

In Pursuit of

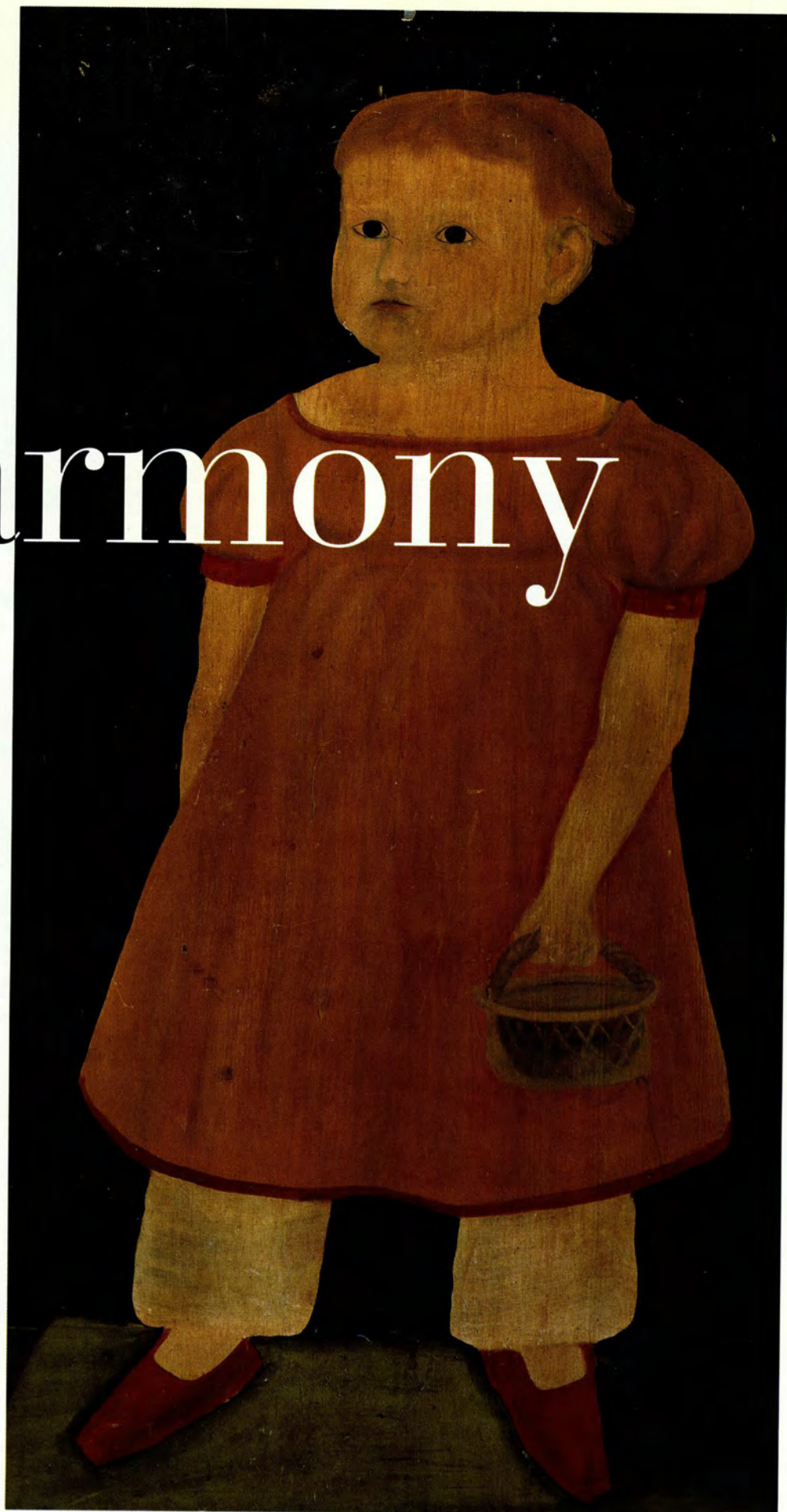
The Alice M. Kaplan Collection



GERARD C. WERTKIN

She collected some of the great masterworks of folk painting and sculpture, but it would be wrong to call Alice M. Kaplan a collector of American folk art. In an age characterized by high levels of specialization, Alice Kaplan's interests remained widely and resolutely eclectic, although always informed by a consistent aesthetic excellence. In 1981, after almost three decades of collecting "slowly and haphazardly," as she described it, she still regarded the acquisition of works of art more "as an enjoyable and stimulating pursuit [than] as building a collection in the conventional sense."¹

Harmony



CHILD WITH A BASKET
Artist unknown
Mount Vernon, Kennebec County,
Maine
c. 1815
Oil on wood panel
34 × 18¼"
Museum of American Folk Art,
gift of Alice M. Kaplan,
1977.13.1



Through adventurous pursuit and an approach that was discerning, but

PORTRAIT OF SARAH PRINCE
(also known as **SILVER MOON** or
GIRL AT THE PIANOFORTE)
John Brewster, Jr. (1766–1854)
c. 1801
Oil on canvas
52½ × 39¾"

To be sure, chance played a role in Alice Kaplan's collecting, but less so, I believe, than she often implied. Hildegard Bachert of New York's Galerie St. Etienne, from whom Mrs. Kaplan acquired drawings and watercolors by Egon Schiele and Käthe Kollwitz, remembers her as an educated, rather deliberate and thoughtful collector for whom careful study was always part of the process of acquisition.² Gerald Kornblau met

Mrs. Kaplan in 1968, the first year that he exhibited at the Winter Antiques Show. She purchased an extraordinary weathervane in the form of a long-billed curlew from him at the preview; several years later, in 1971, he sold her the impressive "Angel Gabriel" tavern sign from Guilford, New York. He remembers her as a determined collector with a highly cultivated eye, who could come to a quick decision in the pressured

opening moments of an antique show.³ Through adventurous pursuit and an approach that was discerning, but no less intuitive, Mrs. Kaplan built a collection that was anything but haphazard, despite her self-deprecating remarks to the contrary.

Alice M. Kaplan died on May 14, 1995, at the age of ninety-one. Early in her long and productive life, she studied painting at the Art Students League, and she always retained a sensitive artist's eye, the impact of which was obvious in her collecting. Her education was interrupted by marriage, residence for several years in Cuba, and the rearing of her four children. It was her decision to return to Columbia University, however, that provided focus to her lifelong interest in art. In 1966, at a time in life when many anticipate retirement, Alice Kaplan received a master of arts degree in the history of art from Columbia. Her thesis—on a drawing by Dürer—was published in *Art Bulletin*, the quarterly journal of the College Art Association, in 1974.

A generous patron of the arts, Mrs. Kaplan served as president of the American Federation of Arts from 1967 to 1977. She was also chairman of the Advisory Council, Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University, and a member of the Visiting Committee of the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University. It was her passion for art and her role as a collector that brought her to these and many other leadership roles and responsibilities.

Alice Kaplan's collection was not large as great collections go, but it was full of wonder and surprise. Among its strengths were old master drawings, pre-Columbian sculpture, the stunning 1888 trompe-l'oeil *Mr. Hulings' Rack Picture*, by William Michael Harnett, and a watercolor depicting the Square of San Marco, Venice, by Maurice B. Prendergast, that one art historian considered the artist's "supreme work on paper."⁴ These, the imposing works of African and Asian art, and much more graced Mrs. Kaplan's welcoming homes in

WOMAN IN BLACK RUFFLED DRESS
Ammi Phillips (1788–1865)
Possibly Kent, Litchfield County,
Connecticut, or Amenia, Dutchess
County, New York
c. 1836
Oil on canvas
32 × 27"



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New York City and on Long Island. Despite the diversity of this collection, art historians have marveled at its aesthetic unity while disagreeing about its principal focus. For Linda Bantel, who until recently was director of the Museum of American Art at The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, it was the "simple contours" and "subtle colors" of the disparate works of art in the Kaplan Collection, along with a clear emphasis on the human figure, that provided a unifying element.⁵ For Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., curator of American painting at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, however, it was Mrs. Kaplan's interest in line that provided the common thread, "line that in the hand of a master creates a nervous consciousness and a special awareness." Many of the

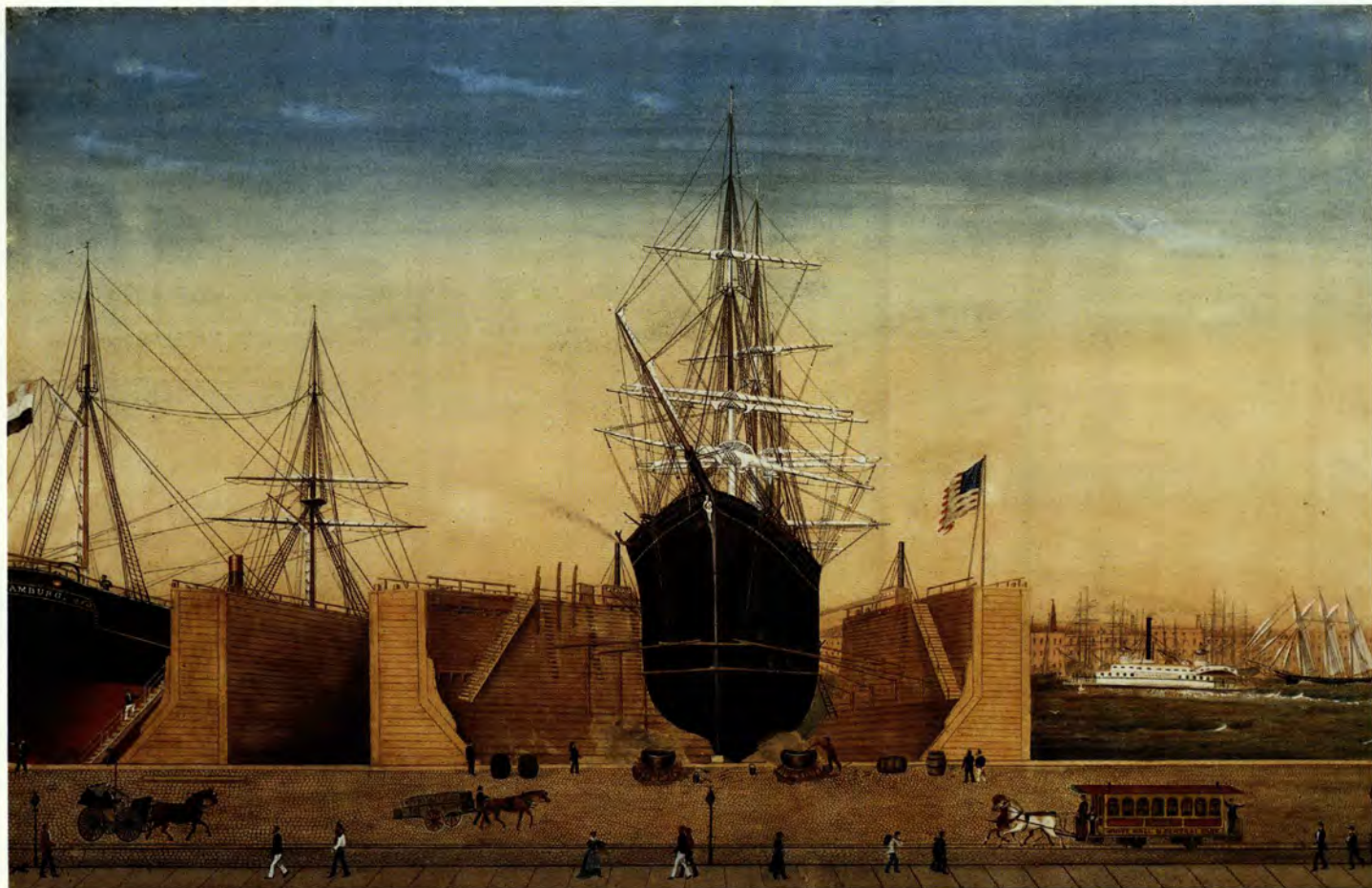
works in the Kaplan collection, he suggested, possessed these characteristics, which in turn were expressive of a "primitive, direct power."⁶

Because Alice Kaplan's collection embodied almost a universal overview of the world's art, without regard to time or place, it may not be surprising that she was also drawn to American folk paintings and sculptures; it is significant, however, to note how strongly the works of American folk art that she acquired held up against the other important objects in her collection. A fourteenth-century Burgundian Virgin and Child in sculpted limestone, for example, and the monumental portrait of Mrs. Ostrander and Her Son, Titus, by the nineteenth-century American folk artist Ammi Phillips, complement

each other wonderfully—the figures are still and self-possessed, each work emphasizes the bond between mother and child, and there is an overarching expression of maternal pride and protectiveness. In the Kaplan collection, folk art was not relegated to the margins; indeed, it was brought to center stage.

Alice Kaplan's collecting was never driven by fashion or by the marketplace. As she remarked in 1977 in referring to her purchase of Ammi Phillips's *Woman in Black Ruffled Dress*, "It was, I guess, only what seems to govern all my choices—the artistic quality of the object and its particular appeal for me."⁷ It is an elegant portrait, and its acquisition marked the beginning of Alice Kaplan's passionate interest in this

NEW YORK BALLANCE DRYDOCK
Jurgan Frederick Hoge
(1809–1878)
Bridgeport, Connecticut
1877
Watercolor, pencil, gouache on buff
paper
23¾ x 35¾"



that she acquired held up against the other important objects in her collection.

great painter. Indeed, by any measure, among the seven or more portraits by Phillips eventually collected by Mrs. Kaplan are two or three of the artist's greatest works: the portraits of Mrs. Ostrander and her son; a hand-

some boy in green with primer, peach, and dog; and *Woman in Black Ruffled Dress*. When Mrs. Kaplan acquired the portrait of the Woman in Black, very little was known about Ammi Phillips. Indeed, Mrs. Kaplan purchased it in a charity auction at Parke-Bernet in New York for fifty dollars. So sure was her artistic eye that this portrait has remained a major work of art in the Kaplan Collection.

Alice M. Kaplan served as a Trustee and officer of the Museum of American Folk Art for many years. She not only was a generous friend and patron, but also participated actively

in the life of the Museum. In 1981, on the occasion of the Museum's twentieth anniversary, she served as curator of an exhibition celebrating the Museum's permanent collection, a challenge that she accepted with her characteristic brio and enthusiasm. I had the privilege of working closely with her on that installation. She and I, together with Cordelia Rose, who then served as the Museum's registrar, had a series of lengthy meetings at an art warehouse in upper Manhattan where the Museum's collections were then stored. We generally traveled between midtown and 135th Street, where the warehouse was located, by bus. Then nearing eighty years of age, Mrs. Kaplan was a robust and spirited companion, and our wide-ranging conversations demonstrated the keenness of



ANGEL GABRIEL
Artist unknown
First quarter of 19th century
Painted and gilded wood
24 (high) × 46½ (between wing
tips) × 18" deep

Alice Kaplan generously lent works from her collection



her intellect and her openness to new ideas. During the installation, Mrs. Kaplan positioned each work of art herself, meticulously deciding upon the appropriate sight-line and integration of objects spanning two hundred years. The Museum was then housed on one floor of a townhouse on West 53rd Street in Manhattan, but it had never seemed so splendid as it did then.

Among the works of art chosen by Mrs. Kaplan for the 1981 exhibition was a painting on board depicting a child with a basket that had been found in an old house in Mount Vernon, Maine. This was but one of Mrs. Kaplan's several generous contributions to the Museum's permanent collection; it is currently included in an exhibition organized by the Museum at the U.S. Embassy in Rome. Another gift was a fine weathervane in the form of a cow, probably from the shop of L.W. Cushing & Sons in Waltham, Massachusetts. Both are illustrated here.

Alice Kaplan generously lent works from her collection for exhibition in various museums, large and small, throughout the country. The published catalog of highlights from her collection contains Linda Bantel's careful exhibition history for each work illustrated.⁸ All of Mrs. Kaplan's great works of folk art have been shown at the Museum of American Folk Art at least once. The portrait of Sarah Prince by John Brewster, Jr., was included in the Museum's initial exhibition in 1962, before she owned this compelling work of art, and was exhibited here most recently in 1990 in "Five Star Folk Art: One Hundred American Masterpieces." Moreover, Alice Kaplan's folk paintings and sculpture were invariably selected by curators for inclusion in the most memorable presentations of American folk art in the last three decades. The distinguished scholar Jean Lipman, whose pioneering work in the field is well recognized, turned to Mrs.

**GODDESS OF LIBERTY
WEATHERVANE**
Cushing & White
Waltham, Massachusetts
c. 1870
Skirt, copper; top of figure,
alloy of tin and lead
59¼ (height, including flag pole) ×
30 × 12½"

for exhibition in various museums, large and small, throughout the country.

Kaplan for major loans to "The Flowering of American Folk Art," shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1974, and "American Folk Painters of Three Centuries," presented by that institution in 1980, as well

tor of an exhibition at the Museum of the portraits of Ammi Phillips in 1968. A scholar as well as a collector, Mrs. Kaplan worked very closely with Mary Black on the installation of the Museum's first Ammi Phillips exhibi-

created, "folk" or "fine," she helped break down barriers to its full understanding and appreciation. ★

Gerard C. Wertkin is director of the Museum of American Folk Art.

COW WEATHERVANE
Possibly L.W. Cushing & Sons
Waltham, Massachusetts
1870-1880
Molded and painted copper
17 x 28 x 6"
Museum of American Folk Art,
gift of Alice M. Kaplan,
1977.13.3



as "Five Star Folk Art." More recently, loans from the Kaplan Collection to the Museum included several of the signature pieces featured in "Revisiting Ammi Phillips: Fifty Years of American Portraiture."

The Phillips exhibition, a comprehensive retrospective and the first major exhibition of his work in more than twenty-five years, was sponsored by the J.M. Kaplan Fund Inc., which had been established by Alice Kaplan's late husband, Jacob M. Kaplan, in 1945. The very generous grant to the Museum was in celebration of Mrs. Kaplan's ninetieth birthday. The grant was especially fitting: Alice Kaplan served as honorary cura-

tion, and it was appropriate that last year's retrospective should be presented in her honor.

Whatever drove her collecting passion, it is clear that Alice M. Kaplan did not set out to create a monument to herself, or for that matter, a museum. Her collecting was a personal affair related to home and family. The beautiful objects that she owned fit comfortably into the places where she and her family lived, and the publication of the catalog of her collection in 1981 was prompted, she wrote, by "family affection." Her achievement, nevertheless, was significant. By recognizing the inherent power of art, wherever or whenever

NOTES

- 1 Alice M. Kaplan, "Foreword," in Linda Bantel, *The Alice M. Kaplan Collection* (New York: Advisory Council of the Department of Art History and Archaeology, Columbia University, 1981), p. 7.
- 2 Hildegard Bachert, conversation with author, June 7, 1995.
- 3 Gerald Kornblau, conversation with author, June 19, 1995.
- 4 Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., "Alice Kaplan Collection," *Portfolio*, vol. 4 (May/June 1982), p. 84.
- 5 Bantel, op. cit., p. 9.
- 6 Stebbins, op. cit., p. 85.
- 7 Quoted in Julia Weissman, "American Folk Art in Private Collections: The Kaplan Collection," *The Clarion*, no. 7 (Spring 1977), p. 12.
- 8 See Bantel, op. cit.