



# Against the Grain

The Works of Minnie Adkins

Essay by Adrian Swain

Cover art by Christy Herring

Catalog design by Matt Collinsworth

Art Photography by Geoffrey Carr

Photograph of Minnie Adkins and family members by Tim Barnwell

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*Self-portraits with Animals*, painted wood, 1990s, Private Collection

Minnie Adkins has received public recognition and accolades that she never anticipated earlier in life, even in her wildest imagination. Since achieving a name for herself as an artist in the late 1980s, she has received many awards, ranging from a 1993 Certificate of Merit for Program Presentation from the Kentucky Extension Homemakers Association to the honorary Doctorate of Humanities conferred on her in 1998 by Morehead State University (See Selected Awards, page 15).

Celebrity is rare in the art world, even more unusual in the field of self-taught art, but Adkins has it and has worn it well for almost two decades. Just how did it all happen?

Minnie Adkins was born Minnie Evon Wooldridge on March 13th, 1934 on Newcombe Creek in rural Elliott County, Kentucky. She was the youngest of four children, born at the height of the Great Depression.

Among the kaleidoscope of experiences that leave impressions on a child growing up, the sight of men carving wood so fascinated Minnie that somewhere between the ages of 8 and 10 her father gave her a knife. It was an unusual gift to a young woman in the early 1940s, because pocketknives were traditionally a male

possession, a common tool with many practical, manly uses. Contrary to tradition, a young girl taught herself how to carve. Seen from the perspective of time, it was a gift that profoundly influenced the course of her life. Two of her childhood carvings are known to have survived, rediscovered among her mother's personal effects following her death.

In 1952, at the age of 18, Minnie married a local man, Garland Adkins and a year later gave birth to their son, Mike. The family remained in Kentucky for the next 16 years, and Minnie continued to carve while she raised her son.

In the aftermath of World War II, many people from eastern Kentucky moved north to Ohio, Indiana and Michigan to take advantage of job opportunities in the burgeoning industrial Midwest. From the 1940s on into the 1960s this out-migration resulted in sizeable communities of former east Kentuckians in many industrial towns of that region ("Appalachians" are now categorized as a protected cultural minority in certain Ohio cities). Not unlike immigrants from a foreign country, the generation that migrated north often continued to regard eastern Kentucky as home. Accounts abound, from the 1940s to the 1960s, of Friday evening traffic jams at bridges that crossed the Ohio River south into Kentucky, as many dislocated eastern Kentuckians headed "home" for a weekend visit.

In 1968, the Adkins family relocated to Fairborn, Ohio. Minnie's ties to the comfort and culture of home were deep and indelible. Displaced, in unfamiliar surroundings, she continued to make small, simple carvings of birds and animals, and roosters shaped out of small twigs. Most of them would fit in the palm of a hand. She sold some of them at flea markets, but most she gave away to family and friends. It has also been argued that recreating images from her early life may indeed have helped Adkins remain connected with the culture of "home" while living 200 miles away in a very different environment.

Most of her work from Ohio confirms a comforting, idealized, and sentimental view of country life. But, unlike many present-day 'wood carver' hobbyists, who aim for technical expertise and realistic representation of certain standard subjects—ducks, shoes, etc.—even Adkins' early carvings were imaginative, original, and expressive.

In 1983 the Adkins moved back to Isonville, within close walking distance of the Wooldridge home place. The return to Kentucky marked the beginning of a transitional period in Minnie's wood carving. Still focusing on the same subjects, some of her work became more complex, sometimes incorporating humor that was subtle, ironic, and occasionally dark. Her 1985 *Rooster on Log with Axe* depicts



*Rooster*, 31 x 16 x 6.5, wood & paint, 1989



*Elijah and the Ravens*, 12 x 17 x 14.5, painted wood, 1989

a twig rooster standing upright on a gnarled log, its head tilted inquiringly to one side. Within the bird's line of vision is a carved hand axe, embedded in an adjoining log. Hand axes are the traditional tool for beheading chickens for the pot, and anyone familiar with farm life would quickly make the connection: that the inquisitive bird might unwittingly be inspecting the scene of its own impending decapitation.

At the suggestion of Minnie's niece, Sharon Sluss, soon after their return home, the Adkins visited a nearby craft gallery in Morehead in their search for an outlet for her work. That chance visit initiated a chain of events that would soon influence her art, change the way she thought about what she was doing, and eventually alter the course of her life.

The gallery agreed to sell some of her work. More importantly, it exposed her work to a larger market and to others who further expanded that audience. She was soon introduced to Larry Hackley, the foremost Kentucky folk art dealer at that time, who developed an independent relationship with Adkins and introduced her work to galleries and collectors in certain major urban centers. In April 1985, under the leadership of Tom Sternal, chair of the Art Department, and Dr. Robert Burns, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, the "Folk Art Collection" was founded

at Morehead State University. A collection of regional folk art with a major focus on the work of contemporary, self-taught artists, it was renamed “Kentucky Folk Art Center” in 1994. As this program gained wider national attention, so too did the work of featured artists. Interest spread, and demand for Adkins’ work grew exponentially.

More importantly, encouragement and support from dealers, museum personnel, collectors and other artists changed the way Adkins thought of her work. While she had previously always conceived of herself as a carver practicing a traditional folk skill, she began now to think of herself consciously as an artist. This perceptual shift had major repercussions in her work. Very quickly, she broadened the range of her subject matter and began to work on a larger scale.

Whereas she had formerly focused almost exclusively on what she had seen around her or experienced in real life—the birds, domestic animals and wildlife of eastern Kentucky—her imagination now came into play, and she began to create exotic animals such as tigers and giraffes and invented creatures entirely of her own imagining. She also harnessed her approach to making roosters (simple twigs with most of the bark left intact) to produce human figures such as her 1989 *Indian on Skis*.



Red Fox, 12.5 x 32 x 6, painted wood, 1985



*Dancing Blue Rooster*, 18 x 8 x 10, painted wood, 1998, Gift of Richard Edgeworth



The mid 1980s to mid 1990s was the period of greatest experimentation and creative risk taking in Minnie Adkins' work. Over that decade, the shape and character of each of her animals gradually evolved to a form with which she was satisfied, and she has since reproduced those resolved versions many times. The one subject that changed very little over time is the twig rooster, which long since became a signature piece for the artist. Given the raw material of a "fork-ed stick," she can easily whittle out a small rooster in less than an hour. But, although the essential form has remained the same, she has used or reinterpreted the rooster in many different ways, varying the angle of the head, shape and conformation of the tail, two-headed, three-headed, etc. She has made roosters up to four feet high and has incorporated many roosters into more complex groupings.

As demand grew for her work, Adkins enlisted the help of her husband, Garland, to keep pace. For many years, they operated much like a cottage industry. Garland did much of the preliminary work—finding the wood and roughing out larger pieces with a saw—leaving the more detailed carving and painting to Minnie. From the mid '80s until 1997, their works were all signed "G & M Adkins."

Certain pieces were the exclusive work of Minnie, but she made no distinction in signing them. Others can be attributed specifically to Garland. In 1988 he developed a particular shape of large horse which he replicated many times. All Adkins horses made before 1998 bear the "G & M Adkins" signature, regardless of who made them. Some painted black, others unpainted, Garland's horses have an austere, timeless quality that quickly caught the eye of collectors and came to be in high demand. They remain high on the list of Adkins pieces sought out by collectors of folk art.

Minnie was widowed in 1997 when Garland died of cancer following a long illness. She was devastated by his loss, but immersion in her work enabled her to continue living and maintain her identity as a artist. In 1999, she married Herman Peters, a retired pipe fitter. Intrigued by his wife's work, Peters began replicating some of Minnie's animals in welded pipe, the most notable of which was his version of the Blue Rooster. These hardy creatures could be installed outdoors, and he has produced several of them, which stand up to eight feet high.

Minnie began to paint in the late '80s. A few of her paintings portray Biblical scenes, simply executed, with human figures set in sideways profile, but most incorporate her easily recognizable animals, also in side profile, often displayed like a sampler of her work in wood. Her paintings can be quite large, measuring 30" x 40" and up. Painted on Masonite, many are 'framed' with thin, circular, cross-section slices of a tree branch, 2-3 inches in diameter, that have been glued around the perimeter.

Despite her celebrity, despite how carving helped maintain her cultural roots while living away, and despite her genuine exhilaration in the creative process, anxieties over remaining financially solvent are never far from her mind. One might think, given her unusual level of success as a practicing folk artist who has lived long enough to reap financial rewards from her work, that success would now be taken as established fact. But the experience of growing up during the Depression and some real financial hardship in her earlier adult life, keep the memories of scarcity alive in her mind; you can never take solvency for granted.

The cottage industry aspects of Adkins life have spawned a number of different projects. For several years, in the late '80s and early '90s, Minnie employed local women to sew quilt tops that, much like many of her paintings, feature profiles of animals cut out of cloth. As the originator, Minnie would sign these products just like her wood carvings. Since the mid '90s she has worked with her cousin, Tess Little, a sculptor and ceramic artist who teaches at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio. Tess has produced a number of hand-built pottery pieces that incorporate Minnie's animals. In 1997, Minnie collaborated with singer/song-writer Mike Norris to produce *The Little Blue Rooster*, a combination audiotape and children's book, again featuring several animals. Adkins and Norris have made a number of public appearances enacting that story line. Since 1999 a commercial



Tiger, 8 x 25 x 3.5, painted wood, 1980s, Gift of Richard Edgeworth



*Black Bear*, 9 x 21.5 x 5, painted wood, 1988, Gift of Tom Sternal & Martha Enzmann

weaver has produced copies of two different afghans that incorporate Adkins animals, as well as Herman Peters' version of the Blue Rooster.

The popularity of the Adkins' work has attracted a host of visitors to Isonville over the years. On a personal level, she has enjoyed the interest and attention her work has created. While some artists shy away from visitors, preferring to be left alone, Adkins generously welcomes those who come to meet her. Beginning in the late 1980s, collectors from all over the U.S. and even some from overseas have visited her to purchase her whimsical sculptures. Many claim her as a friend and maintain contact by mail or phone.

While she places great value in these friendships, the dynamics of such relationships can be complex and ambiguous, since most stem from purchases of her work. They are complex because the artist can feel torn between her wish to sell and the desire for freedom to produce what she wants. In spite of these complexities, she has navigated these uncertain waters with grace.

Celebrity often entails a loss of privacy, and Minnie's accessibility has exposed her to certain related pressures, both within her own community and beyond. Often, individuals with a public profile adopt a public persona, behind which they can live

their real lives in privacy. Without this shield, there's no private life protected from public consumption. To some extent this has been the case with Minnie Adkins.

Perhaps in oblique commentary on her notoriety, Adkins has produced her own self-portrait a number of times. *Minnie Evon, The New Me* (1986) depicts the artist in spectacles, black slacks and a red top, a Bible in one hand and a purse in the other. There is evident self-effacing humor in this piece which makes no effort at flattery. Her 1990 *Washerwoman* is clearly social commentary, with a long-skirted figure bending over the washboard within a small tub, with a scowl on her face. Since the early 1990s, she has portrayed herself a number of times in the same black and red outfit, always complimented by an animal—riding atop a hog, holding a tiger by its tail, etc.—usually with a cryptic inscription such as “Something Big.” Most of these were made to be given as gifts, to celebrate a special development, or to signify a private joke.

Among Adkins greatest accomplishments has been the support she has provided in mentoring other artists. From her earliest days of success, she was active in encouraging others to try their hand at carving or painting because of the pleasure she had long received from her own involvement. As attention came her way, she would direct visitors on to others in her neighborhood with related skills as folk artists. Many artists benefited from her efforts—Linvel Barker, Tim Lewis, Dollie Skaggs, and Charles Keeton, to name just a few. Her son, Mike Adkins, and grandson, Greg, both now carve on a regular basis. Work by three generations of the Adkins family can now be found in the folk art marketplace.

In the late 1980s, Minnie and Garland hosted a June folk art gathering—A Day in the Country—in the Isonville Elementary School gym. This event quickly became an important annual event and was soon relocated to the grounds surrounding the Adkins home. Since 2003, at Minnie's request, the fair has been organized, underwritten, and presented by Kentucky Folk Art Center. A Day In The Country now has an indoor location in the Morehead Conference Center and features at least 60 self-taught artists from Kentucky and other states. In 2006, it was attended by folk art enthusiasts from 23 states.

Response to Minnie Adkins' work has been nothing short of phenomenal, but it is important to examine her work critically as art, away from the accompanying cult of personality that pervades the artist's life. While there is a precedent for the twig rooster from earlier times in Kentucky, the remainder of her work is singularly original. In the context of contemporary folk art, her repetition of many forms is common practice. We may chose to look on this as 'production,' akin to that of a traditional crafts person, but the traditional art of storytelling provides a model



*Minnie Evon, The New Me, 22 x 7 x 3.5, painted wood, 1986*



Crow, 8 x 15 x 11, painted wood, 1985

that can be applied to the visual arts, where each new version represents a separate interpretation, variations on a theme. In 2007 perhaps we stand too close to gain perspective, but each sculpture will be judged on its own merit in the fullness of time. If demand from dealers, collectors and exhibition curators mean anything at all, Adkins work resonates in contemporary American society, and imitation by other artists should flatter this seasoned carver.

For her art, her friendship, and her encouragement of numerous other artists, the Kentucky folk art community has benefited immensely from the life and work of Minnie Adkins. Kentucky Folk Art Center is proud to present this exhibition of her work from the 1940s up to the present.

—Adrian Swain, Curator  
February, 2006  
Kentucky Folk Art Center  
Morehead State University  
Morehead, Kentucky

*It ain't such a long drop, don't stammer, don't stutter,  
from the diamonds in the sidewalk to the dirt in the gutter  
and you carry those bruises to remind you wherever you go.*  
-John Prine, 1974, Bruised Orange-



*Monkey with Banana*, 7 x 8.5 x 2.25, painted wood & plastic, 2001,  
Gift of Richard Edgeworth



*Skunk with Babies*, 8 x 14.5 x 2, painted wood, 2001, Gift of Richard Edgeworth



## Minnie Adkins: Selected Honors

- 1992: Jane Morton Norton Award for outstanding contributions to the arts in Kentucky, Centre College (Danville, Ky.). Ms. Adkins was honored as the very first recipient of this prestigious award.
- 1993: Award for Leadership in Arts and Culture, Eastern Kentucky Leadership Foundation.
- 1993: Distinguished Artist Award, Folk Art Society of America, Richmond, Va. Again, Adkins was the first recipient of this annual, national award.
- 1993: Al Smith Fellowship for individual artists, Kentucky Arts Council.
- 1994: Appalachian Treasure Award for lifetime contribution to the arts in Kentucky, Morehead State University, Morehead, Ky. Adkins was the first visual artist to receive this award. Previous recipients included Jean Ritchie and James Still.
- 1998: Artist Award, honoring lifetime achievement in the arts, 1997 Governor's Awards in the Arts, Kentucky Arts Council.
- 1998: Honorary Doctorate, Morehead State University.
- 2006: Kentucky Colonel, Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels, Frankfort.



*Minnie Adkins with Greg Adkins and Herman Peters, 2005. Photo courtesy of Tim Barnwell*





**102 West First Street  
Morehead, KY 40351  
606.783.2204  
[www.kyfolkart.org](http://www.kyfolkart.org)**