

"Miss Liberty" holds a makeshift sword in one hand, a heart-shaped shield in the other as she greets newcomers to the gallery that the Milwaukee Art Museum has dedicated to the work of folk and self-taught artists.

The time-worn, rough-hewn sculpture is as good an introduction as any to one of the nation's more complete collections of work by artists without formal training.

Indeed, she's a star-spangled icon of patriotism.

Created somewhere in New England in 1910 by an unknown craftsman, and for many years owned by folk-art authority Herbert W. Hemphill Jr., the 82-inch-tall figure came to the city as part of the Michael and Julie Hall Collection of American Folk Art, which was acquired by gift-purchase in 1989.

She's just one of 273 works, valued at upward of \$1.55 million, that in a single stroke transformed the lakefront art museum from an also-ran into a mecca for admirers of art by untutored crafters.

Winter Gallery show

The collection can be viewed in the Winter Gallery, which adjoins the Peg **Bradley collection** on the top floor of the original Saarinen gallery complex, just north of the Calatrava expansion.

A fitting source for contemplation in this era of national acrimony and division, "Miss Liberty" is joyous and direct, a grinning refutation of negativism and defeatism.

Her body and head have been carved out of wood, which her maker has assembled and painted in red, white and blue in a now-faded stars-and-stripes motif.

A coach bolt, struts and iron ring hold Miss Liberty's arms at the proper angle to her body. Standing on the floor nearby is an obviously inoperative cannon, also fashioned out of rudely carved and polychromed wood. The effect is at once humorous and heartbreaking, with just a twinge of nostalgic recall.

In many ways the acquisition of the Hall Collection marked the climax -- but not, as it turned out, the completion -- of the building of the museum's folk-art holdings. The collection was begun in 1951, when the museum acquired two pieces of work by the self-taught American artist Anna Louisa Miller.

Since then, it has expanded steadily but enjoyed its biggest growth spurt with the arrival of the huge Hall trove, which had been on national tour during the protracted construction period.

The collection was impressively in place when the enlarged museum reopened its doors in late 2001.

Jeffrey R. Hayes, professor of art history at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, has written that "Miss Liberty," with her exuberance and free-form grace, "epitomizes the combination of individual expression and cultural connectedness that produces momentous folk art."

'Free from dogma'

In his published comments on the Hall Collection, Hayes quotes Hemphill as saying that the sculpture's rough but resourceful construction and "harsh linear quality" make a powerful impression that is "free from the dogma and restrictions that . . . dominant culture (and its academic art world) imposes."

Hayes quotes another writer, Nancy Jo Fox, as having stated in her book, "Liberties with Liberty," that "liberty princesses" much like this one were featured often in Fourth of July parades.

Such images took many shapes: the Indian Queen, liberty goddess, Columbia and Statue of Liberty.

Fox goes on to suggest that the cannon that stands next to "Miss Liberty" is reflective of the militancy that accompanied rising American nationalism, as heightened by the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898.

The cannon is also a reminder of the global tensions that were soon to lead to this country's intervention on the side of Britain and France in the Great War.

For Milwaukee Art Museum information, visit www.mam.org. E-mail James Auer: jauer@journalsentinel.com.

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