

The Girard Collection: Enduring Appeal

It is entirely possible to be both delighted and overwhelmed by the Alexander Girard's one-of-a-kind exhibition—even after twenty-five years. The vastness of the exhibit space, the complexity of the design, the sheer quantity of objects on display—the immensity and intensity can be overpowering. And compelling.

That's why *Multiple Visions: A Common Bond* has been the destination for well over a million first-time and repeat visitors to the Museum of International Folk Art. First, second, third, or countless times around, we find our gaze drawn by different objects, different scenes. Even after more than a decade here at the museum, I always “discover” a new piece, one that I've passed by but not focused on before.

I expect that the more than 10,000 objects to see will continue to enchant museum staff and patrons. With his singular vision and intuitive understanding of the multiplicity of cultures and artistic genres, perhaps Girard himself felt the same unflagging delight when he was designing the exhibit.

Girard rewards those who look carefully with touches of wit and whimsy, amazing us with his command of detail and sense of perspective. He appeals to children and adults alike who peer into the sets from different angles, to glimpse people and animals, puppets, dolls, and small figures of clay, wood, paper, cloth, and, yes, even plastics. Some look familiar, clearly identifiable as the products of specific cultures and places. Others take us to places we can only imagine.

Who can ever tire of going back to these places of enjoyment and creativity?

—*Joyce Ice, Director*

Museum of International Folk Art

By Steve Cantrell

Alexander Girard was not your typical collector, selecting a kente cloth here and a clay figure there. He bought in quantity—large quantities. Where another folk-art collector might purchase one item, Girard, while on buying trips with his wife, Susan, would scoop up fifty or more of the same thing. Even on their honeymoon in Mexico they filled the car with folk art.

No surprise. Alexander Girard's fascination with collecting began as a boy, when he was given a Nativity scene. It was the first of oh so many. Over the years he added to the collection in both number and elaboration. Friends and relatives returning from travels to other countries would bring the young Girard miniatures, and soon a collector was born.

A native of New York who was raised in Florence, Italy, Girard developed an eye for design early and pursued an education in architecture, studying in Rome at the Royal

School of Architecture and at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London. In 1936 he moved back to New York and then to Detroit, where he broadened the scope of his practice, designing the interiors of offices (the Ford Motor Company headquarters among them), stores, and homes. Along the way he developed a reputation for designing everything for his projects—carpet, drapery, furniture, even the placement of objects in a room—a “control issue” that would become a Girard hallmark, and one that would make *Multiple Visions* the exhibition that it is today.

Girard became head of the textile design division for Herman Miller, in 1952, at a time when fabrics were purely functional and devoid of decoration. That changed in the twenty years he headed the division. As renowned designer Jack Lenor Larson said in *Folk Art from the Global Village: The Girard Collection at the Museum of International Folk Art*: “Girard’s career can be summed up as a long, single-handed campaign to inject the lively human qualities of joy and spontaneity into what was probably one of the driest, sensually impoverished chapters in the history of design.”

Girard felt that fabrics needed color, and Herman Miller gave him the freedom to express himself. Girard did that by bringing his passion for ethnic motifs and extravagantly bright colors to the clean, streamlined aesthetic that dominated mid-century design. It was not long before American interiors, both commercial and residential, were influenced by his bold designs.

His love of theatricality—drama, color and large-scale—came from his post college days in Europe designing stage sets and showrooms. This talent was realized to its fullest in New York City in 1961 with the Herman Miller Textiles & Objects store in midtown Manhattan. Patrons were amazed at the juxtaposition of his bold fabrics, the modernist Herman Miller furniture, and the inclusion of folk art—all of it for sale. It was the first time New Yorkers had really been introduced to folk art in a store that was so precisely designed that it was a work of art in itself.

When Braniff Airlines commissioned him to create a new look for the company, Girard took design to new heights, replacing even the “plain plane.” He painted them inside and out with different hues and then used variations on a multicolored rainbow for flight attendants’ uniforms, the company stationery, the matchbooks, and even the sugar packets.

Though Girard was a social animal during his days with Herman Miller and working with designers George Nelson, Charles Eames and Ray Eames, he and his wife wanted a quieter life and more sun than they enjoyed in either New York or Grosse Pointe, Michigan. In 1953, the couple moved their family to Santa Fe, and with them came the folk art collections that had never stopped growing. Girard’s numerous trips abroad for clients had allowed him the opportunity to continue collecting, sometimes for them, always for himself. Once in Santa Fe, the ever-growing collection was boxed, catalogued, and stored in two old houses.

Girard’s son, Marshall, who lives in Santa Fe, recalled how his father collected

everywhere he went, sometimes on his own, sometimes with family in tow. He noted that finely made furniture and antiques have been passions for Girard patriarchs through the ages: his paternal great-grandfather, a furniture maker in Europe, had an antique store, as did his paternal grandfather. Another Girard tradition: sons worked for fathers, including Alexander for his father. Perhaps it was from that generational progression and love of fine craftsmanship that Girard's appreciation for the handmade came about. He had a woodworking shop at his home and made the storage boxes for his collection and architectural models with his own hands.

At times Alexander Girard pressed family members into service to help add to his collection. One time Marshall met his father in Rome and was asked to carry a large collection of Ethiopian bark paintings to New York. At Idlewild Airport in New York, customs officials detained him, doubting that an eighteen-year-old could be interested in these objects and convinced that he had stolen them. It took phone calls to his mother and to the family lawyer to persuade the officials that indeed these bark paintings belonged to the Girard family and that young Marshall was merely transporting them home for his father.

Had he only been carrying some of his personal favorites—boats—perhaps the questions would have been fewer and the hassle worth his while.

Marshall said that though other museums expressed great interest in having Girard's collection, his father loved New Mexico and wanted the collection to stay in Santa Fe. Legend has it that because of the Girard Collection at the Museum of International Folk Art, the Smithsonian Institution invited the museum to become part of its system. The offer was declined but, with a touch of hubris, was extended in return to the Smithsonian. Whether or not the story is accurate, the state legislature realized the importance of the collection and appropriated most of the money to construct the Girard Wing—a bold move on its part. Folk art was not widely understood or appreciated at that time, and most collecting in Santa Fe was restricted to Indian artifacts.

Girard insisted on installing the collection himself, because only he knew how each piece properly related to others. Not only did he have the perfect eye for collecting high-quality objects (he was known to say that there was good folk art and there was folk art that lacked any aesthetic quality), by designing the installation itself, he also made the entire wing “a singular artifact, a Girard work of art,” said Joyce Ice, director of the Museum of International Folk Art. As Girard put it in *Folk Art from the Global Village*, “Part of my passion has always been to see objects in context. As a collector who was often able to visit the workshop of the artist and see the actual environment in which a piece was made, I've often felt that objects lose half their lives when they are taken out of their national settings . . . I believe that if you put objects into a world which is ostensibly their own, the whole thing begins to breathe.”

Longtime docent Elisabeth Alley said that the installation is proof of Girard's genius and that visitors continue to prove that. She has seen reluctant visitors wander in and then stay for a surprising amount of time, dazzled by what she calls Girard's "jewel in the crown of the museum." For her it is a jewel with many facets, because Alley has more than one favorite piece: *Heaven and Hell*, the cockfighting scene, the christening, and depictions of people dining.

Why dining scenes? For Girard, a meal was a ritual. According to Jean Seth, who frequently socialized with the Girards, the dining table he designed for their home was suspended from the ceiling. This sense of ritual and theatricality carried over to the table settings he once designed for Georg Jensen in New York. Among the six table settings he designed were the *Hostess* set and the *Husband and Wife* set.

Artist and designer Ivan Barnett recalled visiting the Museum of International Folk Art in the early 1980s, long before he and his wife, Allison, opened Patina Gallery in Santa Fe, only to discover his own work on exhibit. At the time, Barnett was constructing contemporary weather vanes in his studio in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and they were being sold at the American Museum of Folk Art in New York—several of them to Alexander Girard.

Girard's reputation for collecting in mass quantities made him a well-known figure to artists and artisans around the world. Jean Seth, whose favorite piece is the *Plaza de Toros*, recalled that when she visited Machu Picchu in Peru and told the vendors she was from Santa Fe, they all wanted to know if she was a friend of Girard's.

Not only was Jean Seth a friend: her father, J.O. Seth, was a Museum of New Mexico regent from the 1930s to the 1950s and also the attorney who advised founder Florence Dibell Bartlett on how to establish the folk art museum; her husband, Judge Oliver Seth, set up the International Folk Art Foundation (IFAF); and her daughter, Laurel, is executive director to IFAF on whose board Alexander Girard once sat.

Laurel Seth grew up with folk art and knew Girard as a frequent guest in her home. At fourteen, she volunteered to work in the collection and knows it intimately, perhaps too intimately to single out a favorite. So many collectors, she says, confine themselves to one country or to certain items. She noted Alexander Girard was the exception, collecting from 100 countries and selecting on aesthetics and quality. For Laurel, the breadth of *Multiple Visions: A Common Bond* sets it apart from other folk-art collections. That, and Girard's skill at creating vignettes, rather than lining up like items next to wall text, made folk art accessible.

Girard's design resonates with John and Marilyn Newhart, who worked with Girard and the Eameses at Herman Miller. They remembered that Girard ran a meticulous workshop there. Everything had its place, and at night, everything went into the drawers. Their mutual friendship with Girard grew, and soon they went on what Girard called "junking trips," daylong forays to New York's countless antique stores. Marilyn

said that Girard had such a good and swift eye that he would immediately spot the best of the objects. He moved through the store so quickly, taking items to the sales counter, that it was nearly impossible to shop with him. He got all the best things first.

Marilyn used the word “massive” to describe Girard’s method of collecting: not only would he purchase in huge quantities, he would place orders for several whole village scenes. And why not? Girard himself said in *Folk Art from the Global Village*, which was published after his death in 1993, that his collecting philosophy was uncomplicated: “What concerns me is an object’s intrinsic value. And, collecting for that reason is very different from acquiring things as if they were currency With me, it was really pretty simple: love of the objects came first, and there was absolutely no other criterion for collecting.”

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