

# Thinking Global and Making Local: Mariner's Art in International Perspective



## Mariner's Art in International Perspective

Although we think of our own age as the one of “globalization,” in fact, as historians are now demonstrating, early Americans were connected with the Atlantic world as well as with global trade and information networks in a variety of ways. The “global turn” in early American studies has worn down the barriers that formerly existed between the history of the U.S. and the rest of the world. As an interpretive model for historians and art historians, globalization remains controversial. In the case of art history, while many scholars want to recognize the international exchange of objects and aesthetic concepts in the past—themes often overlooked in the earlier literature—many also remain skeptical of the applicability of a twentieth-century notion to the understanding of works from the past.

Folk art studies have been largely impervious to the advent of the Atlantic and the global as methodological frameworks, probably because the association

between folk art and American national identity has been so strong since the moment that folk art was "discovered" in the early twentieth century. Historians Eugene W. Metcalf Jr. and Claudine Weatherford have written of Holger Cahill, who promoted folk art as early as the 1920s, that "self-conscious chauvinism expressed itself boldly in [...his] definition of American folk art. And there is some/much truth to this. Said by Cahill to give 'a living quality to the story of American beginnings,' folk art was glorified as representative of an indigenous artistic heritage of a great democratic nation." The connections Cahill drew between folk art and national identity typified scholarship and criticism in the field from its infancy onward: The first gift in 1962 to the collection of the fledgling institution that would eventually become the American Folk Art Museum in New York City was, tellingly, a gate in the form of an American flag.

Such objects suggest the complex cultural and political identifications of folk art producers. They undoubtedly drew on local, vernacular traditions, but that did not preclude their familiarity with national imagery which would in turn imply that they possessed some sense of belonging to the nation. The affiliations of folk artists moved even further outward, however, from their local communities to the broader world in which they lived and worked. The objects they made must thus be interpreted in relation to a continuum of identifications that range from the local to the global. Seen in this light, the works themselves, as well as their makers, take on a new complexity.

Take the work of sailors, who were among the most prolific makers of folk art—from scrimshaw to decorated trunks to ditty bags. A good (but late) example of the latter is a sea bag decorated by Maine native and seaman Jack Gardner during a voyage around the world in 1920-21. Now in the collection of the Maine Maritime Museum, it depicts people, places, and monuments that Gardner encountered during his time abroad. In general, the objects sailors produced or decorated evidence the long idle hours they spent on lengthy sea voyages. At the same time, those trips took them around the world and put them in contact with the cultures of Europe and Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. Many seem to have possessed the "unsettled subjectivity" that literary critic Patricia Fumerton ascribes to early modern seafarers and other workers who lived their lives without maintaining strong ties to family and friends. Being "unsettled" meant that these folk artists were cut off from their families, friends and other associates at home during long stretches of time at sea, yet they formed bonds with shipmates, and were also introduced to people around the world whom they would otherwise never have known. Thus, even if seamen were isolated from their communities of origin, and sometimes only loosely integrated into port life, they nonetheless profited from an exposure to foreign cultures that more rooted people did not enjoy. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even in more recent times, international trade by sea simultaneously created conditions of intense isolation and exhilarating social interaction.



Fig. 1. Flag Gate, artist unidentified, paint on wood with iron and brass,  $39\frac{1}{2}$  x 57 x  $3\frac{3}{4}$  in. (Jefferson County, New York c. 1876). Courtesy of the American Folk Art Museum, New York. Gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill Jr., 1962.

The effects of this kind of global exposure on folk art becomes clear when we look at a small selection of works included in the Maine Folk Art Trail, a series of exhibitions held in ten Maine museums in 2008. Because the state was economically dependent on maritime trade both before and after its political separation in 1820 from Massachusetts (of which it had been a "District"), and because folk art associated with seafaring is prevalent as well as exemplary of global connections, the Maine-related objects provide useful examples. The objects produced by two men—the lighthouse keeper Eliphalet Grover (1778-1855) and his son Samuel Grover (1816-1898)—offer a point of departure. The Grovers are credited with having made several objects now in the collection of the Museums of Old York in York, Maine, including a violin (1821) and a wooden box (ca. 1832) by Eliphalet and a child's violin (1834) by Samuel. Their biographies and the objects they fashioned reveal the dynamic relationship between social isolation and integration that characterized globalized seafaring life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Although he was not a mariner himself, Eliphalet Grover's job was a direct outgrowth of maritime commerce and it entailed some of the same hardships and frustrations seamen faced. After the American Revolution, both maritime trade and related industries like ship-building expanded in Maine, although trade disruptions were caused by the Embargo Act of 1807 and the War of 1812. During the thirteen years prior to the embargo, for instance, shipping registered in the District of Maine nearly tripled, from 50,000 tons to 148,000 tons. Coastal trade depended upon the ability of vessels to avoid the hazards of Maine's jagged coastline. One such hazard was Boon Island, located nine miles off of York Beach in the open waters of the Gulf of Maine. At its widest it is about a third of a mile, although to call it an "island" is perhaps to overstate the case: It is a rock outcropping only fourteen feet above sea level and can support no vegetation. The wife of one twentieth-century lighthouse keeper recalled that "there was not a blade of grass or a weed on the island." In the eighteenth century, coastal vessels had wrecked on Boon Island numerous times and the first beacon was installed there, at a time of increasing maritime activity, in 1799. It was forty feet in height and its construction was funded

through the office of Benjamin Lincoln, the Boston Customs Inspector. During the first half of the nineteenth century, four different towers were swept away by the sea. On May 31, 1831, Eliphalet Grover noted the laying of the first stone for a new lighthouse on Boon Island, but despite its construction of masonry, it was carried away some time after its completion in July of the same year. The granite tower built in 1852, however, was substantial enough to withstand punishing surf and still stands. During the period that the Grover family was on Boon Island, the lighthouse was seventy feet tall and a residence was located adjacent to it, although in the latter part of his tenure they also had a house on the mainland.

Eliphalet Grover, who became the Boon Island lighthouse keeper in 1816, was born in 1778. With his wife, Susanna (1780-1858), he had three children, one of whom was Samuel, born the year his father received his appointment. Eliphalet had a long career as keeper, which lasted until 1839 when he was dismissed for somewhat mysterious reasons, probably because such positions had become by then the objects of political patronage. A variety of alleged infractions, including selling portions of the whale oil shipments that were supposed to keep the light burning, had been made against the lighthouse keeper to justify his dismissal, but he denied them. Grover soon became keeper of Whaleback Lighthouse in nearby Portsmouth, New Hampshire, which seems to suggest that his behavior on Boon Island had not been criminal. Samuel apparently moved after his father's dismissal, if not earlier, to North Berwick and eventually married Olive Jane Grant (c. 1837-1872) of Acton, Maine.



Fig. 2. Fiddle, Eliphalet Grover, pine, maple, and walnut wood, bone, horn, catgut strings, 25  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 8 x 1  $\frac{7}{10}$  in. (Boon Island, Maine, 1821). Courtesy of the Museums of Old York, York, Maine.

The objects the Grovers made reflect their most immediate surroundings, the harsh, isolated island on which they spent much of their lives, as well as their identification with the nation and their connections to a global economy. The men's offshore lives were expressed in the objects they made: small, portable pieces, fashioned from the meager materials at their disposal. Although the family went back and forth from Boon Island to the mainland, inscriptions on the objects the Grovers crafted underscored the paradoxical fact of their production on such a tiny island with so few natural resources from which to make anything. The inscription on the violin made by the elder Grover reads, "Made on Boon Island by Capt. Eliphalet Grover 1821" and the smaller violin made by his son (who likely learned instrument-making from his

father) is labeled on the interior "Made by Samuel Grover Boon Island, Maine, 1834." The extremely limited physical space the Grovers had available to them on Boon Island meant that they had to express their creativity on a very small scale. They even made use of scrap materials available on the island: Eliphalet Grover recorded in his log that in a bad storm, the wind would tear the shingles off of the buildings on Boon Island, so it is not surprising he had a good supply on hand to repair the intermittent damage. Eliphalet used split-wood roof shingles, likely from his repair supply, to make the top and back of his 1821 fiddle. The musical instrument demonstrated Grover's skills as both a joiner and a carver, for he shaped and fitted together the shingles to make the body of the instrument, and then carved its head with a human likeness. The project was well adapted to an island since it required only minimal space and small handtools; moreover, it could be worked on over an extended period of time, taken out and put away as the daily schedule of maintaining the light permitted. The portable violin, which could be easily taken back and forth to the mainland, was typical of the objects the Grovers made. The box Eliphalet fashioned—primarily from locally plentiful pine wood—was well suited to his restricted surroundings. It measures just  $5\frac{1}{2}$  by  $7\frac{5}{8}$  by  $6\frac{1}{2}$  inches and could have been useful for transporting valuables between the island and the mainland.

The imagery, with its repetition of human faces around the exterior, may well have reflected Eliphalet's isolation. These images are profile silhouettes which have been cut out and then affixed to the box. This emphasis on the human face runs through the Grovers's work: Both of their violins are distinctive for having carved and painted heads incorporated into the scrolls, perhaps reflecting a desire for human contact. The Grovers apparently longed for their time ashore, as an anecdote recounted by the poet Celia Thaxter in *Among the Isles of Shoals* (1873) attests. Thaxter's father was a New Hampshire lighthouse keeper from 1838 onward, so she was well aware of what life on a small Atlantic island was like. In her book, she recounted traveling on a boat bound for Bangor, Maine, where she met an unnamed man who had grown up on Boon Island and who was likely one of Eliphalet Grover's sons. Thaxter recalled that "He spoke with bitterness of his life in that terrible solitude, and of 'loneliness which had pursued him ever since.' [...] He ended by anathematizing all islands, and, vanishing into the darkness, was not to be found again."

Making and decorating objects filled some of the hours Eliphalet and Samuel Grover spent on their lonely outpost, and they surrounded themselves with likenesses. These objects would also have been useful in the context of island living. The violin, for example, could have been very useful on Boon Island, the year round. In the summer, when the surf is generally subdued, music from the violin would have melded with the sounds of swells rising against the rock outcropping. In the more severe weather typical of fall and winter, the violin would have helped drown out the relentless sound of crashing surf and filled the empty days, weeks and months when the waves made it difficult for a boat to land on Boon Island. A twentieth-century resident recalled how very nearly inescapable the sound of pounding surf could be: "One day there was a terrible



storm so terrible that we went to the top of the lighthouse and sat with our heads almost in our laps so we wouldn't hear the storm." When the Grovers went ashore, they could have taken their musical instruments with them and joined in the social life of York and other nearby villages and cities. The musical instruments then wove together the Grovers' solitary lives on Boon Island and their intermittent social connections with the community on the mainland. The forms, materials, and decorative aspects of the objects all attest to the dual character of these folk artists' lives: at once circumscribed by their island home and also connected to national and even international economic and social networks.



Fig. 3. Document Box, Eliphalet Grover, pine, maple, cherry, and mahogany wood, with polychrome stain, paint, and ink; brass handle and hinges,  $5 \frac{1}{2} \times 7 \frac{5}{8} \times 6 \frac{1}{2}$  in. (Boon Island, Maine, c. 1832). Courtesy of the Museums of Old York, York, Maine.

We can see the Grovers' identification with the nation and with nationalism on the same objects that testified to the world immediately surrounding them. The faces on Eliphalet's box are enhanced with military uniforms and drawn swords. In the corners of the top of the box are painted eagles and shields on maple veneer. Together, the military themes and eagles and shields suggest an association with battle and ultimately with national history. These motifs reflect Grover's interest in the iconography of the American nation, which he could have encountered through a variety of means, but most likely through popular print. Newspapers, almanacs, and cheap prints all would have served as sources of such imagery; Grover would have seen such printed materials while on shore or have obtained them from visitors to Boon Island. Indeed, the box is lined with pages from a contemporary New York newspaper. He creatively interpreted the visual aspects of the world of popular print in his own original works.

These motifs also echoed the national imagery that appeared on a variety of objects made by mariner folk artists, including what has been probably the most

highly sought-after category of seamen's art: scrimshaw. To take just two examples, in the collection of the Mystic Seaport Museum are two whale's teeth with scrimshaw scenes (c. 1848), the Battle of Lake Erie and the Battle of Lake Champlain, attributed to Nathaniel Sylvester Finney. Simon Newman has also shown that the most personal of sailors' works, tattoos, also employed symbols of the nation, such as eagles, alongside initials and other motifs that related both to their shipboard relationships and to their connections to loved ones on shore. In the 500 records of sailors' tattoos found in the Seamen's Protection Certificate Applications (1798-1816) studied by Newman, he identified seventy-one that featured either "eagles, American flags, the date 1776, [or] representations of liberty," with eagles being the most popular. Newman connects this body of imagery to sailors' interests in early national politics, to their patriotism, and to their advantageous positions as witnesses to the age of revolution throughout the Atlantic world. This interpretation of the tattoo imagery provides a way of understanding the eagles and armed figures that appear on Grover's box. However obliquely, these motifs reference the international conflicts that somebody at sea would have witnessed—or learned about from mariners who had direct experience of the American, French, or Haitian revolutions and other events—in the early national period, conflicts that took their tolls on the very maritime trade that the lighthouse was supposed to facilitate. The eagle may also signal Grover's allegiance to the patriotism of sailors who would have passed by Boon Island and occasionally landed on the rock, as well as to his interest in politics on the mainland.

Eliphalet Grover's box decoration is not an anomaly among the motifs that appear on maritime folk art from Maine, as a ship's figurehead of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry makes clear. Newman points out that many seamen were staunchly anti-British and for them Perry would indeed have been the "Hero of Lake Erie." He led the United States naval forces in a successful battle against the British navy on Lake Erie on Sept. 10, 1813, despite serious damage to his ship, the USS Lawrence, whose battle flag bore the famous slogan, "Don't give up the ship." Although who was responsible for the naming of the ship on which this figurehead appeared, and the selection of Commodore Perry as the motif for the figurehead, is unclear in both cases, the ship's owners as well as its crew could have appreciated the patriotism of the gesture.

Figurehead carving was intimately tied to the shipbuilding (particularly in wood) and shipping trades. As those industries declined in Maine from the end of the nineteenth century onward, the production of figureheads, and indeed maritime carving in general, came to be thought of as a dying art and examples were sought out to document its heyday earlier in the nineteenth century. As art historian Samuel M. Green remarked, "I have seen figureheads and other carvings in deserted corners, lofts, and barns throughout the state [of Maine], all of which will inevitably disappear without a trace unless recorded, just as hundreds of their kind have disappeared before now." In fact, the Index of American Design, a WPA project that produced some 22,000 watercolors and photographs of "various arts and crafts in the field of Design in the United States from before 1700 until about 1900," included examples of Maine maritime

carving. (The work of Edbury Hatch, “the last of the figurehead carvers in the towns of Newcastle and Damariscotta,” was especially highly valued. ) The Index of American Design positioned such carving alongside a wide variety of “folk” objects, all of which were valued for the high quality of their design and execution. Figureheads and other decorative elements from ships were also obviously associated with Maine’s earlier maritime history. At the same time, however, these artifacts were connected to a larger American cultural history, even if the first generation of folk art scholars could not have recognized the full political, social, and economic contexts of seafarers’ lives.



Fig.4. Figurehead of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, maker unknown, carved and painted wood, 46  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 22 x 21 in. (nineteenth century). Courtesy of the Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine. Gift of David Rubenstein, 1964.

Nor would any early folk art critic, dealer, or collector have spoken of the works as evidence of a particularly international, or even global, mentality on the parts of the makers. But in fact some examples of folk art might be said to signify in just that way. For instance, a ship model known as “A Sailor’s Dream” in the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, Maine, provides some evidence of how distant continents appeared in the American sailor’s imaginary. The museum notes that “this ship model is imbued with the romance and exoticism that was often attached to seafaring life.” It features a three-masted sailing ship at sea “on which are numerous carvings of oversized fish, birds, sea-serpents, and smaller rigged sailing and fishing vessels.” The ship sails towards a lighthouse (reminding us of how important those structures were in maritime life) and above the ship hangs a carved eagle (recalling some sailors’ favored motifs). On the portside quarterboard is inscribed the word “Japanese” and on the opposite side is written “Souvenir.” Near the port side on the bow is written “Sterndorfer” and on the stern is inscribed “Maine,” perhaps indicating both the ship’s place of origin and the model’s since it was found in a boat shed in Rockland in the 1950s.



The ship model can appropriately be considered a “dream” to the extent that it distorts the scales of various elements—the ship that dwarfs the lighthouse, for instance—and combines things (some of them fantastic) that could not ordinarily be found together, like the varieties of carved sea life and the eagle in the sky. The model may have been called a dream because it also brings together two distant lands: Maine and Japan. However, given the long history of New England’s maritime relationships with Asia, this work can also be understood as a window onto how some seamen thought of their places in the world, assuming that a mariner made, commissioned or owned the model. The dream of shipboard life was then not so much “romantic” or “exotic” as it was filled simultaneously with excitement and peril, limited and unbounded.

The many ways in which Maine’s folk art evidenced the district’s and later the state’s vigorous participation in international trade from the colonial period forward was barely acknowledged during the period when folk art was being established as a field of collecting and scholarship. True, scrimshaw, ships’ figureheads, ship models, and other objects fashioned at sea or produced in response to maritime trade were the subjects of considerable interest in the early decades of the twentieth century, but a countervailing tendency to associate them with local culture worked against their being understood in relation to global networks of trade and otherwise. The conceptual affiliation of folk art with American identity, addressed at the outset of this essay, provides part of the explanation for this failure to see folk art as part of a larger, more cosmopolitan culture. The other reason is that by the early twentieth century, when artists, curators, and collectors—particularly from New York City—began to buy and exhibit Maine folk art, the state had changed. By the twentieth century, Maine’s ports had been outstripped by others as places of economic activity, and its shipbuilding had become less important as wooden vessels were increasingly limited to pleasure boats. The urbanites who came to Maine after 1900 did so specifically because many parts of the state had become sleepy backwaters by then. They had become isolated, to some extent, as maritime travel and shipping decreased in favor of railroads, and later, highways. And so the slow pace of life in such enclaves suited the purposes of city-dwellers looking to escape frenetic urban life.



Fig. 5. A Sailor's Dream, maker unknown, painted wood, canvas, lead, and plaster, case  $31 \frac{3}{4} \times 31 \frac{1}{2} \times 17 \frac{1}{4}$  in. (nineteenth century). Courtesy of the Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine. Gift of Mrs. Austin Lamont, 1966.

The consequence of the early collecting of Maine folk art was its conceptual disassociation from the global economic activity that originally brought it into being. As historians have raised awareness of how deeply interconnected was the Atlantic world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is appropriate to reinsert the “folk” objects produced during the period into that context. Doing so, we will see makers like Eliphalet and Samuel Grover less as isolated artists whose very separateness from cultural centers and urban institutions was responsible for their creativity, and more as makers whose embeddedness in international economic and cultural networks provided the time, opportunity, and aesthetic impulse to create works that provide a perspective on their own period’s “globalization.” The danger here is that just as early twentieth-century conceptions of folk art supported present-day concepts of the nation, so this repositioning of folk art in relation to a broader geographic horizon will only go to underwrite—in an uncritical way—our own notions of twenty-first century globalism. Brian Connolly has addressed the conceptual and political pitfalls entailed in rewriting early American history from a global perspective. He urges us “to consider how invocations of the Atlantic and other extra-national scales might simultaneously displace the nation and secure other relationships of power, especially those of present-day global capitalism,” and concludes that “we should feel a great deal of anxiety to be writing at the same scale and deploying the same terms as global capitalism.”

In the case of folk art studies, adopting a global perspective can be potentially as limiting as were the pioneering but nationalistic interpretations of the objects that came about in the early twentieth century. Thus we should consider, before we inscribe folk art (or at least some of it) within a global framework, the skepticism that has been expressed vis-à-vis globalization with regard to art history. Art historians, like other sorts of

historians, have been leery of projecting a twenty-first century notion of globalization back onto earlier periods for fear of inadvertently legitimating contemporary economic structures and political regimes, and misrepresenting the historical situation. As a way of side-stepping these potential limitations, but at the same time recognizing the ways that art makers around the world were interconnected—however fragiley, intermittently, discontinuously—in the pre-modern period, Alessandra Russo has suggested that we “work on the tension between distance and proximity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This tension had a crucial role in the production of objects.” Indeed, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the relationship between distance and proximity provides a valuable lens for thinking about the production and consumption of folk art. Avoiding the ideological consequences of “globalization,” by bringing these terms to the fore in our thinking about art made by non-professionals, we are able to capture, at least to some degree, the mentalities and the horizons of experience that their makers possessed.

That word—“horizon”—has particular resonance for the Grovers and for seamen who must have spent hours staring at it. On the one hand, folk artists working within the context of the maritime economy, the Grovers among them, made objects from materials that were proximate and they represented landscapes, people, and objects that were also present in their local setting. On the other hand, that did not mean that their perspectives were narrow. The unknown maker of “The Sailor’s Dream,” for instance, gave material form to his vision of the world which encompassed not only the ship to which he may have been confined for long periods of time, but also the distant lands which he may have visited but certainly had heard of from other mariners whose horizons were similarly wide. For the producers of folk art who were involved in a variety of ways with long-distance commerce by sea, lands and cultures beyond their immediate horizons may indeed have been the subjects of romantic attachment or exotic associations. But they were also distant places woven into the fabrics of their daily lives.



Fig. 6. Plan and Profile of Boon Island, Gridley Bryant, 1850. Historic American Buildings Survey, photocopy of plan and profile in Records of U.S. Coast Guard, Record Group 26. Courtesy of the National Archives, Washington,

## Further Reading:

Although the literature on folk art, its history, and issues with defining it is large, especially relevant here are: Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr. and Claudine Weatherford, "Modernism, Edith Halpert, Holger Cahill, and the Fine Art Meaning of American Folk Art," in Jane S. Becker and Barbara Franco, *Folk Roots, New Roots; Folklore in American Life* (Lexington, Mass., 1988); and Kevin D. Murphy, ed., *Folk Art in Maine: Uncommon Treasures, 1750-1825* (Camden, Maine, 2008). On the Atlantic world, globalization and their implications for American studies and art history, see: Rosemarie Zagarri, "The Significance of the 'Global Turn' for the Early American Republic: Globalization in the Age of Nation-Building," *Journal of the Early Republic* 31 (Spring 2011): 1-37; Brian Connolly, "[Intimate Atlantics: Toward a critical history of transnational early America](#)," *Common-Place* Vol. II, no. 2 (Jan. 2011); "Roundtable: The Global before Globalization," *October* 133 (Summer, 2010): 3-19; Katherine Manthorne, "Remapping American Art," *American Art* 22 (Fall 2008): 112-117; Wendy Bellion and Mónica Domínguez Torres, "Editors' Introduction," *Winterthur Portfolio* 45 (Summer/Autumn 2011): 101-106 (Special issue on "Objects in Motion"); and Felicity A. Nussbaum, ed., *The Global Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 2003). In considering the lives of mariners I have relied on Patricia Fumerton, *Unsettled: The Culture of Mobility and the Working Poor in Early Modern England* (Chicago, 2006) and Simon Newman, *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2003).

Eliphalet Grover's log book is in the collection of the Museums of Old York along with a typescript by Sue Tolle. Further information about the Grovers and their period in Maine history is to be found in Charles E. Clark, James S. Leamon, and Karen Bowden, eds., *Maine in the Early Republic, From Revolution to Statehood* (Hanover and London, 1988), Laura Fecych Sprague, ed., *Agreeable Situations: Society, Commerce, and Art in Southern Maine, 1780-1830* (Kennebunk, Maine, 1987), and Steven C. Mallory, "Capt. Eliphalet Grover's 'Boon Island Fiddle': The Folk Violin in New England, 1750-1850," in *New England Music: The Public Sphere, 1600-1900*, The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings, Vol. 21, 1996 (Boston, 1998).

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