

Show of Primitives Focuses On Nature and on the Past

Reviewed by KATHARINE SMITH

Jacobson's Gallery of Fine Art currently features the work of two Michigan primitive painters, Frederick Papsdorf of Detroit and Margaret Nieman (Mrs. F. K.) of 5781 Snowshoe Circle, Bloomfield Township.

Papsdorf, who is represented in many museum collections and is well-known to patrons of the Detroit Artists' Market, shows 12 small nature pieces, one still life and one landscape.

ALL ARE meticulously painted, with the loving detail characteristic of the great unschooled painters of the past. The stand-outs, however, are the nature pieces.

"Abizitia" is a small eight by 10 inches but beautifully designed, close-up of long yellow green pods and fading leaves against gray clapboards.

"Tick-in-the-Pulpit" (the same size) is somewhat frigidly detailed but charming in the true spirit of both the plant and the painter.

"GOURD SPROUTS" looks like

a section of a larger painting because background components are as important as the plant. "Fall Leaves" is a somewhat more sophisticated composition in yellow greens and browns.

For pure pleasure in natural shapes and colors, "Tulips," "Summer Flowers" and "Daffodil" stand alone in simple freshness.

All of these paintings are nicely framed by Papsdorf himself. They are all recent works and very modestly priced for a painter of his distinguished reputation.

MRS. NIEMAN'S 10 smallest paintings leave the viewer with no doubt that she is a true primitive—unschooled but sincere.

They are not well painted and yet some of them have an eerie charm. She uses fewer components, more carefully arranged than the typical primitive genre painter, but these arrangements are surely intuitive rather than learned, as is her sense of space.

A FEW titles will give an idea of her subject matter: "A Day with Grandma," "The-Berry Pickers,"

"May Basket," "Winter Frolic," "Holy Night" evokes a nostalgic tingle—the warm interior of a small church seen through open doors, the family group approaching, the cold, cold moon lighting the snow.

"Admiration" is well composed; a young girl looks at her reflection in a pool of water while a young man looks at the girl, but the blues in this painting are too harsh for the subject.

"Winter Frolic" makes the most of a nice isolated red in a foreground figure. Many of Mrs. Nieman's frames are handsome antiques which may be bought separately.

THE GIFT shop next to the gallery has 16 tile paintings by Beth Thompson of Jackson, Michigan. Each tile is about five inches square, is neatly framed in dark wood and presents a family scene of rural life. They are really storytelling line drawings rather than paintings, but well-done, decorative and from the hand of a serious painter.

What's Old? What's New? —It's the Riddle of Primitives

Can you unscramble this riddle? When is primitive not old and modern not new?

Give up? In paintings, of course. Many of Picasso's modern abstracts were done by 1920, long before Grandma Moses laid out her paints on the kitchen table and began to chronicle Americana in her whimsical primitive style.

The modern movement, to further unscramble the riddle, usually designates the French Moderns who made their sparkling discoveries in the early 1900's. Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Van Gogh and Utrillo are now the old masters of the movement.

PAINTINGS BEING done currently are called contemporary (to avoid confusion with the term modern) and usually are categorized in various contemporary movements such as abstract expressionism, neo-dada, pop art and contemporary primitives.

Grandma Moses has been rediscovered lately by the devotees of Early American furnishings. In the decorator's search to find consistent accessories, they have stumbled on the whole field of American Primitives. Grandma Moses is one of the latest of these.

Most American Primitives were done when our country was young and many of the people unsophisticated. Primitives can be painted any time in history, from ancient times until now. Early works of art, called old or ancient, can be primitive or sophisticated depend-

ing on the culture from which they emanate.

PRIMITIVES ARE the work of an untutored artist using a simple direct approach. The resulting pictures spring from the same well as the early American furniture—simple, utilitarian constructions of ten showing the individual mark of the craftsman.

The Early American Primitive painters favored romantic idealism over realism in subject portrayal. They usually made iconic, stylized likenesses instead of actual. Their works have an almost childlike simplicity.

OFTEN THE painters were unschooled in their craft. With typical American pioneer philosophy, "I am as good as you are," these early painters created for their own possession portraits and decorations for their walls—the same as the rich people had.

A settler often borrowed, just as did his contemporaries trained in the fine art academies, from the best sources available. Every illustration was an inspiration to the folk artist. Printed fabrics, newspaper cuts, prints, Bibles, store-bought arrangements of stencils; each served as a source for painters searching for the gem of an idea.

FOLK ART, as the unprofessional practitioner's work is called, has a quality called "naive." This means the ignorance of artistic credos, tenets and theories.

Practically, it means that this ignorance frequently results in an aesthetically productive freedom of expression. The folk artist, unhampered by preconceptions that paintings must follow certain academic rules, blithely works as he pleases.

This results in "primitive" style paintings; flat colors, child-like drawings and "facked up" perspective (rather than overlapping).

NATURALLY THE primitives are appealing. They have all the romantic charm associated with the nostalgic memories of Christmas at Grandma's and the direct simplicity of children's drawings.

They are all the more appealing to many when contrasted with the raw "slice of life" literature and obscure emotional paintings of today, both of which demand that the viewer shed his rosy version of life and face some REAL facts.

BEN SHAHN, among other contemporary painters, has recognized this power of the primitives. His drawings, although they show an intensely realistic, unromantic version of Americana, employ the same direct style of drawing, exaggerating that which is most important to gain effect.

The difference is that Shahn knows precisely what he is doing when he uses this technique. The primitives tend to discover results by intuition and chance.

SO WHEN is primitive contemporary, ancient sophisticated, modern old and new?

In the art world they are as interrelated as the grass, the cow, the milk and the farmer—each dependent on the other, but each possessing a growth pattern of its own.

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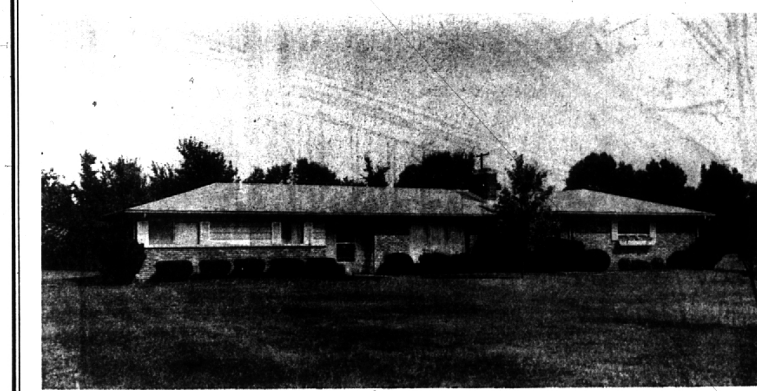
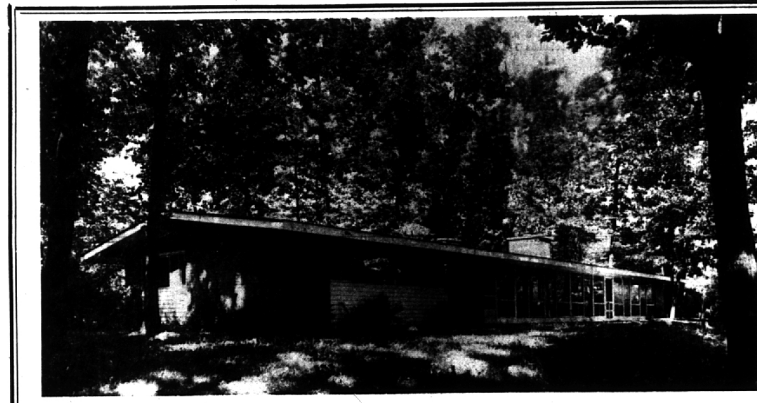
MRS. F. K. (Margaret) Nieman of 5781 Snowshoe Circle, Birmingham, examines reproductions of Early American furniture from Williamsburg. The pieces are being shown along with three-man exhibition of primitive paintings by Mrs. Nieman, Frederick Papsdorf of Detroit and Elizabeth Thompson of Jackson. The combined exhibit will remain through Sept. 14.

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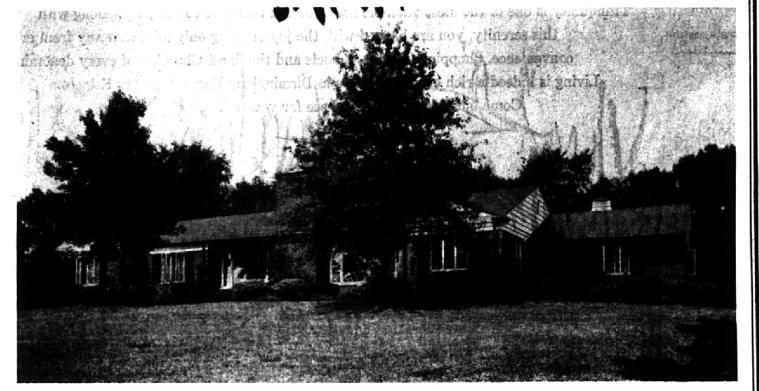
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