

The Gladstone Collection of

BASSE

ART

By Elizabeth V. Warren

BASEBALL



f the more than one hundred works of art displayed in the exhibition “The Perfect Game: America Looks at Baseball,” and illustrated in the accompanying books,¹ approximately a third of the objects are identified with the credit line, The Gladstone Collection of Baseball Art. By far the most prominent assemblage of its type, the Gladstone Collection is the result of Millie and Bill Gladstone’s lifelong love of baseball, their passion for art (especially folk art), and more than thirty years of very specialized collecting together.



Millie and Bill Gladstone



UNTITLED (African-American baseball game)
 Artist unidentified
 United States
 c. 1930
 Oil on canvas
 16 × 23½"

Sheldon Collins

As the Gladstones are both natives of Brooklyn, it is not surprising that their first baseball art purchases featured the Dodgers. "We started collecting in 1971," Bill recalls. "Millie saw an article in *The New York Times* one Sunday about an art gallery on Long Island that was showing cartoons by Willard Mullin, the man who created the 'Dodger Bum' character. So we packed up the kids and drove out there and bought three cartoons."²

A visit to the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York (where Bill now serves as an active member of the Board of Directors), introduced the Gladstones to the work of artist Dick Perez and to Frank Steele, co-owners of the Perez-Steele art gallery, near Philadelphia. Bill and Millie purchased all of the Perez paintings that depicted Dodgers in the Hall of Fame, and went on to form a relationship with Steele that would help shape their buying habits. From Steele they learned that there was more to baseball collecting than memorabilia, and they began to look for older, aesthetically pleasing objects that they could afford. Today,

their collection is composed of three parts: paintings and sculpture by fine artists, folk art, and important historical baseball memorabilia (particularly material related to Brooklyn teams).

Asking the Gladstones to identify a few favorite works of folk art in their collection engenders some lively discussion. After much give-and-take and compromises on both sides, the eight objects illustrated here were selected for both aesthetic and sentimental reasons.

The Boy with Ball and Bat is a mutual first choice. The painting is not only the oldest work of folk art in the collection (dated 1844), but it is also the oldest known baseball painting. It was found by Millie at the White Plains Antiques Show seventeen years ago. Bill was on a business trip at the time, but Millie had the dealer hold the painting until he could make it back so they could see it together.

The bat and ball may have been painter's props (similar to the more commonly seen whips, hoops, and pull toys that were often used to indicate male gender in American folk portraiture); they do not necessarily indicate that the child was actu-

Courtesy Lehigh University Art Galleries, Bethlehem, Pa.

WOMAN'S HAIR COMB WITH BASEBALL MOTIF
 Maker unidentified
 United States
 c. 1870
 Carved horn
 7½ × 7¼ × ¾"



ally proficient at baseball, but they do show that the sport was common enough for its symbols to be instantly recognizable in a likeness. The painter probably had some artistic training, but he could not be considered a successful academic artist. By the time this picture was painted in 1844, photography had been introduced in America, and folk portraitists, who served mainly the middle class, were rapidly losing commissions to daguerreotypists. In commissioning this painting, however, the boy's parents were buying what could not be provided by photographs of the time: size, color, and a work of art that would command an important place in their parlor. The painting now hangs in the

entryway to the Gladstones' home and serves as an introduction to the collection inside.

Mandana Ball's *Family Register* is another mid-nineteenth-century work that depicts children with the accoutrements of baseball. In a witty play on the family name, fourteen-year-old Mandana showed children playing a ball game in front of a sturdy brick structure while surrounded by cartouches containing the names of all the Balls, including a brother who died in infancy. The Gladstones, who found the painting through an advertisement in the *Newtown Bee*, later tracked down Mandana's family genealogy as well as the building shown in the center of the register. The house still stands as

a private residence in Northboro, Massachusetts.

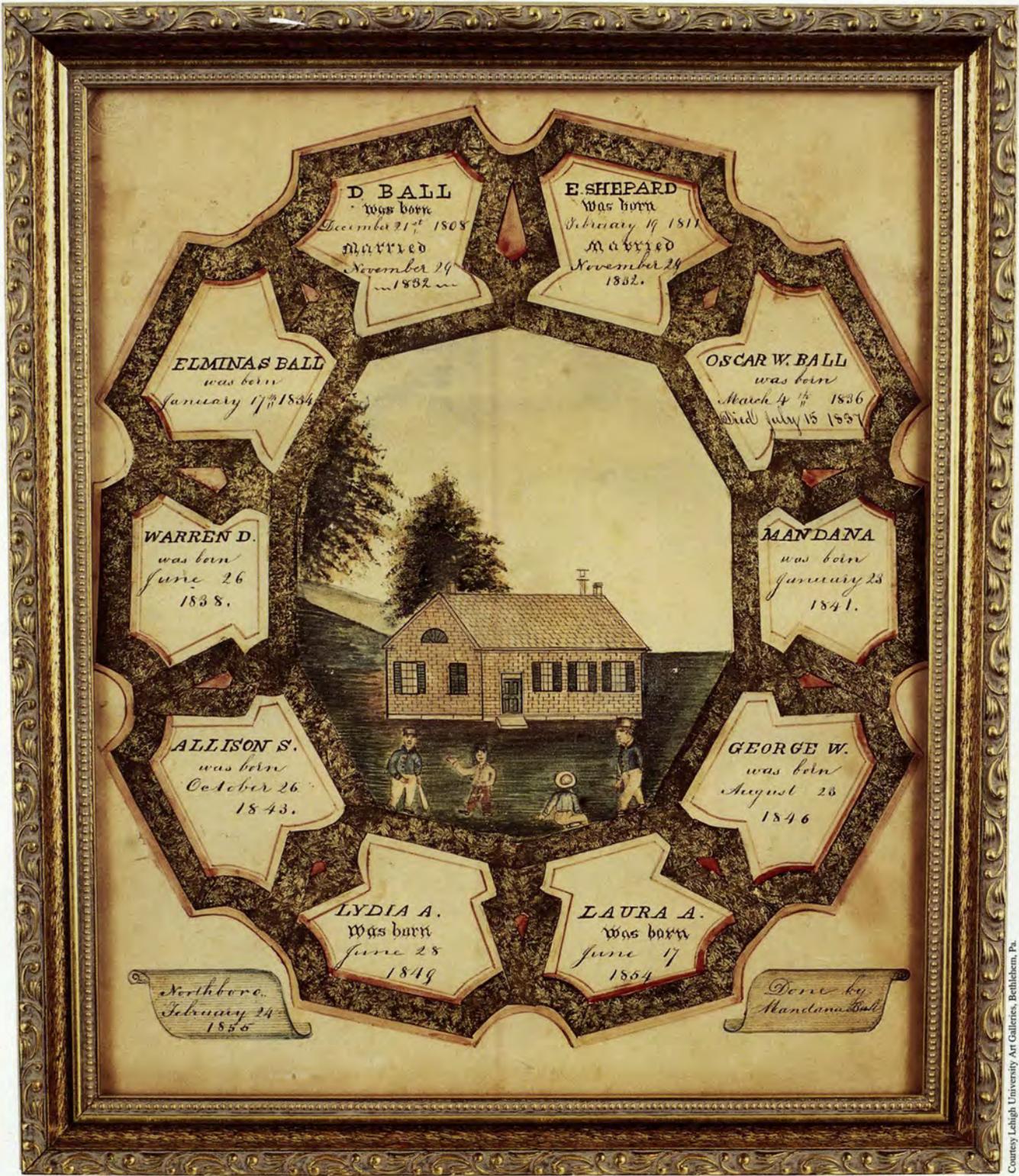
The Gladstones' acquisition of the iconic *Baseball Player Show Figure* by Samuel Anderson Robb has already been detailed in this publication.³ Formerly in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, it is now a promised gift to the American Folk Art Museum and was included in the "American Anthem: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum" exhibition as well as the National Gallery's recent show of objects illustrated in the *Index of American Design*.

It has not been determined whether the batter represented in this sculpture was meant to be a generic ballplayer or a specific hero. Cer-

BASEBALL GAME WHIRLIGIG
 Artist unidentified
 United States
 Early twentieth century
 Carved and painted wood with
 metal hardware
 45 × 38½ × 22½"



Sheldon Collins



Courtesy Lehigh University Art Galleries, Bethlehem, Pa.

FAMILY REGISTER
Mandana Ball (1841–1928)
Northboro, Massachusetts
1855
Watercolor, pen and ink, and
tinsel on paper
14½ × 12"

tainly the face of the carving bears a strong resemblance to contemporary photographs of Michael J. “King” Kelly, the most popular player of the 1880s, and among the first to maximize his popularity off the field as well as on. In addition to the then unheard-of salary of \$2,000 that he earned in 1887 from the Boston Beaneaters, Kelly’s contract also specified that he would receive \$3,000 for the use of his picture.⁴

Samuel Robb (1851–1928) was one of the most well known and accomplished of the many nineteenth-century carvers of what are often called trade or Cigar Store figures. Like many show figure manufacturers of his era, Robb was descended from a family of ship-carvers. As the demand for ships’ figureheads and other decorations waned in the middle of the nineteenth century, the artisans turned to creating the herds of show figures that once populated urban streets. Robb trained with two other well-regarded carvers, Thomas Brooks and William Demuth, before opening his own workshop in 1876. He also received instruction in drawing at Cooper Union in New York City.⁵

Because this carving had been inscribed with Robb’s name and address on the original wheeled base (which permitted the figure to be rolled indoors at night), it can be reliably attributed to the famed carver and dated to between 1888 and 1903, when Robb had a workshop at 114 Centre Street. Unfortunately, no such information can be attached to the small (fifteen inches tall) carving known affectionately by the Gladstones as “smiling” *Baseball Player* because of the grin of pure happiness that enhances the figure’s face. Possibly meant to be used as a countertop display, perhaps for a sporting goods store, the Gladstones found the sculpture through the hard work of collecting—in this case, by contacting dealers who specialize in folk art to ask whether they had any baseball material. They were attracted to the piece partly because its attenuated lines and simple form reminded them of the work of early-twentieth-century sculptor Elie Nadelman, himself a collector of American folk art.

BASEBALL PLAYER
Artist unidentified
United States
c. 1910
Carved wood
15 × 6 × 3½"



Garvin Ashworth

While they have not been able to purchase much art at baseball auctions, where the focus is on collectibles and memorabilia, the Gladstones have occasionally been able to find baseball-related material at Americana and folk art auctions. The *Box Office Sign*, for example, was purchased at the auction of a prominent collection of American folk art held at Sotheby's in New York City.

The sign painter, who included his name, Theo I. Josephs, and his location at the "solder's home [*sic*]," was probably a Prussian immigrant born in 1842.⁶ He assumed that his audience could read, although the *O* in "Office"—decorated as a baseball with a bat in its center—would most likely be a good clue for any patron who could not. Josephs was obvi-

ously inspired to go beyond the simple words to create an artistic image. The style of lettering as well as the carefully delineated urns that enhance his work are all typical of mid-nineteenth-century decorative art.

tesy of power provided by a blowing breeze. When the wind turned the wooden blade on the side of the box, an internal mechanism made the turntable on the box's surface rotate. This caused the batter to swing and the players to run around the bases.

The untitled painting of an African-American baseball game is another work of art that the Gladstones had known about for a number of years before they were able to buy it. A poignant and important reminder of a time when blacks were specifically excluded from white American baseball games, the painting is close in tone and content to a description in the *Brooklyn Eagle* of an 1862 game played between the "Unknown" club of Weeksville and the "Monitor" club of Brooklyn, "both of African descent."⁷ While praising the players

two pitchers and two runners sliding into base among the intricately carved motifs. In the early days of organized baseball, women were welcomed as spectators by club owners who felt that the presence of ladies would help curb the rowdiness of the crowds. Women dressed for the occasion, and this hair comb, probably made sometime in the 1870s, was no doubt meant to enhance a lady's baseball-viewing outfit.

The Gladstones put most of their collection together during Bill's working years, when he had little time for things other than his professional responsibilities. As Bill recalls, "This joint collecting gave us a chance to spend time together doing what we both have a passion for."⁹ After Bill retired as co-chief executive of Ernst & Young in 1991,

BOY WITH BAT AND BALL
Artist unidentified
United States
1844
Oil on canvas
23½ × 19"



BOX OFFICE SIGN
Theo I. Josephs (c. 1842-?)
United States
c. 1890
Paint on wood
11¾ × 48¼ × 1½"

Sometimes, an object that was passed up because of its asking price the first time around finds its way into a collection as the buyers become more experienced and/or as the market evolves. The Gladstones deemed *Baseball Game Whirligig*, made in the early twentieth century by an unknown artist, too expensive the first time they saw it. The piece continued to interest them, however, and was eventually purchased when it became available again.

The players on the whirligig were made to circle the bases, cour-

and the spectators for their good play and "genteel" behavior, the author nevertheless used language we would now consider frankly racist: "Quite a large assemblage encircled the contestants, who were ever one as black as the ace of spades."⁸

Though probably painted after 1920 (the players' uniforms include numbers, an innovation of that decade), the scene depicted here is clearly meant to recall an earlier time. The women's dresses, for example, are more in the style of the nineteenth century than the twentieth.

The final favorite object included here, the *Woman's Hair Comb with Baseball Motif* was discovered at an antiques show, unaccompanied by any information about its history. Made of horn, it includes

the couple embarked on a new phase of their collecting life, which included the 1992 acquisition of a Class A Minor League baseball team. This, according to both Millie and Bill, is "the ultimate baseball collectible."

In the eleven years since they've owned a team—first the Pittsfield Mets, a New York Mets farm team, and currently the Tri-City ValleyCats, a Houston Astros affiliate—neither Gladstone has missed a home game (more than four hundred so far). The ValleyCats play in the New York-Penn "short season" Class A League, and their home is in the brand-new, family-friendly Joseph L. Bruno Stadium in Troy, New York. The list of players who began their career on one of the Gladstones'



Sheldon Collins



Gravin Ashworth

teams and made it to the big leagues now numbers about thirty, and includes such standouts as Edgardo Alfonzo, Preston Wilson, Vance Wilson, A.J. Burnett, Jason Istringhausen, and Terrence Long.

Today, the Gladstones continue to collect baseball art, although, as in many areas of collecting, the good stuff is still "hard to find." Folk art, especially, is scarce, and there tends to be less of it available. The couple also continues to be intimately involved with the American Folk Art Museum. Millie serves as a museum docent as well as a volunteer at the American Folk Art Museum's Eva and Morris Feld Gallery bookshop, while Bill frequently contributes his time and business expertise to the museum. ★

BASEBALL PLAYER SHOW FIGURE
Samuel Anderson Robb
(1851–1928)
New York
1888–1903
 Carved and painted wood with metal wheels and handle
 76 × 21¾ × 24" (with wheeled base)
 American Folk Art Museum, promised gift of Millie and Bill Gladstone, P4.1999.1

Elizabeth V. Warren was the curator of the American Folk Art Museum from 1984 to 1990, and has been the museum's consulting curator since 1991. She served as curator of "Young America: Folk Art History" (1986), "Expressions of a New Spirit" (1989), "Five-Star Folk Art: One Hundred American Masterpieces" (1990), and "The Perfect Game: America Looks at Baseball" (on view now at the American Folk Art Museum through February 1, 2004). Warren also served as co-curator of "Glorious American Quilts: The Quilt Collection of the Museum of American Folk Art" (1996, with S.L. Eisenstat). Each exhibition was accompanied by a catalog. Warren received a bachelor's degree from Bryn Mawr College and a masters in American folk art studies from New York University.

Notes

- 1 Elizabeth V. Warren, *The Perfect Game: America Looks at Baseball* (New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003); Janet Wyman Coleman and Elizabeth V. Warren, *Baseball for Everyone: Stories from the Great Game* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., in association with the American Folk Art Museum, 2003).
- 2 Ricardo Viera, *Baseball Art from the Gladstone Collection* (Bethlehem, Pa.: Lehigh University Art Galleries in association with Zoellner Arts Center, 2001), p. 4.
- 3 Stacy C. Hollander, "Grand Slam Addition to the Collection," *Folk Art*, vol. 24, no. 3 (fall 1999), p. 25.
- 4 Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *Baseball: An Illustrated History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 35.
- 5 Stacy C. Hollander, "Baseball Player Show Figure," in *American Anthem: Masterpieces from the American Folk Art Museum* (New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), pp. 353–354.
- 6 "Family Search," *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, 1999–2001, <http://familysearch.com> (Jan. 9, 2002).
- 7 Dean A. Sullivan, ed., *Early Innings: A Documentary History of Baseball, 1825–1908* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 35.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 9 Viera, *op. cit.*, p. 5.