the art, folk represented an appealing romantic, nativist qualifier used in the marketplace. For those stressing the folk, it represented a sense of community and informal learning examined in academe."²³ Despite the cogency of Bronner's arguments, he himself is guilty of romanticizing the folk by describing them in terms of "an integral type of learning and social exchange, viewing folk as a constant, dynamic process, and characterizing folk as part of vitally functioning communities which often downplay individual capitalist competition."²⁴ Although it is commendable to see the folk in relation to themselves, their own cri-

teria of excellence, and their distinct set of symbols, as Bronner suggests, much of the art currently designated as folk, such as Earl Cunningham's paintings, cannot be segregated from mainstream culture: Cunningham's work was made for museum viewing, and his style indicates a familiarity with modern art.

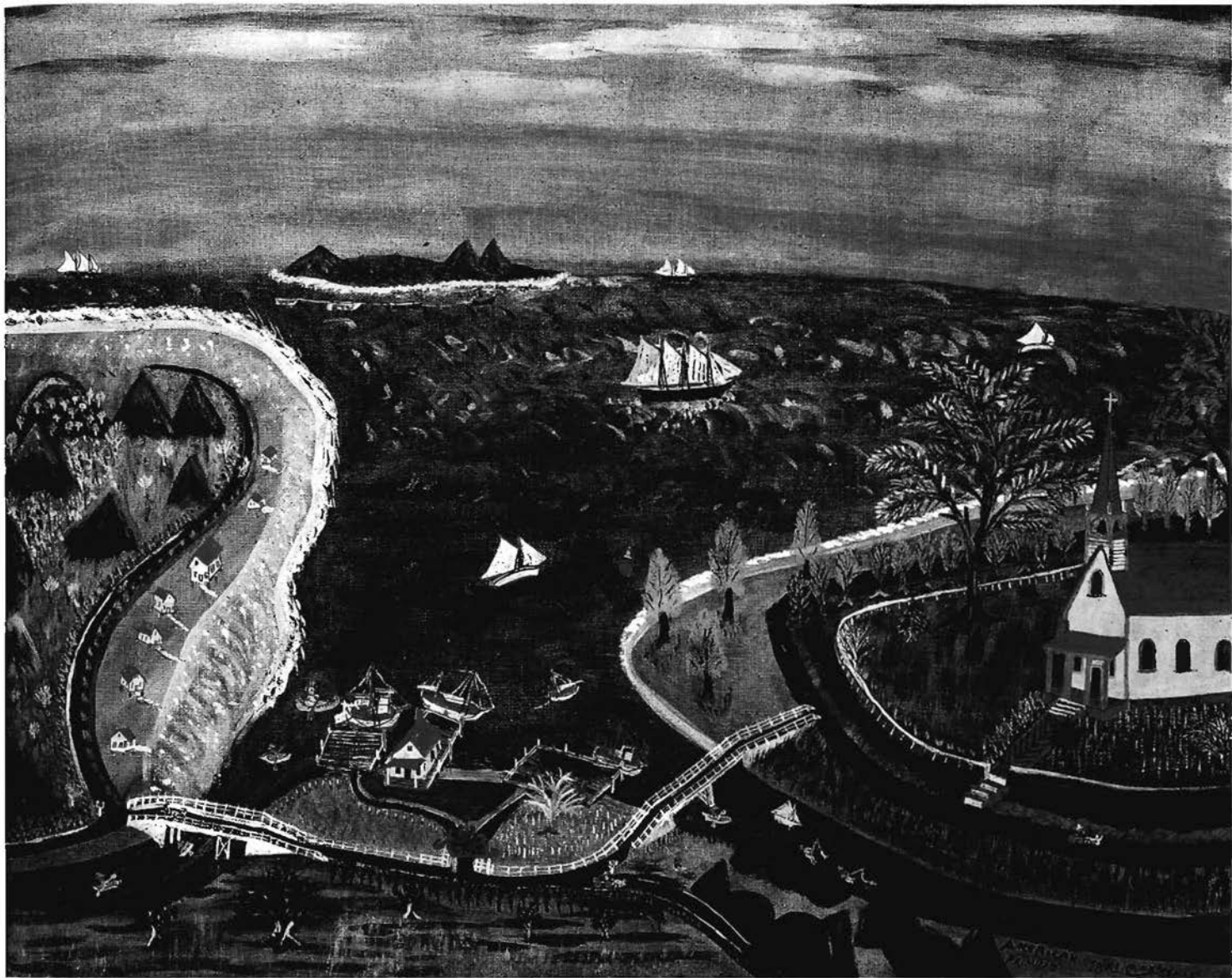
Thus when considering his work one should resist such pronouncements as the following one by Charles Brigham: "In Earl Cunningham's work, there is no real knowledge, no aesthetic theory that lies behind his work. It is all a spontaneous effusion of a high mark."²⁵ Despite Brigham's sincerity and enthusiasm, his belief in an unmediated vision is unrealistic and inconsistent with the nature of art as a means of establishing a common identity. While it is unrealistic for a critic or an art historian to subscribe to the idea of a pure vision, such a conviction is often an essential working premise for many artists who need to regard their vision as unique in order to maintain it.

Cunningham's naiveté was very knowing. As Surovek has stated, "Cunningham was the most unaffected affected guy in the world." He has pointed out that this artist was aware of people's critical remarks about the flamingos that were out of proportion with his houses but was unwilling to accede to their criteria. Although hurt by these remarks, Cunningham took comfort in Picasso's freedom of expression, which he often compared with his own.²⁶ In his work and in his life, Cunningham manifested a mixture of simplicity and sophistication that is characteristically twentieth-century even though it is disconcerting to anyone trying to apply

Interior of Over Fork Gallery with Earl Cunningham, 1970. Photograph by Jerry Uelsmann



White Ship, Blue Sea. 15½ × 20½"



New England Church. Oil on canvasboard, 21 × 25"

| | | |
|------------------------------------|---|------------------------|
| Gallery |  | Studio |
| 55 ST. GEORGE ST. | | 49 ST. GEORGE ST. |
| Primitive | Cunningham | Artist |
| Earl Cunningham | | |
| 49-55 ST. GEORGE STREET | | ST. AUGUSTINE, FLORIDA |



OVER-FORK STUDIO

Earl R. Cunningham
 CURATOR MINERALOGY
 PRIMITIVE OIL PAINTINGS
 MINERALS CUT AND POLISHED
 FINISHED SEMI-PRECIOUS STONES
 SMALL ANTIQUES

Earl Cunningham's business cards

traditional labels such as naive and folk artist. This mixture of simplicity and sophistication makes Cunningham appear to be postmodern, but he is involved with belief rather than doubt. When Cunningham signed a painting "American Primitive"²⁷ and later when he had business cards printed with the designation "Primitive Artist," he inadvertently set up a tension between intuitive art and later post-modern neoprimitives such as David Bates and Hollis Sieglar. His knowledge of his status indicates a sophistication that is at odds with the usual expectations concerning vernacular artists, and it points to the fluidity of language in the twentieth century, when naïveté and sophistication can no longer be considered as polarities. By using the term "Primitive Artist" to refer to himself, Cunningham doubles the codes for vernacular art with the goal of using one to reinforce the other. This designation, however, which is characteristically used by a member of the mainstream culture to refer to someone who is marginalized, serves the reverse function of questioning the authenticity of his work. The doubling of sophisticated and vernacular codes continues in his reappropriation of the so-called folk-art forms used by many modern artists, including the Fauves, and in his reliance on the tradition that includes Edward Hicks, Grandma Moses, and Joseph Pickett. Depending on one's point of view, Cunningham's approach can be considered an appropriation of modernism, a reappropriation of the vernacular that modern art itself had appropriated, a revival of the American folk-art tradition as seen in the works of Hicks and others, and a survival of nineteenth-

century traditions that Cunningham himself continues. Of course his approach is representative of all these attitudes, considered singly or in combination. Although Cunningham was self-taught, he was definitely not naive; and although he was knowledgeable about his status as a vernacular artist, he remained an intuitive painter who attempted to synthesize his experiences in a visual form. The problem for traditional scholars who are accustomed to regarding vernacular as a marginalized activity is that Cunningham was both trusting enough to follow his convictions and yet self-aware; he was both marginalized and mainstream at the same time.

Such knowing naiveté is evident in Cunningham's use of both housepainter's and artist's supplies. Since he enjoyed scavenging, he availed himself of the used lots of house paint that he acquired for sometimes two dollars a box. Surovek remembers seeing in the artist's studio twenty to thirty cans of paint that Cunningham had found at garage sales. He believes that the pinks, greens, and yellows in many Cunningham works may have been commercial paint. According to Surovek, if Cunningham had a paint color available, then he would use a lot of it in his paintings.²⁸ Cunningham apparently used artist's tube colors in conjunction with the house paint. In the studio at his death was a large variety of costly brushes and a range of palette knives. His oil paints included tubes of colors sold by Grumbacher, Schmincke & Co. Dusseldorf, Sheffield Colors, and Winsor & Newton.

The majority of Cunningham's works are painted on Masonite. The smoothness of this material

was important to him, perhaps because of the final polished surfaces it permitted him to achieve. These enamel-like surfaces distilled and purified his scenes, making them appear permanent and inevitable. The smoothness also allowed him to indulge in a wealth of details with the assurance that they would be pristine and intense. His polished surfaces encase his forms in a chrysalis of jewel-like light that protects and separates them. This glossy surface functions almost like quotation marks that set this artist's images at a remove from prosaic reality: action is suspended, creating the effect of a constant state of being—an inevitability that is a subtle and yet strong force in the art.

Cunningham enriched this smooth surface with a variety of techniques, which included scratching through paint to determine forms, using feathered brushstrokes, combing in such shapes as foliage, and laying on heavy impasto for rocks and the bark of certain trees. Frequently he allowed the underpainting to show through the top layer of semitranslucent color and thus change the perceived tone of a given hue and give his work a distinct harmony. This preference for underpainting and for scratching and combing colors allies Cunningham with the techniques of Henri Matisse and helps to support the claim that Cunningham was aware of the subtleties and range of mainstream avant-garde art.

Deeply serious about his art, Cunningham took time to carefully work out compositions, as his extant drawings show. On a number of these drawings the artist posed questions for himself and for others. On a study of Mackinac Island (circa 1950),



A'Sail at Dawn. 20×24"

he asked a member of the Michigan Historical Society, which commissioned it, "Does this want to be here—just say yes or no in letter. Have not put it in." At other times he noted changes that he intended to make in the oil version of the composition. And he often jotted down reminders of exactly which colors he planned to use when translating a drawing into a painting.

Although some artists consider frames to be mere decorative accessories and allow their dealers or clients to choose them, Cunningham's concern with the frames for works such as *Flamingo Bay*, *Springtime Squall*, and *Blue Water Cove* indicates his belief in them as crucial aesthetic components. He made all the frames for his paintings. The most important ones were modeled on American Empire ogee frames, which had mahogany veneers. Cunningham's variations, without veneer, are similar to the stripped-down pine and poplar wood frames of the "Early American" revival style of the 1940s and 1950s, except that Cunningham's frames are highly varnished or decorated with colorful, free-form shapes resembling military camouflage. The shiny, heavy frames are imposing; they circumscribe and separate Cunningham's world, keeping it special and semiprivate.

Although Jerry Uelsmann "can't imagine Cunningham reading art books,"²⁹ the artist did come in contact with modern art and accepted a number of its tenets. Surovek has referred to Cunningham as "a Socrates of the first order, who learned everything you can learn from language,"³⁰ and so he may have picked up important information about modern art



Flowers and Birds. 1965. Graphite and charcoal on paper, 15 × 10 1/4"



Springtime Squall. 16 × 19½"



Flamingo Bay. 18 x 23 1/4"

from visitors to his antique shop and other painters in the St. Augustine area. Even if Cunningham did not read art books, as Uelsmann suggests, he could have become acquainted with modern art from the surprising number of articles on the subject that were published in *Life* magazine beginning in the late 1930s. Uelsmann remembers that in Cunningham's antique shop there were stacks of *Life*, *Collier's*, and *National Geographic*, "so many in fact that it was dangerous."³¹

In addition to *Life*, Cunningham had the opportunity to know some modern works of art through large reproductions. In one of the photographs of his antique shop taken by Uelsmann in 1970 appears a framed reproduction of a late Maurice de Vlaminck that was being offered for sale. Considering the existence of this image in his antique shop, it is possible that Cunningham sold over the years second-hand reproductions of popular works by Vincent van Gogh, Matisse, and the Impressionists. Access to these reproductions would have exposed him to some of the basic concepts of modern painting and might explain his penchant for strong colors.

Cunningham also could have come in contact with a number of basic attitudes about modern art by watching such Walt Disney animated films as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Fantasia* (1940). At some time between the late 1930s and early 1950s Cunningham made paintings of Disney's seven dwarfs. This art suggests that he saw *Snow White* and was enthusiastic about its strong color and sense of fantasy.³² Because the artist did not take commissions, the choice to re-create the

dwarfs was no doubt his own. Cunningham's knowledge of this film is an important clue to his overall work because it indicates a familiarity with expressionistic ideas, which are evident in the forest scene early in the film, when the huntsman takes Snow White outside the palace. In this segment the forest begins to take on some characteristics of Charles Burchfield's early paintings, particularly the repeated outlines around trees and plants that suggest spiritual emanations and sometimes reveal incipient anthropomorphic features. Even though the latter does not occur in Cunningham's work, the repetition of outlines is readily apparent in some of his earlier paintings and relevant to his overall style. Although this device in Burchfield's work indicates connections with both synesthesia and the art of the Russian Expressionist Wassily Kandinsky, who wished to establish equivalences between color, shape, and sound, in Cunningham's work it points to the art's attempt to get beyond surface appearances and reveal a more profound cross section of life itself. *Snow White* and *Fantasia* could also have served Cunningham as short courses in modern art's seemingly arbitrary intense colors, which originated in the work of Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and the Fauves.

It might seem farfetched to align this self-taught artist with the highly sophisticated ideas of the French Symbolist movement, which provided Gauguin and Matisse, among others, with the rationale for using saturated hues. But if one recognizes how profoundly these Symbolist concepts permeated popular culture, including animated cartoons, mass-



Big Tree Park. 16×24". Akron Art Museum, Ohio,
Gift of The Honorable Marilyn L. Mennello and Mr. Michael A. Mennello



Tranquil Forest. 22 × 26"

Tranquil Forest (*detail*)

media advertising, and fashion, their indirect impact on Cunningham seems far more plausible. The reason for pointing out their relevance to his art is not simply to elevate his paintings by association, even though that might be a residual effect, but to point out how Cunningham has claimed for vernacular art certain avant-garde concepts that have become disseminated throughout the culture.

In his work Cunningham invokes some of the original Symbolist concepts, such as the absolute reality of the abstract components of painting. This belief in the reality of art's formal language has a source in Stéphane Mallarmé's thought. A major Symbolist poet, Mallarmé was fond of asserting that poems are made of words not ideas. By this statement he meant that poetry must be separated from prose, and the "inner alchemy of the word" must be preserved. Following Mallarmé, modern painters realized that works of art are made with colors and shapes that must be freed of many encumbrances created by fictive illusions in order to communicate directly. Although Cunningham never relinquishes the realm of appearances, he does revel in the abstract power of color as his saffron oceans, raspberry bays, and chocolate waterways all indicate.

While Cunningham was susceptible to the abstract power of strong color, he had only a rudimentary education and consequently did not use philosophical concepts to explain the ideas that his works manifest. In conversations with Uelsmann he would defend the colors of his skies and bodies of water as actual.³³ Although Cunningham may have fervently believed in the veracity of his color, he

may also have confused two different orders of reality informing his work: one being external references to nature and the other the truth of his intuitive vision, which he was compelled to manifest in his art. This seeming contradiction between actuality and a transcendent reality recapitulates many aspects of the classical philosophical debate between Aristotle's ideas on the substantiality of concrete particulars and Plato's theory of forms.

This debate about the nature of reality, which the Platonists view as a nonsensible entity approached through pure reasoning and the Aristotelians consider grounded in both the sensible and the mutable, is of central importance to the study of vernacular art. Its first important application to the study of intuitive art occurs in the book *Santos and Saints: The Religious Folk Art of Hispanic New Mexico* by the Jesuit priest Thomas J. Steele.³⁴ Steele notes that Platonic ideas are philosophic equivalents for spiritual being, which places importance on sacred persons and "pattern-setting actions."³⁵ He writes: "The important thing is not a flow of knowledge—of explanation—from the more intelligible [the spiritual] to the less intelligible [the earthly], but a validating participation of the greater holiness of the greater (saint or saving event) by the lesser (santo or cultic ritual)."³⁶ In other words, the sacred ritual or the work of art (in this case, the santos) is a vector pointing to a transcendent realm; it is important because of its connection to an elevated spiritual plane and because it can ensure a continued relationship between ordinary mortals and the saint or spiritual state to which it alludes. Steele refers to

this spiritual state as “folk Platonism,”³⁷ and he notes that the preeminence of the transcendent truth over the cultic ritual or object representing it can result in an unfortunate situation in which “the artifact or the religious ritual [can] deteriorate into an unimaginative and mechanical imitation.”³⁸ He elaborates on this idea, saying: “The santo is like a commissioned portrait, where the subject’s likeness is the dominant consideration and the artist’s style and artistic ideals are less autonomous than when he is working from his own inclination.”³⁹ In the realm of secular, intuitive art, this Platonism takes the form of an autonomous concept that the artist must render to the best of his or her ability.

Even though Steele does not deal with secular objects in his book, his “folk Platonist” theory can be applied to them with little difficulty. Although in the religious work of art the importance is shifted from the actual object to the Platonic realm of non-sensible form, in the secular, vernacular work of art significance is placed on the power of the original concept, which can be comprehended only through the work of art. Unlike santos, which can be effective sacred objects even when uninspired, the secular, vernacular objects must convey the artist’s belief in his or her vision in order to be effective. The vision, in other words, must be powerful enough to inspire the vernacular artist to surmount the difficulties of a rudimentary technique. Because there is no religious orthodoxy to validate the secular intuitive artist’s vision, artistic quality is a key factor in assessing the significance of this vision.

In his essay “Suffer the Little Children to

Come unto Me’: Twentieth Century Folk Art,” Donald Kuspit elaborates on Steele’s concept of folk Platonism⁴⁰ by emphasizing the role of feeling and by addressing the problem of the typical and the commonplace that so often occurs in vernacular art. In regard to feeling, Kuspit points out that “the [vernacular] artist became so intoxicated with the idea (not simply reality) of them, that only a toy home or a toy animal could do them justice, for only that toy made their Platonic intelligibility and necessity visible.”⁴¹ Thus feeling allows the vernacular artist to dispense with aspects of visual reality in order to emphasize the concept.

Although he does not mention Robert Motherwell, Kuspit’s attitude correlates well with the thinking of this Abstract Expressionist, who described abstraction as a form of emphasis:

*One might truthfully say that abstract art is stripped bare of other things in order to intensify it, its rhythms, spatial intervals, and color structure. Abstraction is a process of emphasis, and emphasis vivifies life. . . . The need is for felt experience—intense, immediate, direct, subtle, unified, warm, vivid, rhythmic.*⁴²

Motherwell’s statement helps explain the fact that the abstraction of vernacular art is a necessary coordinate of the artist’s intense feelings.

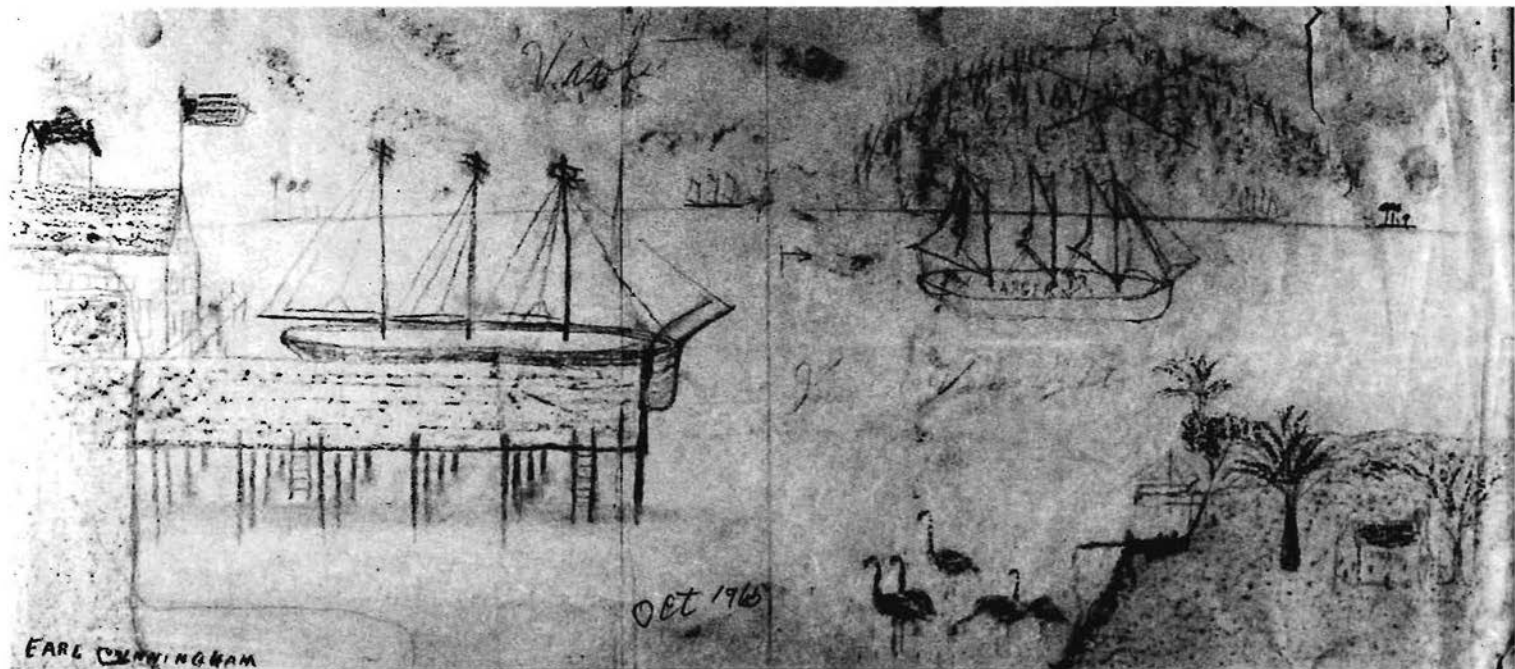
In his conclusion Kuspit goes beyond the vernacular artist’s intoxication with an idea to emphasize the role of conviction: “Powerful belief has Platonized both sign and idea. [The toy] is a Platonic



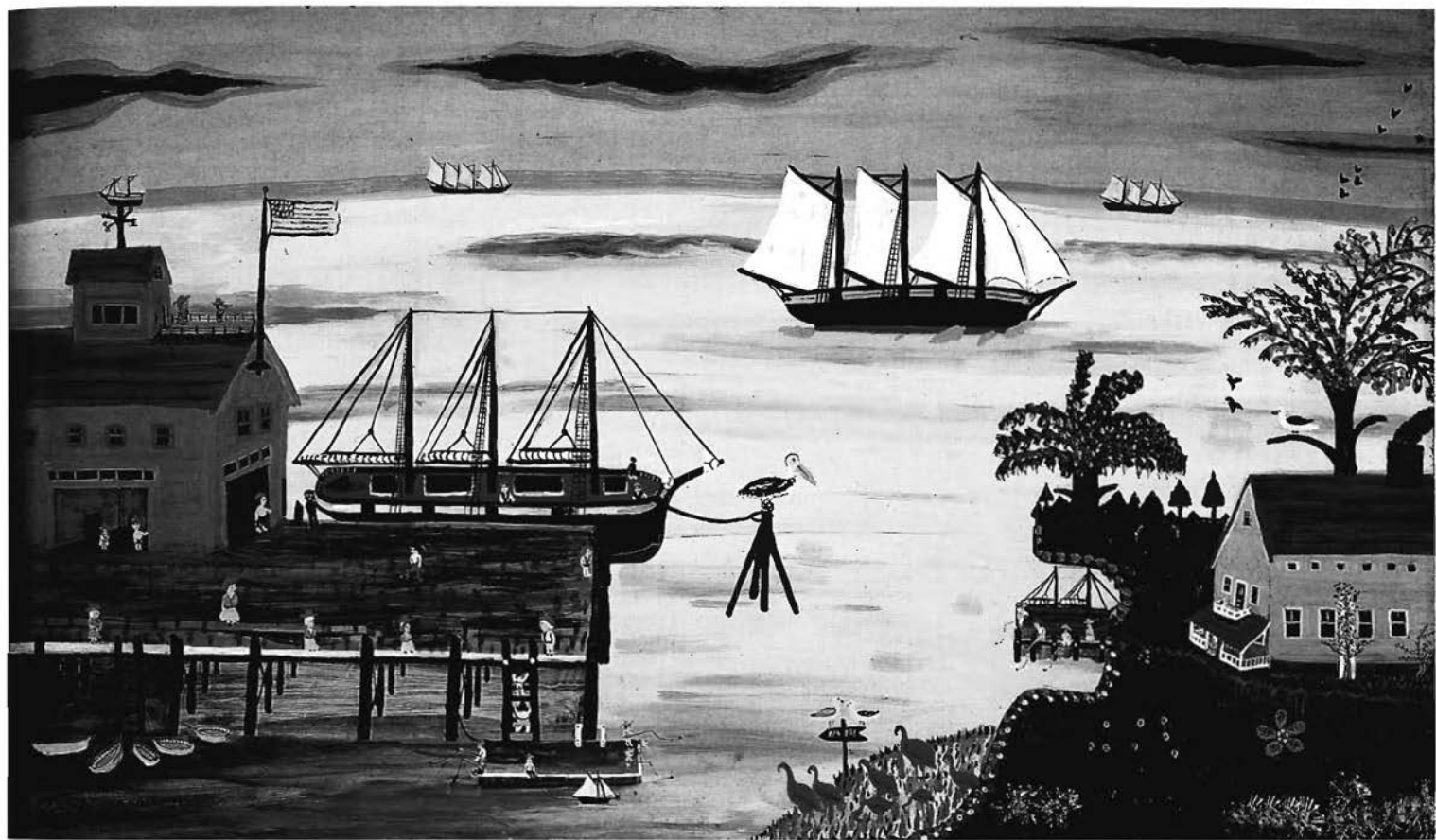
Twin Pines. 16×20"



Summertime at Fort San Marcos. 16×24"



Study for Widow's Walk. October 1965. Graphite and crayon on paper, 15½×32"



View from the Widow's Walk. $20\frac{1}{4} \times 26\frac{1}{4}$ "

idea in scarecrow form, remaining Platonic so long as it is passionately believed to be uniquely itself, and as such autonomous."⁴³ Belief is thus crucial, according to Kuspit, because it enables the vernacular artist to view the commonplace as representative of the transcendent. The vernacular artist therefore reinvigorates clichés through a sincere conviction in their importance and in the process renders the specific in a more generalized form that points to the ultimate reality of the intuited concept.

In his essay Kuspit wrestles with the role of the commonplace in vernacular art because it might appear to contradict the folk Platonist theory he is elaborating. He therefore presents the role of clichéd ideas in vernacular art in a rather circuitous manner:

The folk artist's ability to reveal the relevance of what seems irrelevant—because it is commonplace—depends on his ability to read facts as fated or to take what is culturally presented as fated to be factual, thus making what is commonplace the sign of an uncommon, because unique, fate. For him the commonplace is the inescapable, which is what makes it so profound and important. For the folk artist, art is a way of making one's peace with what is given, and of recognizing that givenness as something neither wantonly there nor wantonly dispensable. It is uniquely and inevitably what it is, precisely particular yet necessarily the case. Each of its details testifies simultaneously to its particularity and necessity.⁴⁴

The danger of the commonplace in vernacular painting is that the Platonic realm, which can only be indirectly alluded to in works of art, could slip into Aristotle's concrete particulars, which would result in a diminishment of the vernacular artist's contribution to knowledge. In that case the work of art would be a far less adequate representation of external reality than academic art, and its only contribution to human culture would be its awkward charm and rustic syntax—qualities that would support the patronizing delight that sophisticates have taken in this so-called humble art.

The folk or vernacular Platonist theory, which has been admirably developed by Steele and given an important psychological dimension by Kuspit, now needs to be carried a step further so that it can be used to analyze specific stylistic characteristics of this art as part of a world view rather than merely a result of little or no formal training. In this painting, belief overcomes the great obstacles stemming from lack of training and even uses the obstacles, imperfectly understood, to reinforce vernacular Platonism. Some of the stylistic qualities occurring in this art include a lack of facility with perspective, which works in tandem with arbitrary scale, intense color, reliance on schemata, and predilection for symmetry and patterns to create a situation in which each object imperfectly signals the artists' originary concept or feeling. The use of multiple foci in vernacular art helps to disembrace objects from their representative function and to secure their Platonic role as signs. Because the objects in vernacular paintings often are seen from different

vantage points, they deconstruct the Aristotelianism of Renaissance perspective, which apportions a relative and consistent scale to all objects in a painting by subsuming them all under a unified point of view. Instead of the Renaissance view, vernacular paintings emphasize painted objects as inadequate representations of reality, thus suggesting truth rather than manifesting it. What holds these random vantage points together in an individual work of art and makes it an arresting image is the artist's conviction that it must be painted. In this type of art the ultimate reality of the mind/spirit must be acknowledged even though it can only be implied through a host of different vantage points, including the bird's-eye point of view that indicates an omniscient artist/creator or a divine viewpoint. Predominant in many of Cunningham's paintings this vantage point helps to transform his world into a storybook realm.

In addition to using the bird's-eye point of view, Cunningham frequently curved the horizon, as a former seaman might, to reinforce the fact that the world is round. Because this curved horizon is seen in conjunction with Cunningham's highly personal transformation of scale, it appears more a sign than an illusion and thus supports the Platonic realm so important to his art. When Surovek asked Cunningham why the horizons were curved in his paintings, the artist took the question as a criticism of his view of the universe and responded matter-of-factly that Surovek must be one of those people who believe that the earth is flat.⁴⁵

Among the codes of conviction of vernacular art, balanced and symmetrical compositions are par-

ticularly important. The symmetry that occurs so often in vernacular painting bespeaks a world order and an underlying harmony. In Cunningham's art, symmetry functions as an assumed center of balance that is respected but not rigidly followed. In place of bilateral symmetry, he looks for variety through repetition and harmony within the limitations of balancing the right side with the left, the top with the bottom, or the upper left with the lower right.

In art, symmetry connotes a special orientation to the world. In contrast with unbalanced compositions, symmetrical ones imply a desire to invoke tradition. Since symmetrical compositions change a dynamic and chaotic world into a predictable and balanced one, they assume the force of an absolute and reflect an understanding of history as a recurring law rather than an irreversible line of unique events. This predictability reinforces the idea of a fundamental, unchanging state, and it points to a timeless and permanent world consistent with a transcendent, Platonic realm. When symmetry serves as a basic compositional structure in Earl Cunningham's paintings, it bespeaks a desire to reinforce a transcendent order as the ultimate reality. Symmetry is thus a device for manifesting the concept of universals over particulars and a way of pointing to a golden age that transcends the accidents of time. For Cunningham, symmetry was a system for transforming his unique experience into a universal equation.

Closely related to symmetry is pattern, which plays an equally important role in making the world conformable to one's expectations. Whenever



Springtime at Bay Point, Georgia. 22 × 26"

Springtime at Bay Point, Georgia (*detail*)



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PURCHASE OUR OWN
POWERED BY BUSINESS

objects, be they plants, houses, or clouds, are transformed into patterns, they become predictable and thus affirm an overall schema for the world. Patterns served an important function for Cunningham because they made his dreamscape predictable and were therefore psychologically reassuring. In his art, Cunningham created multiple borders of plants around islands and land masses, he balanced sloops, cutters, and schooners so that they formed meaningful designs, and he articulated even skies and birds so that they participated in an overall governing plan. Patterns order his dreams with identifiable and repeated elements that help to establish rhythmic harmonies throughout a given work. These harmonies, consisting of variations of elements within strictly defined limits, make the patterns seem inevitable, as if they, too, are reflecting the ultimate reality of a transcendent Platonic reality or Edenic view of the world. The sense of rhythm pervading these works may have a source in Cunningham's enjoyment of music: he played the harmonica well and enjoyed such old songs as "Old Black Joe," "Red River Valley," and "Home on the Range."⁴⁶

In order to comprehend the meaning of his patterns, it is helpful to look at Neolithic art that Cunningham collected in the form of Mound-Builder pottery. The repetition and regularity of patterns

apparently first began to assume great importance for societies dependent on the yearly agricultural cycles of planting, tending, and harvesting crops. The predictability of patterns decorating the pottery and textiles of these cultures, which are divided into distinct zones, may reflect a desire for regular high crop yields, a pride in the geometric harmony of straight lines of plants, and a concern about accurate land divisions.

While Cunningham was in all probability unaware of the social basis of the Neolithic Native-American art, his own painting is involved with a similar desire for predictable patterns and for rigid limitations. Cunningham's obsession with order was also reflected in his antique shop, where everything from brass fittings for sailing vessels to bottles, cards, and buttons was neatly and obsessively organized. Uelsmann remembers that in Cunningham's shop there were at least twenty mason fruit jars filled with small items such as marbles and screws, as well as many notebooks containing such late-nineteenth-century printed material as German Valentines and greeting cards decorated with flowers. Because of his desire for order, Cunningham even organized these cards into different series. He arranged images of roses, for example, according to size. While this sense of order partially stems from Cunningham's seafaring days, when every object aboard ship had to be accounted for and given a place, his continuance of it in his art and in his antique shop indicates a desire to maintain control over his environment.

Ironically, limitations provided Cunningham

Earl Cunningham in Mariner's Room of Over Fork Gallery, 1970. Photograph by Jerry Uelsmann

Notes

Foreword

1. Brian O'Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth* (New York: Ridge Press/Random House, 1974), 6.
2. Columbus Museum of Art, *Elijah Pierce: Woodcarver* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1992), and Judith E. Stein et al., *I Tell My Heart: The Art of Horace Pippin* (Philadelphia and New York: The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in association with Universe Publishing, 1993).

Earl Cunningham: Painting an American Eden

1. Charles Messer Stow, "Primitive Art in America," *Antiquarian* 8 (May 1927): 20–24.
2. Fred E. H. Schroeder, *Outlaw Aesthetics: Arts and the Public Mind* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1977), 10.
3. Robert Bishop, in *Earl Cunningham Exhibition at the Orlando Museum of Art* (1988), a videotape, in the archives of Michael and Marilyn Mennello, containing passages from Bishop's lecture at the Orlando Museum of Art on October 17, 1986.
4. Robert Bishop, "Comment," in *Earl Cunningham: The Marilyn L. and Michael A. Mennello Collection*, exhibition catalogue (Huntington, West Virginia: Huntington Museum of Art, 1990), 10.
5. Robert Bishop, "The Rediscovery of a Major Twentieth Century American Folk Artist," brochure for exhibition "Earl Cunningham: His Carefree American World," Museum of American Folk Art, New York, 1986. The curator for the Cunningham retrospective at the Museum of American Folk Art was Hank Niemann.
6. Charles Brigham, telephone interview with Robert Hobbs, January 17, 1993.
7. Jerry Uelsmann, telephone interview with Robert Hobbs, August 17, 1991. In an interview with Maude Wahlman, December 1, 1989, Uelsmann stated that Cunningham's dream was a museum of just his own work.
8. Robert Cunningham, telephone interview with Robert Hobbs, December 21, 1992.
9. Ibid.
10. Cunningham was fond of pointing out that the term "overfork" was a more polite way of encouraging people to "fork over" their money for the antiques in his shop.
11. Brigham, telephone interview with Hobbs.
12. John Surovek, telephone interview with Robert Hobbs, January 27, 1993.
13. During his lifetime Cunningham sold relatively few works. He made an exception to Kenneth and Mary Dow, who began purchasing works in 1949 and continued until the artist's death; Cunningham also sold thirteen paintings to Margaret Hahn and two to John Surovek. In addition to these collectors he allowed Charles Brigham, Jane Dart, Marilyn Wilson (later Mennello), and Jerry Uelsmann each to acquire one painting. When Surovek wanted to acquire one large and small painting, Cunningham priced both works \$500 apiece. To Surovek's suggestion that price be commensurate with the size, Cunningham responded by asking how one could differentiate between two masterpieces by Michelangelo.
14. Surovek, telephone interview with Hobbs.
15. Ibid.
16. According to Cynthia Parks, "'The crusty dragon' got his name from a headline by the late Charles Brock, who was entertainment editor of *The Florida Times Union*." Cynthia Parks, "The Crusty Dragon: His Work Is Private No Longer," *The Florida Times-Union Jacksonville Journal* (Sunday, December 16, 1979).
17. Cynthia Parks, "The Crusty Dragon of St. George Street," *Times Journal Magazine* [*Times-Union and Journal*, Jacksonville, Florida], August 20, 1972, p. 9.
18. When asked about the name, he would respond with the question, "I couldn't very well call it Fork Over, could I?" Parks, 1979.
19. This information is taken from a statement by Mrs. Moses' daughter-in-law Dorothy, who discusses life on the farm. Otto Kallir, ed., *Grandma Moses: American Primitive* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1946), 30.
20. Bishop, *Earl Cunningham Exhibition at the Orlando Museum of Art*.
21. John Hubenthal, unpublished paper on defining folk art, 1991, for a seminar taught by Robert Hobbs.
22. Simon J. Bronner, *Grasping Things: Folk Material Culture and Mass Society in America* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 201, 206.
23. Ibid., 192.
24. Ibid., 207.
25. Charles Brigham, "Biographical Survey . . .," in *Earl Cunningham: American Primitive*, exhibition catalogue (Daytona Beach: Museum of Arts and Sciences, 1974).
26. Surovek, telephone interview with Hobbs.
27. In addition, Cunningham's second museum exhibition was subtitled "American Primitive." According to Surovek, this designation was Cunningham's idea.
28. Surovek, telephone interview with Hobbs.
29. Uelsmann, telephone interview with Hobbs, August 17, 1991.
30. Surovek, telephone interview with Hobbs.
31. Ibid.
32. Although early snapshots of these paintings are extant, the

- works themselves have not been located.
33. Uelsmann, telephone interview with Hobbs.
 34. Thomas J. Steele, S.J., *Santos and Saints: The Religious Folk Art of Hispanic New Mexico* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Ancient City Press, 1982).
 35. *Ibid.*, 46.
 36. *Ibid.*
 37. *Ibid.*
 38. *Ibid.*, 47.
 39. *Ibid.*
 40. Donald Kuspit, "Suffer the Little Children to Come unto Me: Twentieth Century Folk Art," in *American Folk Art: The Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr. Collection*, exhibition catalogue (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 1981), 37–47.
 41. *Ibid.*, 43.
 42. Robert Motherwell, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* 18 (Spring 1951): 12–13.
 43. Kuspit, in *American Folk Art*, 46.
 44. *Ibid.*, 43.
 45. Surovek, telephone interview with Hobbs.
 46. Beverly Winslow, telephone interview with Robert Hobbs, January 27, 1993.
 47. C. G. Jung, *Mandala Symbolism*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 10.
 48. William C. Ketchum, Jr., lecture on Earl Cunningham for the Jacksonville Museum of Art, October 1, 1987. Archives of Michael and Marilyn Mennello.
 49. Brigham, in *Earl Cunningham*, n.p.
 50. Parks, 1979.
 51. Brigham, in *Earl Cunningham*, n.p.
 52. *Ibid.*
 53. "Cunningham Collection on View," *The St. Augustine Record*, October 24, 1978, p. 3.
 54. David Jaffee, "A Correct Likeness': Culture and Commerce in Nineteenth-Century Rural America," in John Michael Vlach and Simon J. Bronner, eds., *Folk Art and Art Worlds* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 70.
 55. *Ibid.*
 56. Brigham, in *Earl Cunningham*, n.p.
 57. The postcard is in the archives of Marilyn and Michael Mennello.
 58. Robert Cunningham, telephone interview with Hobbs.
 59. Brigham, in *Earl Cunningham*, n.p.
 60. *Ibid.*
 61. Warren James Balasco, *Americans on the Road: From Auto-camp to Motel, 1910–1945* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press), 8.
 62. *Ibid.*, 74.
 63. *Ibid.*, 71ff.
 64. *Ibid.*, 11, 15.
 65. Parks, 1979.
 66. Recognizing their historic value, Joe Brunson collected and preserved these materials.
 67. Cunningham's annotation on back of photograph labeled "Old Fort Marion." Archives of Michael and Marilyn Mennello.
 68. Ketchum, lecture, 9.
 69. Earl Cunningham diary, c. 1960s. This diary is in the archives of Michael and Marilyn Mennello.
 70. *Ibid.*
 71. *Ibid.*
 72. *Ibid.*
 73. The original of this letter is in the archives of Michael and Marilyn Mennello.
 74. *Ibid.*
 75. Surovek, telephone interview with Hobbs.
 76. Jackie Clifton, telephone interview with Marilyn Mennello, October 1988.
 77. Earl Cunningham's scrapbook, n.p.
 78. *Ibid.*, n.p.
 79. *Ibid.*, n.p.
 80. *The Vacationer* (September 26, 1973), 10–11.
 81. In a letter of May 1, 1977, to his uncle Earl Cunningham, Carroll Winslow refers to a book that Cunningham was evidently writing, "Well how is the book coming along. I know that it is slow work but you must be coming along on it by now. . . . I know that you are busy with the book and hope that it comes along the way that you want it to, but don't get too busy and forget to write."
 82. Uelsmann, interview with Hobbs. This anxiety may have extended to Cunningham's identity as an artist, for he stopped wearing a beret in the mid-1970s.
 83. Although Miss Paffe's close friend Jean Troemel repeatedly told Cunningham to draw up a will, he died without one. Jean Troemel helped Miss Paffe manage her Cunningham paintings. She arranged for one of the works to be sent to Jay Johnson's gallery in New York City, and she wrote to Robert Bishop at the Museum of American Folk Art about this artist. She also worked with Robert Harper, exhibition coordinator of the St. Augustine Art Association, who organized a showing of Cunningham's paintings.
 84. Jung, *Mandala Symbolism*, 3.
 85. *Ibid.*
 86. C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, recorded and edited by Aniela Jaffe, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), 195ff.
 87. Jung, "Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth," as quoted in *Mandala Symbolism*, vi.
 88. *Ibid.*, 4.
 89. Surovek, telephone interview with Hobbs.
 90. Parks, 1972.
 91. Neil Harris, "Museums, Merchandising, and Popular Taste: The Struggle for Influence," in *Material Culture and the Study of American Life*, ed. by Ian M. G. Quimby (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 152, 162.
 92. Maude Southwell Wahlman, "Earl Cunningham: Visionary American Artist," unpublished manuscript, 1989, 7. Archives of Michael and Marilyn Mennello. Wahlman writes that Cunningham "worked on several paintings at a time, allowing one to dry completely before adding new de-