ESSAY BY

LARRY HACKLEY

THE NARRATIVE WORKS

of

EDGAR TOLSON

CARL MCKENZIE

EARNEST PATTON

& DONNY TOLSON

ESSAY BY

LARRY HACKLEY
This project was supported by a grant from The Kentucky Arts Council.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THIS PROJECT represents the first comprehensive exhibition of these four artists’ work together, and it would never have been completed without the cooperation and support of numerous organizations and individuals.

We thank the artists, both living and dead. Their art, in many ways, stands at the center of contemporary American folk art. This is wonderful and remarkably important work. It should also be noted that Donny Tolson expertly repaired a number of the pieces that are a part of this exhibition.

Secondly, we offer our most sincere thanks to Larry Hackley. Without Mr. Hackley’s extensive knowledge of these artists and their work and his willingness to go back and forth with us about innumerable issues over the course of months, this exhibition would not have been possible. We also thank Jason Gibson for the editorial assistance that he provided to Larry.

We want to thank all of the individual collectors who invited us into their homes and graciously allowed us to borrow treasured pieces from their collections. Therefore, we offer heartfelt thanks to Clifton Anderson, Rita Biesiot, Nancy Jane Bolton, Gayle Cerlan, Barry & Laura Crume, Ken and Donna Fadeley, Lyn & Gordon Layton, Guy Mendes (who also provided the excellent photos of the artists), George H. Meyer, Jacque Parsley, Ellsworth Taylor, and Allan Weiss.

We are grateful to the Huntington Museum of Art, Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, and UK HealthCare, not only for lending works from their collections, but also for providing significant support for the exhibition in other ways. Both the Huntington Museum and KMAC will serve as host sites for the exhibition during its travels. Over the past two years, KFAC has had the pleasure of curating a collection of Kentucky folk art for UK HealthCare. It was our participation in that earlier project that ultimately gave rise to this fine exhibition.

We are extremely grateful for the financial support provided by a Folk Arts Program Project Grant from the Kentucky Arts Council. And as always, we owe our thanks to everyone at Morehead State University, our parent institution. Without MSU’s consistent support and trust, major projects like this would never have time to develop. We also offer our thanks to the Friends of Kentucky Folk Art Center Board of Directors, who urge us on and work to keep us on the right track. We are again grateful to Grant Alden who lent us his years of experience with editing and publishing toward the development of this catalog.
In this century, and moment, of mania,
Tell me a story.

Make it a story of great distances, and
starlight.

The name of the story will be Time,
But you must not pronounce its name.

~Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989)
from *Tell Me a Story*
INTRODUCTION

STORYTELLING or narrative has always been important in traditional cultures. Through stories people communicated the most significant aspects of their cultures, educated their young, and provided entertainment. Given the geographic and cultural isolation experienced by people living in Appalachia throughout the 18th, 19th, and even 20th centuries, storytelling became an important part of east Kentucky’s culture. Whether it was a preacher riffing on a story out of Genesis at a tent revival or Florence Reece composing her great ballad “Which Side Are You On?” in response to the attempted murder of her coal miner husband by company thugs in Harlan in 1931, narrative became the central form of communication in the Kentucky mountains. For anyone who has visited a courthouse, diner, church function, or gas station anywhere in the region, you know that storytelling still exists as a vibrant undercurrent in these communities. Stories about the old days and about yesterday swirl like ghosts through the smoke of cigarettes. This is how we keep time, how memory holds sway.

Therefore, when we first visited longtime folk art dealer and collector Larry Hackley in Berea to discuss a possible exhibition of works by the prominent artists from the Red River area, we were delighted by his suggestion of “narrative” as a theme for this exhibition. Not only did this theme effectively define our process of selecting works, it drove straight to the heart of Kentucky folk art and the region’s culture. After all, Edgar Tolson rose to fame on the strength of his “Fall of Man” series, which recounted the story of Adam and Eve. His son, Donny, continued working in a similar narrative vein, depicting many Biblical stories, but branching out into popular culture as well. Likewise, Ernest Patton’s work is bound up with narrative: historical, personal, and Biblical. And, finally, would you like to venture a guess at what stories gave rise to Carl McKenzie’s Devil Family or Topless Waitress pieces?

In the end, this project grew and became more exciting with each passing day. We consider it among the most important exhibitions that Kentucky Folk Art Center has ever presented. While the work of artists in this exhibition has been featured in dozens of exhibitions going back some forty years, their work has never been presented in this way, together. All of these artists, four of the most important in contemporary American folk art, came out of the same place and were influenced by the same local culture. In one way or another, the other three followed Edgar Tolson’s lead, but all realized something unique and made his work distinctively his own. These are their stories, like most of ours touched by hard times but colored by joy.

For generations preceding the births of Edgar Tolson in 1904 and Carl McKenzie in 1905 the way of life had changed little since the arrival of the first white settlers in the mountains. The hilly landscape posed challenges to farming. East Kentuckians responded with a common lifestyle that required thrift, ingenuity and self-sufficiency. The evolved culture of the region was rooted in these...
constraints and defined by the inherited remnants of the various European peasant cultures of those who had settled this land. Life was hard, but there was a degree of predictability. This was the world into which Edgar Tolson and Carl McKenzie had been born. The 20th century, however, was to be a period of massive upheaval in terms of technology, economics and culture.

Radio penetrated the region early in the 20th century, revolutionizing people’s awareness of a world not necessarily the same as theirs. Other developments followed in increasingly rapid succession, which opened the region to the world beyond. Many of the forces at work during this period of time are eloquently detailed in Julie Ardery’s excellent, in-depth book on Edgar Tolson, The Temptation (1995). All cultures evolve to remain relevant, but do so typically at a tolerable pace. Today, ten years into the 21st century, we have no option but to accept our world in a constant state of change. With the ground constantly shifting under our feet, we now live in a world unprotected by predictability.

This was the backdrop against which Edgar Tolson and Carl McKenzie responded to the world in their art. Earnest Patton, born in 1935, continues that narrative from his own particular, timely perspective. Donny Tolson was born a generation later, in 1958, into a world fundamentally changed from that of his father’s upbringing. His work reflects yet a different perspective, a world in a deeper state of flux from that even of Patton. Despite some common subject matter, the different preoccupations, personalities and interests of each artist, the four bodies of work presented in this exhibition offer insights into their progressively changing world.

Edgar Tolson himself was a harbinger of change. His work and its “discovery” by the world beyond the hills was transformational. Before Tolson, much attention was paid to the products of Appalachia’s traditional culture, music and crafts. But Tolson was possessed of what our first President Bush might have referred to as “the vision thing.” Tolson took wood carving, a skill learned from his participation in the region’s traditional culture, and did something bigger with it. He reacted in response to and sometimes in protest against the new world creeping against the edges of his experience. Edgar Tolson set the stage, his work serving as a cultural bridge into and out of east Kentucky.

~Matt Collinsworth & Adrian Swain
January 2010
RED RIVER

by Larry Hackley

RED RIVER was assembled to illustrate the connections, influences, styles, sources, and evolutions of the four major sculptors of the Campton School: Edgar Tolson, Carl McKenzie, Earnest Patton, and Donny Tolson. It was decided to exhibit mostly tableaux, as they would include both human figures and animals and address more complex narrative themes than single images. This body of sculpture establishes that Appalachian Kentucky’s visual arts tradition is equally as rich and vibrant as the region’s music and literature. The work of these artists addresses universal themes and celebrates a particular sense of place.

Religion has always been an important part of life in rural mountain communities, and its influence in the lives and work of the artists featured here is clear to see. For generations, people gathered in small church houses dotting the hollows and bottoms to socialize with family and friends, in addition to refreshing their spirits. For those who did not read well, church was the place where they could absorb the narrative Biblical cannon. This exhibit is heavy with sculptures of Adam and Eve, a recurring theme throughout the work of these artists. This enables us to see differences in their styles. Also, it allows us to see how each artist’s sculpting evolved over time. The universal themes of the Genesis saga—love, obedience, temptation, betrayal, and banishment—are appealing subjects for these artists, surrounded as they were by a rich storytelling tradition. Adam and Eve tableaux, with their nude figures, became extremely popular with collectors. For these artists and for Edgar Tolson in particular, this buyer demand monopolized their creative time, preventing them from exploring a wider variety of themes.

To some degree, all of these artists are working in a mode that John B. Flanagan, the great, early, modern, primitivistic stone carver, called “thinking with your hands”. Flanagan liked to carve weathered boulders into figures and animals. He depended on the original form of the stone to influence the feeling and shape of the final image. Likewise these natural artists allow their hands to find the images, surface and feeling in the slab, branch or root they carve. Sometimes the artist’s intuitive sense of touch is as important as his vision.

The four sculptors in this exhibit all grew up and have lived in an area roughly comprising the Red River watershed in Wolfe and Powell Counties. In the decades from the 1940s to the 1970s when Edgar Tolson, Carl McKenzie, and Earnest Patton were beginning to find their voices as artists, this part of Appalachia was still isolated, both geographically and culturally. Their homes were snugly situated up the narrow hollows that are etched into the Cumberland Plateau. There they practiced a traditional, self-sufficient agrarian lifestyle like most other people in the region. Every family grew a garden for food and a hillside tobacco patch to make some extra cash. Many of these farms were still being worked with horses and mules into the 1970s, and each had its complement of chickens, hogs and cows, necessary to feed a large family.
Unpaved roads connected these isolated hollows to the main roadways where there were often modest, plain church houses and perhaps a small store every few miles. There was no industry and few opportunities for working a “public” job. Many men spent their weeks in Ohio, Indiana or Michigan working factory jobs, returning to the home place on weekends. Even those who took their families with them often returned to the familiar comfort of the family’s hollow, never becoming fully comfortable under broad, open Midwestern skies.

By the mid 1960s television was beaming-in all manner of popular culture from stations in Huntington and Lexington. Also in the 1960s, the Mountain Parkway was constructed, connecting Campton to the Interstate at Winchester and the world beyond. This made possible an easy commute to day jobs in central Kentucky.

The new parkway ending at Campton (or beginning, depending upon your perspective) might have turned the city into a regional economic hub. But, like many communities in east Kentucky, Campton had long carried the burden of poverty and all that came with it. The new road was a way out not a way in. The community remained dominated by entrenched political interests, its systems and institutions seemingly locked in time. Not surprisingly, only one of Edgar Tolson’s fourteen children with his wife Hulda graduated high school.

However, a bright spot in Wolfe County was Dr. Paul Maddox’s clinic in Campton. It was the only medical facility in a several county area, and for a time in the 1960s and 70s, the clinic was the busiest in the nation. Everyone came through its doors. With fourteen children needing shots, stitches, and casts for broken bones, and with his own health and addiction problems, Edgar was in regular need of the good doctor’s services. For example, his son, Donny, was bitten by a rabid dog and ran a rusty nail through his foot when he was a small child, both life threatening events.

Edgar, who could rarely afford to pay cash, traded Dr. Maddox for medical services with carvings. After Edgar became famous, Dr. Maddox displayed his carvings in a large display case in the waiting room of the clinic. This display inspired others to try their hand at carving.

Frequently short on finished works to sell, Edgar came to use this display as a sort of gallery. He would sell pieces out of the case to admirers who came from out of town, who “just had to have something.” Sometimes he replaced Dr. Maddox’s pieces, sometimes he did not.
AT A GLANCE, Edgar Tolson could look something like one of his wooden dolls; frontal, stiff-spined, rigid, all skin and bones, with an out of control flat-top, often wearing his signature striped shirt and slacks. One could easily overlook Edgar as the native genius behind the Campton School of wood sculptors.

Edgar could hold court in almost any situation and turn it to his advantage. He might quote scripture and charm a guest one minute and unleash withering, misogynistic cracks at a family member the next. But, he would leave his guest buzzing with a positive impression of him. He was a force of nature.

Edgar suffered a stroke in 1957, leaving him paralyzed and bedridden for eighteen months. After regaining his strength, he began carving regularly again in 1959. He had made the occasional wood or stone carving in the decades before, but it was not until after this illness that he began to consider using this talent as a source of income. In the late 1950s he sold carvings on Jockey Day in Campton. Jockey Day, so named because of the regular horse races on Jockey Street, was a monthly court day when folks would gather in town to trade horses, livestock, dogs, produce, guns, anything of value. There was a market and often a tent revival. Jockey Day was the social scene in Wolfe County. There, Edgar sold or traded his snake canes, traditional mule ear chairs, and carvings of dolls and especially animals. He was also fond of carving oxen, bulls and horses as gifts for friends.

In the mid 1960s he became affiliated with the Grassroots Craftsmen, a local crafts coop through which he subsequently made contact with collectors and enthusiasts who would introduce his work to the art world outside Wolfe County.

Edgar’s figures and tableaux, with their elegant, contained simplicity, set the standard for the Campton School of carvers. His narrative tableaux portraying the Garden of Eden saga are spare in concept, and the limited number of typically condensed elements leave little room for misinterpretation. Perhaps subconsciously, Edgar’s work adheres to the modern, mid-20th century dictum that “less is more.”

His figures began as blocks and he removed barely what wood he needed in order to create the finished figure. The surface of his figures is animated with the strokes of his knife work and coarse sanding. This sanding visually softened the surface and “humanized” the carvings. Art historian James Smith Pierce has said of Edgar’s figures that “they don’t look real, they feel real.”

EDGAR TOLSON
Edgar Tolson, photo by Guy Mendes, Campton, Kentucky, 1975
Oxcart with two Oxen and Driver with Whip, 1967, walnut & poplar, varnished, Collection of George H. Meyer

This subject is one that Edgar returned to again and again in his early carvings, either as full bodied “steers” as seen here, or as flattened wall plaques with heads, a yoke and front legs in framed relief. He had worked teams of oxen in the first half of the 20th century while logging virgin timber. This piece exhibits several elements of his early crafts-oriented style, including the pegged eyes and shellacked surface. Edgar explained that he had not developed a way to carve eyes on his animals at this point. These early cedar carvings were frequently made as gifts to friends and neighbors.

Temptation (3rd version), 1968, Wood, paint & graphite, Collection of Clifton Anderson

The idea of naked figures was suggested to Tolson by University of Kentucky art professor John Tuska, who, with his wife Miriam, had seen Edgar’s work at the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen fair in Berea. Edgar completed his first version of The Temptation, which would become his most popular subject, at the 1968 Smithsonian Folklife Festival on The Mall in Washington, D.C. This is the third version, which once belonged to the Tuskas. The apple tree is particularly delicate, with thin limbs and small apples.
Paradise, 1969, Wood, paint & graphite, Private collection

This depiction of Eden was carved in December of 1969 and was purchased by a boyhood friend of Edgar’s. The man took the piece home to Winchester and gave it to his wife for Christmas. She didn’t like it, and relegated it to the closet. During this period Edgar attempted to give his nude figures a degree of shapeliness not seen in his later work, which became more generalized and blocky but perhaps more sculptural.

Noah’s Ark, 1970, Poplar, pine & paint, Collection of George H. Meyer

In the ark, one of Edgar’s most elaborate early painted pieces, Noah and his family are depicted in the ark’s upper section, while a menagerie, including lions, giraffes, and oxen, is found on the deck and in the lower level. Horizontal bodies and right-angle attachment of limbs imbue these animals with the same stark, self-contained countenance as his human figures.
Expulsion, Circa 1971, Wood, paint & graphite, Collection of Ken and Donna Fadeley

This tableau, the fourth from the Fall of Man series, was an often requested subject, as angels are always popular with collectors. In this version, the figures are more elongated than in earlier depictions. Tolson explored this concept often in the early 1970s.


This is the second crucifixion made by Edgar. An earlier version was not as tightly composed and was rudely carved. This example is extraordinary for its triangularly composed figures. The Christ is made to feel less rigid and more serene by tilting his head and closing his eyes.
Original Sin, 1973, Wood, paint & graphite, Collection of Guy Mendes

This piece is the third from the Fall of Man series. The carving of the figures and tree exhibit the mature style that Edgar retained throughout most of the 1970s. He experimented with short, blocky nude figures but always returned to the proportions evident in this sculpture.
Someone suggested to Edgar that he make a unicorn. Having never seen a depiction of a unicorn, he carved one of his standard oxen with a single horn on top of its head. Later, someone sent him a postcard featuring the famous Unicorn in Captivity tapestry from the Cloisters Museum. Tolson made several of these chained, fenced unicorns during the 1970s.
Edgar was a yellow dog Democrat and always interested in politics. He became an avid follower of national politics after he acquired a television. This sculpture, one of Tolson’s largest and most complicated, is a peculiar conflation of Old and New Testament stories. Michael D. Hall, Edgar’s longtime dealer, interpreter, and promoter, thought this piece was a response to the Nixon era Watergate saga and a meditation on the abuse of power. With their casual, turtleneck shirts and rifles, Edgar’s figures are given a modern twist. His usual serene, wide-eyed, stiff-armed figures, in the context of this assemblage, take on a zombie-like character as they go about the business of death and torture.
**Black Adam and Eve (2nd version), 1980, Wood & paint, Private collection**

This black version of Edgar’s classic Temptation scene is the result of a mistake by the artist. The finished carvings exhibited spalting (discoloration of the wood resulting from fungi), so Tolson painted it rather than wasting the figures. This theatrical piece is made even more exotic by painting the snake as a harlequin-like “pied serpent.” These short, stocky figures are representative of a group that Tolson experimented with in the late 1970s. In these, he retains much of the original wood block, carving away only what he must to create the image with no superfluous shaping.
Tolson continued to experiment with themes relating to Paradise long after completing the Fall of Man series in the 1960s. God is depicted in two of these works. In the first, Cool of the Evening (1972-73), a bearded God points his finger and admonishes the sinful Adam and Eve, who hide their shame with plastic fig leaves. In the second, seen here, a more youthful God presents Eve to Adam. At this point in his career, Edgar was becoming frail and increasingly dependent on the women in his life. Perhaps a new appreciation of his wife and daughters provided the inspiration for this piece. During this late period, he carved several beautiful female figures, all bearing a striking resemblance to his wife, Hulda, who was a strong, handsome woman.
CARL WAS TWELVE years old when his mother died, leaving him an orphan. His father had been earlier hit by lightening and killed while logging in the Red River Gorge. From this point on, Carl led a tough, hardscrabble life. A record of his youthful misadventures and of fending for himself was evidenced by his nose which had been broken a number of times and seemed to bend in several directions at once. As he grew older, this feature just added character to a face reminiscent of an 18th Century illustration by William Hogarth.

A gregarious bear of a man who loved a good joke, Carl would often be seen carving canes, figures and animals, sitting on his front porch, or on a stump out front, on the road leading into Red River Gorge through the Nada tunnel. Here he presided as the unelected major of Snakey Hollow.

Carl had carved sporadically all his life, but it was only after he retired from driving a lumber truck in 1969 that it occupied his full attention. Around that same time he became aware of the attention Edgar Tolson was receiving for his work. He knew Edgar from seeing him around the court house square in Campton, and they both took interest in local politics.

When one compares the works of these two artists, it is clear that Carl had never really paid much attention to Edgar’s carving techniques. By the time they met, Carl’s carving style was most probably well codified. It is in the choice of subject matter where Tolson’s influence is most obvious. The oxen plaques and depictions of Adam and Eve are strikingly similar. The Noah’s Arks by each artist are conceptually different, but the fact that both carvers made them during the same period suggests that Carl was aware of Edgar’s arks.

Both men struggled with addiction. Carl may have used carving as a distraction, to stay sober. He rarely sat down without some small piece of carving to occupy him. These sculptured doodles ended up in a box from which he could pull small animals or animal heads as he assembled larger, more complex pieces. Carl’s work has a quirky, joyous quality largely due to the use of these perfunctorily carved parts. The gregarious whole becomes greater than its parts.

Carl was known to pitch these small trifles to school kids as they came through Snakey Hollow on the bus. It amused him that he would later find some of these carvings in mud puddles alongside the road.
Carl’s earliest dated carvings, from the late 1960s, are quirky and constructed out of natural wood found in the forest around his Snakey Hollow home. Limbs with branches, roots, burls, and vines were minimally carved, often with eccentric effort. This Noah’s Ark is inscribed to his wife Edna in 1969.
Noah's Ark, circa 1970, Wood and paint, Private collection

This conception of the ark is reminiscent of Appalachian log cabin construction or a simple chicken coop fashioned out of saplings. It may reflect elements of a shanty boat once common on the Red and Kentucky Rivers. Carl told vivid tales about damming hollows along the Red River with logs in the spring so that they could create a “big tide” by breaking all the dams simultaneously to float the logs to Clay City. This carving benefits from its extreme primitive quality and the whimsical joyous knife play seen in the scale-like feathers of the birds and the terrifying Tasmanian Devil-like animal lunging outwards from the ark.
Early Adam and Eve, circa 1978, Wood, paint, wrapping paper & ribbon, Collection of Rita Biesiot

This early Adam and Eve is interesting for its use of found wood, most likely right off the wood pile, and for the primitive but subtle carving of the figures. The Christmas wrapping paper fig leaves and ribbon add a festive note. In homage to Edgar Tolson, Carl's apples appear at the ends of the tree limbs. (Occasionally Carl made apples out of spit balls!) Unlike Edgar, Carl's snakes are multicolored, most often rattlesnakes. Similar small, early carvings of Carl's were sold at the gift shops near Natural Bridge.
Carl’s compositions seem wildly random when compared to those of Edgar Tolson, but careful consideration reveals an underlying symmetry. The cluttered grouping emphasizes the whimsy of the piece, as does the inclusion of animal heads meant to represent the whole animal.
Carl’s first devil was a woman figure with horns which he named after his wife, Edna. She insisted he make a “Carl” devil. This idea later evolved into the Devil family.
Birth of Jesus, 1985, Painted wood & fabric, Collection of Barry and Laura Crume

Carl used store-bought brushes to paint his carvings, but just as often he would pound the end of a stick until it frayed to make a rough hewn brush. With these twig brushes he would daub layer upon layer of color, much like the abstract expressionist painters. From the mid 80s on, his works became wildly colorful.
Guardian Angel, circa 1985, Painted wood, Collection of Barry and Laura Crume

This sculpture was inspired by a picture Carl's mother had acquired as a premium with washing detergent that had hung on a wall in his childhood home. He described that scene as children picking flowers in a field with the angel hovering overhead. This was a common theme reproduced many times during the Victorian era. Sometimes the children were depicted crossing a rickety bridge.
Carl played banjo and spoke often of musical get-togethers with friends. He was good friends with Lilly May Ledford, a member of the famous Coon Creek Girls. She dropped in whenever she was visiting nearby. Carl played old-time ballads and remembered playing music for corn huskings and house dances, where the furniture was moved outside to make room for dancing indoors. With the increased demand for his carvings in the 1980s, Carl’s arthritic hands stiffened into paws, and he often lamented that he could no longer pick the banjo as he once had. He continued to strum his version of a mouth bow, which he referred to as a “tinging” bow. In the 1970s a musician friend from Indiana, who visited Carl on weekends, bought carvings and resold them to antique dealers in southern Indiana and southwest Ohio. These carvings were eventually traded around the antiques community as “early anonymous folk art.”
Once a concept was worked out, it was rare for Carl to deviate from his usual compositions. This oversized angel protecting a single person is a surprising change from his usual angel with children and flowers. From the early 1980s onwards, Carl carved most of his human figures out of two-by-fours supplied by a Lexington friend who brought scrap wood from his concrete molding business when he came on weekend visits to his cabin in the Red River Gorge. At this point Carl's figures became generally larger, flatter and more foursquare.
Devil Family, 1985, Painted wood, plastic & string, Kentucky Folk Art Center Permanent Collection

Over time, Carl’s tableaux gradually evolved with subsequent versions. The devil family began with only Mr. and Mrs. Devil. By turns, he added children, pitch forks, chairs and pokers. Later all the figures were secured on a base to which he attached that family’s pet snake. In later versions, the children are given matches and kindling to ensure the fires of hell kept burning.

Ox Team and Teamster, 1986, Wood, metal chain, paint & ink, Collection of Barry and Laura Crume

Carl made many carvings of oxen, usually simple wall plaques consisting of a yoke and two straining ox heads with their tongues extended. He worked with oxen in the Red River Gorge when he was young and remembered them as being preferred over horses for pulling logs slowly and deliberately, and for their ability to plant their cloven hooves firmly in the rocky hillsides.
Carl drove a lumber truck making deliveries to buyers in central Kentucky, Ohio and Indiana from mills in east Kentucky. Over the years, he encountered many different waitresses at his favorite lunch counters, but probably never a topless one. Carl produced many carvings of waitresses, but mostly with their clothes on. This was a dream girl!

*Noah's Ark, 1988, Painted wood, Collection of Barry and Laura Crume*

Over time, Carl's works became more bold and colorful. There is an old art axiom that all great art has something unexpected and eccentric. Carl's work consistently exemplifies this concept. The rooster and pig between Noah's legs is a common Appalachian carvers' joke.

*Topless Waitress, Pam, 1989, Wood & paint, Kentucky Folk Art Center Permanent Collection*

Carl drove a lumber truck making deliveries to buyers in central Kentucky, Ohio and Indiana from mills in east Kentucky. Over the years, he encountered many different waitresses at his favorite lunch counters, but probably never a topless one. Carl produced many carvings of waitresses, but mostly with their clothes on. This was a dream girl!
BEARDED, RUGGED, and weathered from many years of working on his hilly farm, Earnest Patton has the look of the quintessential mountain man. Earnest is a cousin of Edgar Tolson and, as a young married couple in the 1970s, Earnest and his wife Betty made frequent visits to the Tolsons. During these visits Earnest picked up the essentials of carving from Edgar. While his figures adhere to the basic Tolson formula, frontal, rigid and self-contained, they can be more bold and exaggerated, and the proportions of Patton’s figures can change from figure to figure.

Generally, Earnest’s carvings are much larger than Edgar’s. While Tolson’s figures stand 10”-12” tall, Earnest’s average twice that size. His animals are constructed with the legs at right angles to the body emphasizing a self-possessed feeling. Edgar’s wood of choice was poplar, whereas Earnest uses any light colored soft wood. His subjects are mostly derived from his personal life, from day-to-day farm life, and family events.

Like Edgar, Earnest had some success selling carvings around Campton, and through the Grassroots Craftsmen Co-op in the mid 1970s until the Grassroots shop burned along with some of his carvings. Disheartened by the loss, he stopped carving for a time but began again in the late 1970s.

Earnest Patton, photo by Guy Mendes, Wolfe County, KY 1987
Good Shepherd (1st version), Wood, circa 1980, Private collection

This was the first tableau made by Earnest. The bold, broadly carved figure and eccentric carving of the sheep’s coat is noteworthy. The subject was derived from a picture hanging in the Patton Home.
**Nativity (1st version), circa 1980, Wood and graphite, Private collection**

This early tableau is remarkable for the Appalachian accoutrement. Joseph, needing to be well caffeinated, holds a coffee pot, and Mary illuminates the future “Light of the World” with an old fashioned oil lamp.

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**Cat Goddess, circa 1980, Painted wood, Collection of Kentucky Museum of Art & Craft**

The source for this Egyptian Goddess was a history book Earnest’s daughter Joyce brought home from school. Each chapter began with a picture of a god or mythological creature. Earnest made a series of carvings based on these images. He also carved satyrs, sphinxes, centaurs and mermaids.
The Pattons have always lived on a farm. They depend on the animals they raise to work the land and provide meat for the table. This sculpture was made one week after the fall hog butchering. More of Earnest’s works are inspired by his everyday domestic life than any of the other artists in this exhibition.
Bull Fighter (1st version), circa 1980, Wood, paint & graphite, Private collection

Earnest is frequently inspired by popular culture. This Bull Fighter is his version of a plaster souvenir decorating the Patton living room. Similar plaster decorations were sold in gift shops near Natural Bridge during the 1970s. Earnest used salvaged wood in many of his early carvings. The base of this sculpture is made from the door panel of what may have been an antique cupboard.

Indian Hunting Deer, circa 1983, Wood, paint, feathers, graphite & ink, Private collection

Earnest made a series of large scale figures in the early 1980s. There were other Indians hunting bears and historical figures – George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Uncle Sam. This large deer is remarkable for its delicacy. Earnest’s early animals, from the 1970s, have the same elegant proportions.
This unusual subject was carved shortly after Betty Patton gave birth to Earnest Jr. It seems strange that such a universal part of the human experience would be so rarely depicted in western art.

Characters from television have provided Earnest with a rich source of inspiration. The identity of this cowboy is unclear. Other popular culture figures by Earnest include The Incredible Hulk, Pee Wee Herman, Dolly Parton, Speck Rhodes, Elvis and Uncle Sam.
Many of Earnest’s works illustrate the realities of rural life. Yesterday’s pet may be tomorrow’s dinner. Compared to the unpainted Hog Killing also in this exhibit, these colorful painted figures seem to emphasize the whimsical nature of this tableau.
Coon Hunter, 1989, Painted wood, Kentucky Folk Art Center permanent collection

The best part of coon hunting is sitting around a fire in the dark, drinking, and listening to hounds “sing” as they run after the coon. However, Appalachian artists most often depict a scene similar to this where the coon has been “treed” and the hunter has arrived to shoot it down.

Black Adam and Eve, 1989, Wood, paint & graphite, Collection of Barry and Laura Crume

Earnest has carved many versions of Adam and Eve. This version with bloodshot eyes seems oddly related to his Booger Man (Devil) carvings.
Earnest’s Ark is more of a river-bound flatboat than the sea going vessel usually depicted in this Old Testament story. He may have seen flatboats on the Red River or on the Kentucky River at nearby Beattyville. The claustrophobic effect of people and animals jammed together is reminiscent of a stockyard auction. As a farmer, such a venue would be familiar to Earnest.
AMERICA HAS A HISTORY of father/son artistic dynasties: the Peales, Calders and Wyeths, to name a few. With Donny Tolson inheriting Edgar’s style, we have another significant family tradition. Alternately stiff and lanky like Edgar, Donny also inherited his father’s unpredictable energy and artistic sensibilities. Unlike Edgar, Donny has a perfectionist’s obsessive desire to control the unforgiving craft of woodcarving. Meticulous to a fault, Donny will spend a month chipping away minute shavings to create just the right forms for a figure, only to pitch it into the wood stove if it is not going the way he wants. Edgar would make a figure in a day.

Donny’s carvings, with their precise forms and smoothly sanded surfaces, seem to be informed by a mid 20th century modern impulse. There are other clear instances of folk artists citing modern influences in their work. For instance, another Kentucky woodcarver, Linvel Barker, has cited Constantine Brancusi as one of the inspirations for his own sleek animals.

Donny has expanded on Edgar’s repertoire of stark, spare figures and Biblical subjects by sculpting subjects from history and popular culture. His extreme crafting renders a mannered, more complicated figure than Edgar’s deliberately primitive fashioning, but his work is no less compelling.
**David and Goliath (1st version), 1981, Wood & paint, Private collection**

The childlike character of the David figure makes the themes of good and evil, weak and powerful, all the more poignant. The carving in this piece is evidence of Donny’s preoccupation with detail early in his career.

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**John the Baptist (2nd version), 1990, Wood, wire & paint, Private collection**

This sculpture is very cinematic and Disney-like, with its swirling waters, stop-action water drops and animated dove. Even with all its gimmicks, the piece still conveys the seriousness of the holy event through the tightly wrought composition and stoic nature of the figures.
Adam and Eve (3rd version), 1990, Wood, paint & ink, Collection of Barry and Laura Crume

Here Donny attempts to distinguish his figures from those of his father by subtly shaping the bodies. Also, he is experimenting with the tree and snake. The trees branches extend upward and have extra apples and the snake here is carved onto the tree.

Colonel Sanders, 1993, Painted wood, ceramics & shoe string, From the collection of Clifton Anderson

This is Donny’s first near life-size figure, and his largest piece to date. A child of the sixties and seventies, Donny’s work frequently celebrates Kentucky heroes and subjects from popular culture, something rarely seen in his father’s oeuvre.
Temptation of Eve, 1994, Wood & paint, Collection of Nancy Jane Bolton

This piece is Donny’s first departure from the standard Adam and Eve themes he inherited from Edgar. Here, Adam is nowhere in sight, as the snake tempts Eve. God seems to have made Eve in the image of another member of the Tolson family with her dimpled chin.
The great architect Louis Sullivan said “God is in the details” and his buildings are loaded with details and ornamental motifs. A similar thing could be said of Donny Tolson’s work. Here the sensuous and curvaceous tempting devil contrasts with the simple choir boy-like Christ. Donny’s meticulous detailing of the figures makes the sculpture successful.
Lady Combing Hair (4th version), 2008, Wood, graphite & markers, Kentucky Folk Art Center Permanent Collection

A wonderful domestic subject, Donny no doubt had seen his mother, sisters and girlfriends primp many times. This is the fourth in a series, two of which are painted, one of them a black woman with a hair pick in her Afro. This bold version is somewhat reminiscent of Donny’s mother Hulda.

Dale Earnhardt, 2004, Painted wood, Collection of UK HealthCare

With stock car racing’s moonshining origins, is it any wonder that Donny would admire Dale Earnhardt? Here Earnhardt, decked out in all his endorsement logo regalia, is the quintessential twenty-first century folk hero.
The Trial of Abraham’s Faith (2nd version), 2009, Wood & paint, Collection of the artist

Here the Old Testament saga of faith, sacrifice and redemption blend with the Garden of Eden theme of temptation. Donny often designs his tableaux around a mountaintop-like base.
Donny borrowed this subject from his father. This tableau is the second in Edgar’s Fall of Man series. Donny’s version includes the addition of the owl and dove.
THE FOUR CARVERS in this exhibit rarely utilized anything other than hand tools to create their art. Hand saws, hatchets, draw knives, sand paper, and paint would fill their tool boxes. Their most important tool, however, is the pocket knife. When these men were growing up, everyone carried one. It was part of your day-to-day gear, handy for all kinds of odd jobs. It was a prop for whittling shavings when you sat around the stove at the country store or at the “liars’ bench” at the county court house. Telling stories and curling thin shavings off a stick is a time honored pastime.

With imagination and skill, these carvers transform the wood they work into subtle, sophisticated objects. To a great extent the appeal of the finished sculpture is the result of the knife work. With knife in hand, these artists are able to exploit the plastic characteristics of the wood and transfer emotion. It is rare to see artists who work with power tools elicit similar feelings in wood.

~Larry Hackley, December, 2009
AFTER SIXTY-FOUR YEARS of living in subsistence-level obscurity, Edgar Tolson became an overnight sensation in 1968 when he was invited to be a featured artist at the Smithsonian’s National Folklife Festival. He made a subsequent appearance there when Kentucky was the exclusive focus of the festival in 1973. The 1982 episode of *Old Friends/New Friends*, in which Fred Rogers’ (Mister Rogers of PBS) visits with Edgar and Hulda Tolson, provides poignant insights into Tolson’s character and his often intractable attitude. It also offers a rare, candid, and at times softened look at the man and his late life attitude towards his art.

Tolson’s meteoric rise from unknown eccentric to minor celebrity status within the larger “art world” made only a modest impact on his lifestyle and financial status. But, there can be little doubt that the attention his work received affected a sea change in his sense of himself as a legitimate artist. This affirmation provided the necessary impetus to other wood carvers who also became the beneficiaries of the market demand erupting from Tolson’s art.

Tolson’s work transformed attitudes towards folk carving in east Kentucky. It spawned subsequent generations of wood carvers beyond the Red River area, but they already understood their own work as “folk art” without having to undergo the perceptual transition from practitioners of a traditional pastime to makers of “art.” Carl McKenzie and Earnest Patton were the most immediate to benefit from this shift in public perception, but there have been numerous others in the decades that followed.

Though he pays frequent tribute to his artistic inheritance, Donny Tolson came to this type of carving already recognized as art. Rather than exploiting that legacy, Donny has acted as an artist, exploring his own aesthetic with a level of expertise second to none, expanding the scope of his subject matter with a subtlety and ambiguity that are unique and entirely of his own invention. It is Donny Tolson who now carries the torch, producing art that is consistently perceptive, innovative, challenging and arresting.

~Adrian Swain, January, 2010
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CHECKLIST

1. Ox Cart with Two Oxen and Driver with Whip, Edgar Tolson, 1967, walnut & poplar, varnished, 10 x 14½ x 6½, collection of George H. Meyer
2. Temptation (3rd version), Edgar Tolson, 1968, wood, paint & graphite, 13½ x 8½ x 6, collection of Clifton Anderson
3. Paradise, Edgar Tolson, 1969, wood, paint & graphite, 11½ x 11¼ x 6¼, Private Collection
5. Expulsion, Edgar Tolson, circa 1971, wood, paint & graphite, 15¼ x 18 x 7, collection of Ken & Donna Fadeley
6. Unicorn in the Garden, Edgar Tolson, circa 1971, wood, 13¾ x 15 x 11¼, collection of Ken & Donna Fadeley
7. Original Sin, Edgar Tolson, 1973, wood, paint & graphite, 13 x 9½ x 9, collection of Guy Mendes
10. Black Adam and Eve (2nd version), Edgar Tolson, 1980, wood & paint, 14 x 13 x 1, Private Collection
11. She Shall Be Called Woman, Edgar Tolson, 1982, wood & paint, 15½ x 18 x 14, collection of UK HealthCare
12. Noah’s Ark, Carl McKenzie, 1969, wood and paint, 8½ x 13½ x 4, Private Collection
13. Noah’s Ark, Carl McKenzie, circa 1970, wood & paint, 7½ x 9 x 7½, Private Collection
14. Early Adam and Eve, Carl McKenzie, circa 1978, wood, paint, wrapping paper & ribbon, 22¼ x 11½ x 6, collection of Rita Biasiot
15. Paradise (1st version), Carl McKenzie, circa 1982, painted wood & ribbon, 25½ x 19½ x 11, collection of Barry and Laura Crume
17. Guardian Angel, Carl McKenzie, circa 1985, wood & paint, 23½ x 5 x 13¼, Private Collection
18. Guardian Angel (with children), Carl McKenzie, circa 1985, painted wood, 16½ x 9¼ x 9, collection of Barry and Laura Crume
20. Devil Family, Carl McKenzie, 1985, painted wood, plastic & string, 20 x 18½ x 8, KFAC Permanent Collection
21. Ox Team and Teamster, Carl McKenzie, 1986, wood, metal chain, paint & ink, 15½ x 18½ x 8½, collection of Barry and Laura Crume
22. Three-Piece Band, Carl McKenzie, 1987, painted wood, 18¼ x 17½ x 4, collection of Jacque Parsley
23. Noah’s Ark, Carl McKenzie, 1988, painted wood, 24¼ x 25½ x 8, collection of Barry and Laura Crume
24. Topless Waitress, Pam, Carl McKenzie, 1989, wood & paint, 19 x 4½ x 4½, KFAC Permanent Collection
25. Bull Fighter (1st version), Earnest Patton, circa 1980, wood, paint & graphite, 17 x 22½ x 10, Private Collection
27. Good Shepherd (1st version), Earnest Patton, circa 1980, wood, 16½ x 12½ x 9½, Private Collection
28. Cowboy and Horse, Earnest Patton, circa 1980, wood, leather, feather & paint, 23½ x 23½ x 6, collection of Kentucky Museum of Art & Craft
30. Indian Hunting Deer, Earnest Patton, circa 1983, wood, paint, feathers, graphite & ink, 41¼ x 33 x 12¼, Private Collection
31. Birth Scene (1st version), Earnest Patton, circa 1984, wood, paint & graphite, 24½ x 23 x 11¼, Private Collection
32. Hog Killing (1st version), Earnest Patton, circa 1989, wood, string & graphite, 21½ x 15 x 8½, Private Collection
33. Noah’s Ark, Earnest Patton, 1989, wood, paint & graphite, 14 x 11½ x 15, collection of Lyn & Gordon Layton
34. Black Adam and Eve, Earnest Patton, 1989, wood, paint & graphite, 23½ x 11 x 13, collection of Barry and Laura Crume
35. Coon Hunter, Earnest Patton, 1989, painted wood, 18½ x 10½ x 8, KFAC Permanent Collection
37. David and Goliath (1st version), Donny Tolson, 1981, wood & paint, 12½ x 16 x 14¼, Private Collection
38. John the Baptist with Jesus (2nd version), Donny Tolson, 1990, wood, wire & paint, 9 x 13¼ x 11¼, Private Collection
39. Adam and Eve (3rd version), Donny Tolson, 1990, wood, paint & graphite, 15 x 15 x 11¼, collection of Barry and Laura Crume
40. Colonel Sanders, Donny Tolson, 1993, painted wood, ceramics & shoe string, 64½ x 15½ x 22, collection of Clifton Anderson
41. Temptation of Eve, Donny Tolson, 1994, wood & paint, 22½ x 13 x 22, collection of Nancy Jane Bolton
42. Devil Tempting Jesus (2nd version), Donny Tolson, 1996, wood & graphite, 18 x 16½ x 15, collection of Clifton Anderson
43. Dale Earnhart, Donny Tolson, 2004, painted wood, 26 x 14½ x 6, collection of UK HealthCare
44. The Trial of Abraham’s Faith (2nd version), Donny Tolson, 2009, wood & paint, 18½ x 24½ x 9¼, on loan from the artist
45. Original Sin (1st version), Donny Tolson, 2009, wood, paint & ink, 13 x 10½ x 9, collection of Gayle Cerlan
46. Lady Combing Hair (4th version), Donny Tolson, 2008, wood, graphite & markers, 18 x 4½ x 5, KFAC Permanent Collection