



The Image

During the height of their popularity, carved wooden figures advertising a wide variety of goods and services were a common sight on the streets of urban and small-town America. Tens of thousands of shop figures were carved in the United States and Canada in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Images of Native Americans were by far the most popular, but any character that caught the public's imagination—especially after about 1860—could and would be skillfully personified, from the more traditional Turks and Scotsmen to up-to-date baseball players and fashionable ladies. The carvers themselves coined the phrase “the image business” to characterize the wide range of figures that they were called upon to create.¹ Whether rendered in detailed realism or a more stylized and individualized fashion, shop figures represent one of the largest and most expressive of all American sculptural traditions. As reflections of their era, they also speak volumes about several important aspects of American social history, including racial and gender stereotyping, the emergence of a national popular culture, and the birth of modern commercial advertising.



INDIAN PRINCESS WITH
CROSSED LEGS
Incised "S.A. Robb, Carver,
114 Centre St." on base
New York City
1888-1903
Polychromed wood
72" high
Collection of Allan and
Penny Katz

Business

Shop and Cigar Store Figures in America

By Ralph Sessions

FATHER TIME
Artist unknown
Mohawk Valley, New York
c. 1910
Polychromed wood,
metal, and hair
52 1/8" high
Museum of American Folk Art,
gift of Mrs. John H. Heminway,
1964.2.1



Shop figures were so much a part of the American scene that no one thought to make note of them until they were threatened with extinction in the final decades of the nineteenth century. In 1892, a Philadelphia journalist wrote:

So familiar in times past has everyone become with the cigar store Indian that we have forgotten to look for them. Thus the majority of pedestrians have failed to notice the disappearance of these figures from most of our cigar stores throughout the city. To-day not one in twenty cigar stores is so designated, while in times past every cigar store, large and small, was decorated with some character of Pompey....²

A few decades later, they were decidedly out of favor, most having already been destroyed, relegated to cellars and back rooms, or donated to local historical societies. As a result, their numbers are much reduced today, and their origins and history have become obscure.

As with many things American, the tradition of shop figure carving originated in Europe. By the first quarter of the seventeenth century, craftsmen and merchants had made the link between Native Americans and tobacco. The earliest known representation of a tobacconist figure appeared in 1617 in *The Smoking Age, or The Life and Death of Tobacco*, a long, rambling tale of the origins of tobacco that ridiculed the extravagance of fashionable English smokers. The frontispiece of the book is an illustration of the interior of a tobacco shop. On the counter is a small, vaguely African figure in a feathered skirt with a tobacco roll under his left arm and several clay pipes at his feet. Known variously as a blackamoor, black boy, or Virginian, the type remained popular in England into the nineteenth century. By that time, it had been joined by Scotsmen, Turks, sailors, and other human types, most rendered in quarter to half life size.

Shop figure carving reached its height in America from about 1840 to 1890. The vast majority of the sculp-

tures made during this time were created by shipcarvers trained in traditional Anglo-American woodcarving techniques who operated through a network of workshops in port cities and towns along the East Coast and, to a lesser extent, the Great Lakes. Besides producing shop figures, they also created figureheads and other maritime carvings, as well as a wide range of architectural and church work, and, after the mid-nineteenth century, circus wagon figures. Their major contribution to the art was the development of life-size shop figures, which came to be known as show figures. In this, they were again following English precedent, as full-size representations of Scotsmen had been used as tobacconists' signs in the British Isles in the eighteenth century. The British figures were relatively few, however, compared to the burst of creativity that was about to ensue on this side of the Atlantic.

Patterned after figureheads, life-size shop figures emerged in the United States around 1840, at a time when shipcarving was entering its last major phase of activity. Freestanding figureheads carved in the round were themselves a relatively new development here, having first been copied from French vessels fifty or sixty years earlier. The Philadelphia sculptor and shipcarver William Rush (1756–1833) is generally credited with introducing the French style of full-length figureheads into the American carvers' repertoire. According to an early nineteenth-century account, he first saw them in the early 1780s on two French frigates that were repairing in a Philadelphia shipyard.³ Rush's innovative designs in the following years were very influential and helped change the course that figurehead and shop figure carving was to take in the nineteenth century.

Shipcarvers were a tight-knit group, bound by both family and master-apprentice relationships. Among Rush's apprentices, for example, was Daniel Train, one of the leading shipcarvers in New York at the turn of the nineteenth century; records show that he actively worked at his trade between 1799 and 1812. Simeon Skillin, Jr. (1756/7–1806) and his brother John Skillin (1746–1800) of



the Boston shipcarving dynasty executed Rush's design for the frigate *Constitution* in 1797, and a few years later their nephew Simeon Skillin III (1766–1830) was a partner with the prominent New York City carver Jeremiah Dodge (c. 1780–1860). Given the success of Rush's designs and this itinerant and highly competitive professional network, it is not surprising that by the early nineteenth century the full-length figure, usually dramatically posed on a scroll, was one of the most popular figurehead types in America, along with portrait busts, eagles, and decorative scrolls. These images remained the major styles until the demise of the figurehead tradition in the later part of the century.

By merging the tradition of full-size figureheads with that of the generally smaller shop figures, early nineteenth-century shipcarvers created an imposing sculptural form that was readily adaptable to the rapidly expanding and increasingly competitive American business environment. By mid-century, the phenomenon had reached the dimensions of a fad and show figures had become an essential part of many shopkeepers' operations. The carvers responded by producing a remarkable variety of figures suitable to a wide range of commercial enterprises. The cigar-store Indian was the most popular and prominent type, but new characters reflecting the latest fashions or public opinions were continually created. Portraits of politicians, popular entertainers, and sports heroes were commissioned, from

George Washington to Buffalo Bill to John L. Sullivan. Fictional characters were represented as well, especially Punch of Punch and Judy fame. According to contemporary accounts, he was particularly popular in the 1870s and 1880s.

Due to the innumerable and often brief partnerships of master shipcarvers, the frequent relocation of even the most stable workshops, and the itinerant nature of the profession, the attribution of figures to a specific carver or even a specific shop remains largely speculative. Dating is more certain, as a stylistic chronology that roughly parallels developments in the fine arts can be applied to figureheads and shop figures. From the mid-eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, shipcarvers like William Rush and the Skillins combined traditional baroque-inspired figurehead design with an overlay of neoclassical dress and accessories. The result was a tendency toward dramatic movement, deep carving, and generalized faces with idealized features. At the end of this period, neoclassical elements often dominated, as seen in the *Mercury* carved around 1830 and attributed to William Rush. As the god of commerce and the messenger of the gods, Mercury was an appropriate choice for a tobacconist's sign. Then again, the store owner may have simply wanted a distinctive figure carved in the latest style. The details of *Mercury's* costume, including winged helmet and armor, are crisply rendered, while the attention to anatomical features seen in the musculature of the neck and legs mark it as the work of a master like Rush.

As the nineteenth century progressed, elements of romanticism were adopted by the carvers, particularly in the stereotypical depiction of Native Americans in the "noble savage" mode. Carving was somewhat shallower than before, but ornamented surface remained the rule, as did idealized faces with eyes that searched the horizon in the manner of their figurehead ancestors. Among the men most responsible for the development and production of the type were four New York City shipcarvers: John Cromwell (1805–1873), Thomas Brooks (1828–1895), Thomas White (1825–1902),

MERCURY
 Attributed to William Rush
 Philadelphia
 c. 1830
 Polychromed wood
 38" high
 Maryland Historical Society,
 26.11.1



AFRICAN AMERICAN INDIAN
 Attributed to Job
 Freehold, New Jersey
 c. 1850
 Polychromed wood
 46" high
 New York State
 Historical
 Association,
 Cooperstown,
 New York, N-145.61

Glenn Linowhardt



DUDE or RACE TRACK TOUT
Artist unknown
Probably New York City
c. 1880
Polychromed wood
72" high
Heritage Plantation of
Sandwich,
Massachusetts

Gary Anderson

and Samuel Robb (1851–1928). Thanks to the work of Frederick Fried, Robb's workshop is the most familiar. His was the largest and most successful operation in the final decades of the nineteenth century, producing many of the finest examples of New York show figures known to us today. It is also true, however, that Robb inherited many elements of his style from his predecessors, as was typical in all of the old craft traditions.

Beginning with Cromwell and one or two of his contemporaries, three generations of New York ship-carvers worked in a similar style, producing thousands of figures that are largely variations on a relatively small number of themes. With the exception of special commissions, upon which carvers would indulge their imaginations in highly individualized conceptions, the majority of figures were created using a standard repertoire of poses, expressions, and accessories. That is not to say that they were either devoid of originality or indistinguishable from one another. The number of combinations of the various elements was seemingly endless, and the best carvers imparted an individualized touch to their work. Even in the case of the most popular types of figures, no two pieces were exactly alike.

One of the finest surviving examples of the New York show figure style is illustrated here, a female Indian with "S.A. Robb, Carver, 114 Centre St." incised on the top front edge of the base. The piece is remarkably well preserved, from its carved detail to an original paint surface that shows almost no evidence of retouching. This may be because it spent much of its working life indoors, possibly in a store window, and therefore escaped the exposure to the elements and other types of wear and tear that resulted in many figures needing to be routinely repaired and repainted. In any event, the figure's expressive face and cross-legged pose give it a casual, almost jaunty air that is much more lifelike than many of its more static contemporaries.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the emphasis on detailed realism and contemporary dress favored for public monuments and commemorative sculpture influ-

enced the depiction of many characters. The best figures were carved with much attention to detail, while faces were frequently handled more naturalistically. At the same time, these tendencies were often mixed with a strong element of caricature that was also seen in newspapers and the popular press. One typical urban type, known at the time as a *Dude* or *Race Track Tout*, was particularly popular. As one carver explained in 1886, "Dudes had quite a go for a while. I have got fully twenty-five dudes planted around Brooklyn and New York now, though dudes are on the wane..."⁷⁴ Nattily dressed, this ultimate city slicker is rendered as a slightly disreputable character who would no doubt be happy to sell you anything. He is skillfully carved, but it is the bold use of paint, which in this case has been carefully restored, that is especially important in creating the overall effect.

In large part, these stylistic parallels with the fine and graphic arts resulted from the fact that the carvers were creating works for an American public that—due to the proliferation of civic monuments, commercial galleries, and art fairs after mid-century, as well as the availability of inexpensive prints and illustrated magazines—was increasingly aware of current developments in the arts. A few carvers even received some academic training, including Samuel Robb, who attended night classes at Cooper Union and the National Academy of Design in New York City.

Despite the changing styles and details, however, the figures continued to be made in the traditional manner. The preferred material was white pine, usually three- to seven-foot sections of masts purchased at spar yards in the maritime district. The larger carving shops consisted of one or two master carvers, a few apprentices, and one or more itinerant journeyman carvers who were engaged on a daily or weekly basis, depending upon the number of orders to be filled. Other master carvers worked alone, with perhaps only a single apprentice. The work proceeded by hand. "While the carving is mostly done by eye, chalk or pencil lines are drawn on the log for general contour," as a reporter noted

in 1883.⁵ For the more popular types that were often repeated, a paper pattern was used as a guide. The carvers' tools were axes, mallets, and chisels. While the inspiration for a particular figure might come from any number of different sources, industrialization never made much headway in a craft that demanded so much handwork. For this reason, show figures made by shipcarvers represent a fascinating blend of folk, fine, and popular art.

At the other end of the folk art continuum are those self-taught carvers who fashioned figures for local markets, often in smaller inland towns and rural areas. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, carpenters, cabinetmakers, and part-time woodworkers in all parts of the country produced shop figures on demand or for personal enjoyment. Little can be said about common training or techniques of these generally unidentified artists, other than what can be inferred from their work. They represent a diverse collection of individuals who usually operated independently of one another, often creating one-of-a-kind pieces patterned after those produced in the seaport shops. In all, they produced far fewer figures than did the shipcarvers, and again survival rates for the figures are low. As a result, their work is extremely rare today. Their artistry speaks for itself, however, and among the surviving examples are some of the most dynamic and engaging pieces of American folk sculpture.

One of the most distinctive of these is a figure of a woman believed to have been carved in Freehold, New Jersey, around mid-century by an African American named Job. A powerful stylization, this figure has an abstracted presence stripped of ornamentation and yet presented in a typical pose with the left leg raised and supported by a bunch of cigars. The carver was obviously aware of the figures being made some forty miles to the north in New York City. This is particularly evident in his handling of the two bunches of cigars and the use of scored fringe at the bottom of the skirt and on the sleeves, as well as in the revealing cut of the dress, a rare but not unknown feature among urban show figures designed to catch the eye

of male customers. This highly individualized interpretation is a unique combination of an eroticized body and a bold, masklike face that has been noted for its formality and an "iconic intensity" suggestive of African sculpture.⁶

The third and smallest group of carvers were those academically trained artists who responded to the growing demand for show figures in the second half of the nineteenth century. Included with them are woodcarvers trained in the European system, mainly Germans and French-Canadians, who as apprentices had followed a course of study that included instruction from recognized sculptors. Among these artists is Caspar Buberl (1834–1899), a Czechoslovakian-born sculptor best known for his Civil War memorial groups. Around 1875, he modeled a figure of Puck (a character made famous by the English satirical magazine of the same name), which was cast in zinc holding a large pen in one hand and a bunch of cigars in the other. The original figure was probably not carved in wood. More likely Buberl worked in clay and other artisans translated his figure into metal.

Unlike Buberl, Julius Melchers (1829–1909), a German sculptor and woodcarver who settled in Detroit in 1855, worked in several different mediums, including wood, plaster, and stone. He had apprenticed with a sculptor and master woodcarver in his native Prussia and studied with two leading academic sculptors at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. For more than forty years, his Detroit workshop produced architectural sculpture, church carvings, patterns for decorative castings, and shop figures. Melchers also conducted classes in drawing and modeling, and so made a major contribution to Detroit's fledgling artistic community. His best shop figures are sensitively rendered, with a naturalism that is quite convincing. The *Fur Trapper* attributed to him has several conventional features, including a feathered skirt, catamount pelt, and left leg supported by a box, but is nevertheless far from typical. The masterful carving seen in the handling of form, as well as in the modeling of the face and other details, raises it to the level of the extraordinary.

The Museum of American Folk Art presents

The Image Business: Shop and Cigar Store Figures in America

On View

May 11 through October 19, 1997
Heritage Plantation of Sandwich
Sandwich, Massachusetts

November 1, 1997, through January 25, 1998
Museum of American Folk Art
New York, New York

February 18 through April 12, 1998
Baltimore Museum
of Art
Baltimore, Maryland

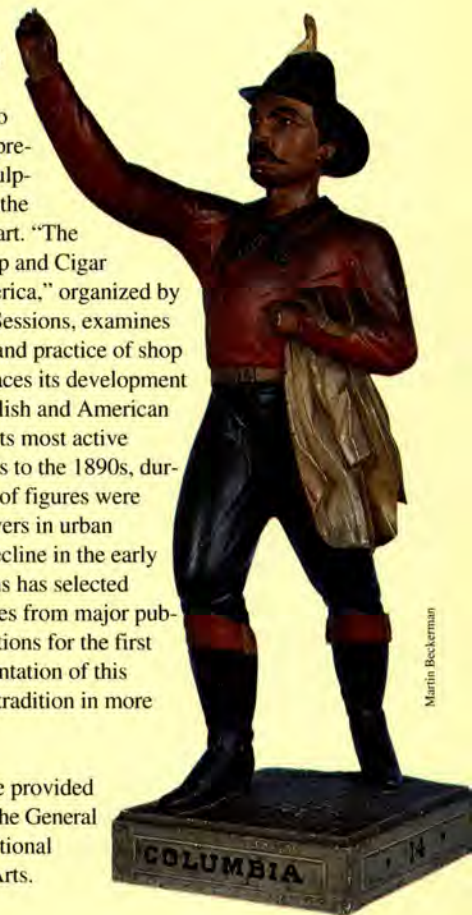
Shop and tobacco store figures represent a major sculptural tradition within the history of American art. "The Image Business: Shop and Cigar Store Figures in America," organized by guest curator Ralph Sessions, examines the origins, sources, and practice of shop figure carving and traces its development from the earliest English and American examples—through its most active period from the 1840s to the 1890s, during which thousands of figures were produced by shipcarvers in urban workshops—to its decline in the early 20th century. Sessions has selected more than sixty figures from major public and private collections for the first comprehensive presentation of this important sculptural tradition in more than 25 years.

Generous grants were provided for the exhibition by the General Cigar Co. and the National Endowment for the Arts.

VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER

Columbian Engine Co. 14
Incised "S.A. Robb, 195 Canal St." on base
New York City
1876–1888
Polychromed wood
29" high
New York City Fire Museum

This firefighter is probably a commemorative figure, carved 15 or 20 years after the Columbian Engine Co. 14 had ceased to exist. The figure is wearing a uniform that was typical of New York City volunteer companies around 1860. Professional firefighting companies replaced the volunteers in 1865. Columbian Engine Co. 14 was located at the corner of Vesey and Church Streets until that time.



Martin Beckerman

After 1860 show figures were marketed nationally by a few large tobacco products distributors. The most successful of these was William Demuth & Company, a New York firm that offered a full line of figures through catalog sales. Demuth also sent salesmen across the country and set up elaborate displays in major national expositions and industrial fairs, including the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Among the firm's major innovations was the introduction of zinc figures, an idea that Demuth developed with Moritz Seelig, a fellow German immigrant who operated a foundry in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. Demuth's 1875 catalog offered thirty different zinc figures, from several varieties of Indians to Buberl's *Puck*. He also sold countless wooden figures through the mail. Both Samuel Robb and Thomas White worked for him, and other New York carvers probably did as well. Together they established New York City as a center of show figure production and distribution, spreading the New York style across the country.

Show figures had found a niche in the rapidly evolving arenas of commercial art and popular culture. They remained quite popular for a time, as carvers continually created new models that reflected the latest fashions and public opinions. The vogue did not last long, however. For a variety of reasons, including oversupply, changing tastes, and new modes of advertising, the production of new figures virtually ceased by 1900. They were increasingly seen as old-fashioned, symbols of an era that was rapidly passing away. Most of the traditional shipcarvers were out of business anyway, their craft having been doomed by the advent of metal-hulled ships several decades earlier. After the turn of the century, the lessened demand for shop figures was easily met by repainting and recycling older ones.

While the art of the shipcarver gradually faded from the American scene, however, shop figures have never disappeared. The work of self-taught artists has continued unabated, made all the more visible in our time by the demise of many of the old craft traditions. An outstanding example

from earlier in this century is *Father Time*, a counter-size figure from the Mohawk River Valley region of upstate New York that was carved around 1910. Although his original purpose is not certain, he is presumed to have been used in a shop, probably as a doorbell of sorts. The figure was once articulated so that the right arm moved and the sickle hit the suspended bell. He may also have originally been more modestly attired in a robe, which would seem to be appropriate for so venerable a character. As found, he is a sleek stylization with a strong vertical thrust that accentuates the idea of an otherworldly being who marks the inevitable passage of time.

As such, he is an appropriate piece with which to end this survey. *Father Time* represents a direct link with the type of self-taught work that has become so popular today. He and his kind have always been a part of the shop figure tradition. Once vastly outnumbered by their urban workshop counterparts, they now stand as the sole heirs, as well as a vital form of contemporary expression. ★

Ralph Sessions is an independent curator and art historian. He has worked as chief curator of the Museum of American Folk Art, director of the Abigail Adams Smith Museum in New York City, and director of the Historical Society of Rockland County, New York. Sessions is currently a doctoral candidate in art history at the City University of New York.

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FUR TRAPPER
Attributed to Julius Melchers
Detroit
c. 1865
Polychromed wood
46" high
New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown, New York, N-144.61

Glenn Linsenbard

NOTES

- 1 "Designed by Whittling Yankees," *Tobacco* 1 (May 14, 1886), p. 7.
- 2 E. Leslie Gillams, "Cigar-Store Indians," *Philadelphia Times*, December 18, 1892, p. 18.
- 3 John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: E.L. Cary & A. Hart, 1830), p. 551.
- 4 "Designed by Whittling Yankees," op. cit., p. 7.
- 5 "Wood-carving," *Harper's Weekly* 27 (January 6, 1883), p. 13.
- 6 John Michael Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in the Decorative Arts* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978), p. 37; Frederick Fried, *Artists in Wood* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1970), p. 20.