

"THE RAINBOW" BY GRANDMA MOSES:
CAN IT TRULY BE CALLED PRIMITIVE?

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The "Rainbow" is the last painting completed by the famous twentieth century artist Grandma Moses. In this landscape Grandma Moses shows the everyday farm life through little unfinished anecdotes (Illustration 1). The "Rainbow" is an affirmation of life, the self-portrait of a 101-year-old energetic woman. The light of the rainbow is hope in our dark age of paranoia and individualism. In this, as in all of her work, Grandma Moses joins the primitive artists (tribal artists, children, and folk artists) in expressing universal thoughts and feelings. However, the questions arise: Did Grandma Moses, despite her fame, her professionalism, and her greatly developed style, remain a folk artist? Is the "Rainbow" a true primitive painting?

We must keep in mind that primitivism is not a style. Styles come and go just as fashion does. They are ordered by institutions (academies), marketplaces (museums, galleries), and the media (newspapers, magazines, radio, and television).

All art at birth is primitivism. At this pure stage, it is intuitive. It springs from the heart. Primitivism is at the origin of all art. It is untaught, and thus it includes every single human being as an artist. It was born with early man in the ancient caves. These ancient people around the globe have left their signatures on rock walls.



Illustration 1: Grandma Moses. Rainbow, 1961. Oil on canvas. 16" x 24". (K. 1511).¹

Petroglyphs and pictographs become part of the process of the creation of the universe. Their never-ending stories talk about the circumstances of life and the life of the common people. This ongoing storytelling is the ritual that keeps the world in balance. Spirals, handprints, hunting scenes, handholding people, plants, and animals, etc., express man's journey in this and other worlds, his relationship to the natural and supernatural. This early art was executed with greatest care. The places were chosen as sacred places. Made to be seen by the gods, they had to be of the highest aesthetic quality. The frame was the natural outline of the rock. An overhanging rock often protects the images (Illustration 2). The composition, at first sight, looks arbitrary, but it is always highly balanced in its environment.

The oldest known and preserved cave paintings are in Lascaux, France. They tell us the story of a people who lived there about 45,000 years ago. Rock painting, as a ritual, is just about to die out. Very few tribal communities in the world still are performing this kind of prayer. One of them is the aboriginal tribes of Australia. They have continuously performed creative painting rituals for 40,000 to 45,000 years. They believe that through this creation process called "Dreamtime," they keep the world going.²

Thus, the tradition of folk art includes all history of mankind. It reflects man's relationship to nature in the

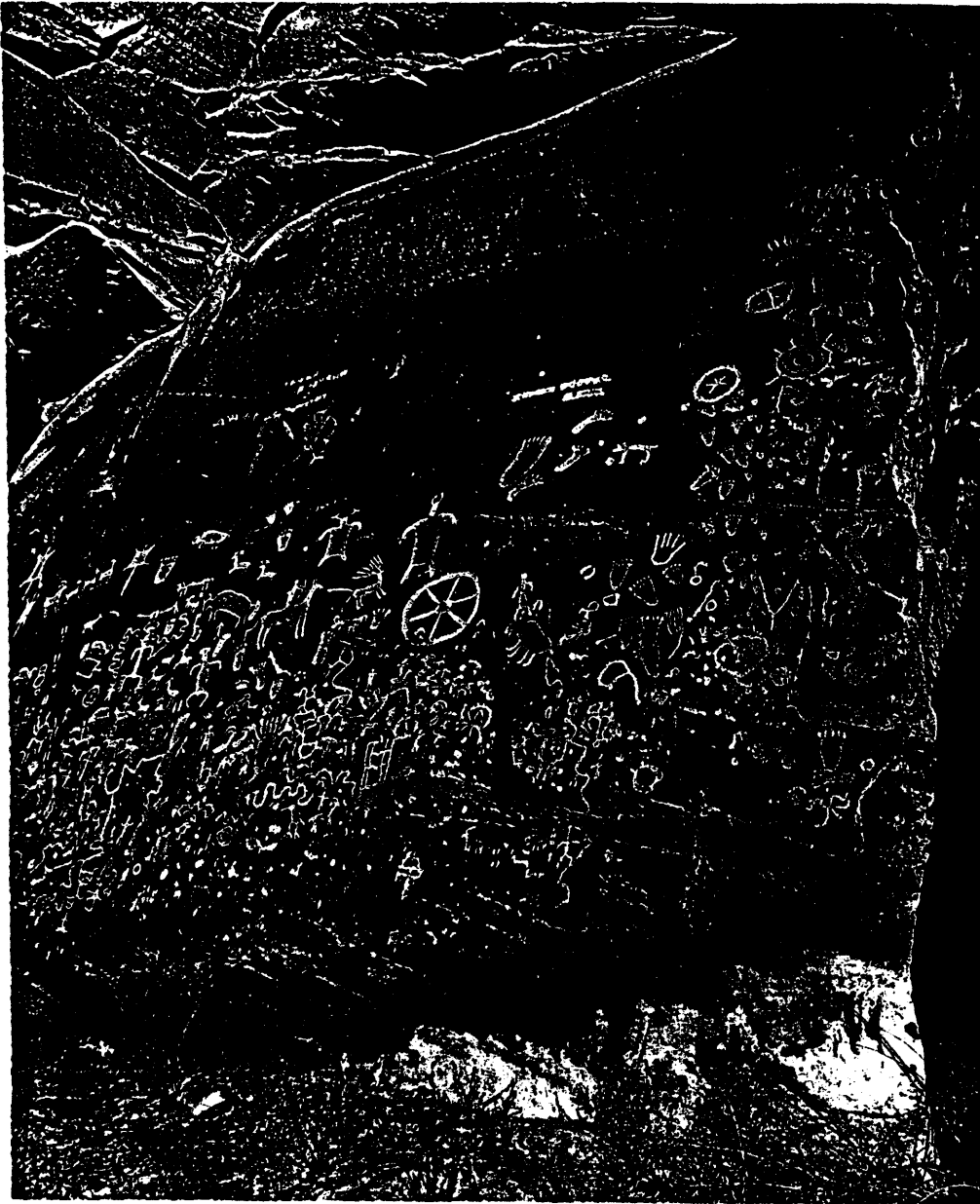


Illustration 2: Gaell Lindstrom. Newspaper Rock. Photograph: Indian Creek State Park, Utah.

ongoing cycle of life. Folk art does not distinguish between art and craft. This union sometimes is referred to as a heritage from the medieval guilds. Another important influence since the time of the Renaissance is the tradition of easel painting for the American folk artist and the American landscape painters of the nineteenth century, especially the Luminists. In France, at the turn of the century, a group of untaught artists started to teach themselves by copying masters from museums, mainly those in the Louvre. Among them was Henri Rousseau, a great enthusiast for Gerome's paintings (Illustration 3). Picasso's endorsement of Rousseau as an artist of quality and his general acceptance of primitive art, which came mostly from African sculpture, were door openers for folk art in Europe in the twentieth century.

"Folk" or "naive" is the usual label for adult, non-academic artists of the so-called "civilized" world. I prefer to call them human beings in the never-ending process of growing up or artists who have not lost the magic of childhood. Folk artists are outsiders who are often misunderstood, put down, and outcast. They are known falsely for being untaught and unsophisticated because their learning takes place outside the "official" system, namely, the academic institutions. Folk artists thrive on absolute freedom. They set their own limits. They are perfectionists in their aesthetic quality. They know what they want to say. Their message is clear because it communicates on a

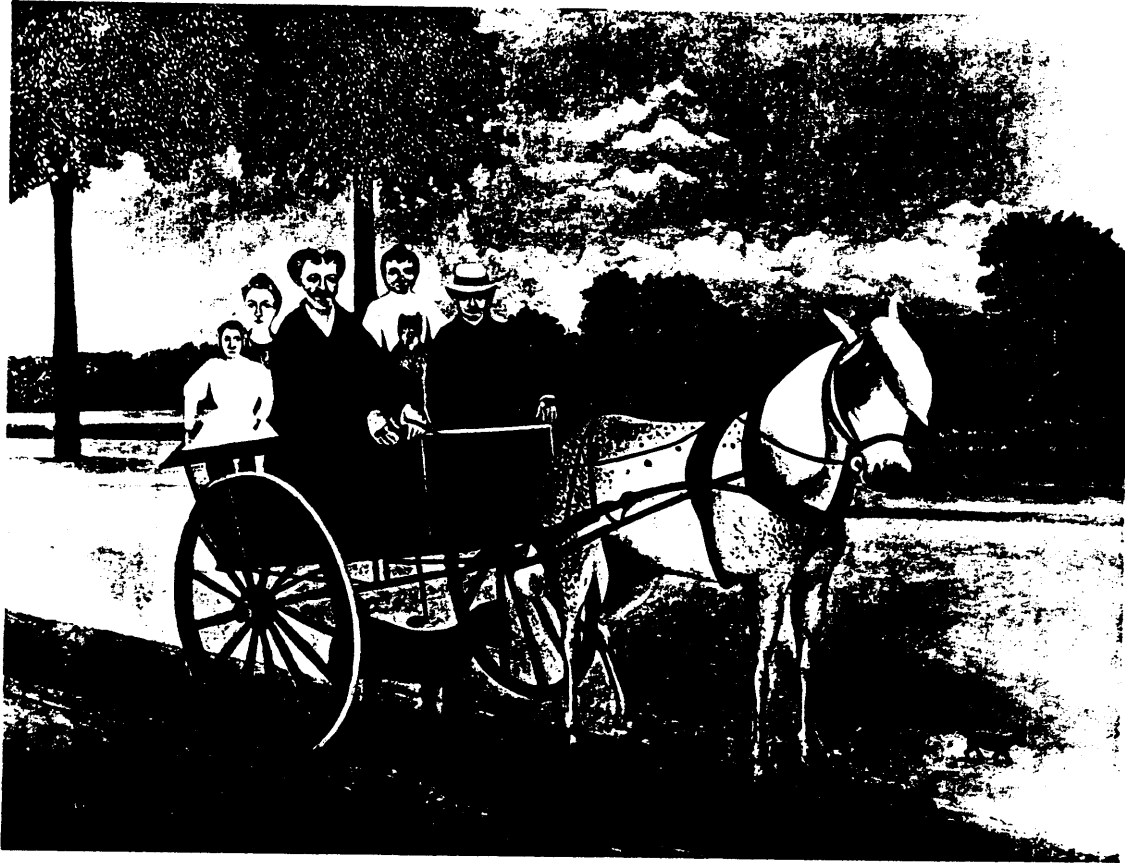


Illustration 3: Henri Rousseau. The Cart of Pere Juniet.
1908. Oil on canvas. $38 \frac{1}{4}'' \times 50 \frac{3}{4}''$. Musee de
l'Orangerie; Collection Walter Guillaume.

simple, direct level. The composition is well ordered. Balance has overall importance in their work. These artists create simple images of a paper-doll world. They believe in it and hope that the viewers will join them in seeing the world poetically. Fun and joy can be shared equally by the creator and the viewer. This optimism would be a real threat to any system that is based on intimidation and control. In folk art there is neither elite nor competition. Everyone is an artist, and everyone is invited to realize a dream of happiness.

This dream takes place in the everyday surroundings of the artist. It is a view of the world with which the creator is familiar. It is mostly rural or at least hints to man's closeness to nature in which beauty, truth, and goodness are found. American folk artist Morris Hirshfield gives us a wonderful example of his vision of the primeval landscape. In his painting "Lion" he has captured nature's wilderness in harmony (Illustration 4). The lion is centered in the picture, surrounded by carefully arranged plants. The same kind of linear texture is used for the animal as for the plants. The lion is far from being a wild beast but stands absolutely still with his feet planted on the ground. His facial expression is as calm as his environment. All this makes him a well-integrated and balanced centerpiece of the painting.

American folk artists have contributed greatly in defining the American culture by portraying the American



Illustration 4: Morris Hirshfield. Lion. 1939. Oil on canvas. 28 1/4" x 40 1/4". The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection; Gift to the Museum of Modern Art, New York.⁴

dream. They show our nation as a land of opportunity marked by the pioneer spirit of adventure and inventiveness. Folk artist John Kane, who started out as a craftsman painting boxcars, illustrates the dream of progress and of owning your own home in "Prosperity's Increase" (Illustration 5). The lower half of the painting is made up of streets; a glamorous, majestic bridge; a Mississippi steamer; factories with steaming chimneys; and the railway, in short, all things which are the foundation of prosperity. On these bases of technology rest the hills where people enjoy life in their private homes.

American folk art has also expressed the basic ethnic and historical backgrounds of the people of the United States. Horace Pippin's work tells us the history of our nation at war colored by his personal story. It is the tale of a wounded soldier during World War I and of a black painter who exhibited his first oil paintings in a shoe store window and kept painting until he was discovered.⁵

Children, like folk artists, depict the world which they experience and know.⁶ Children, as everyone knows, are self-taught, and thus they believe in what they perceive until they are told otherwise. This gives freshness to their artwork. Creativeness needs no rules or principles but personal feelings (spirit) and ideas (imagination).⁷ "Children have the capacity to think, to feel, to respond and to create."⁸ Their creations are real and alive to them, even if it is just a two-dimensional pencil

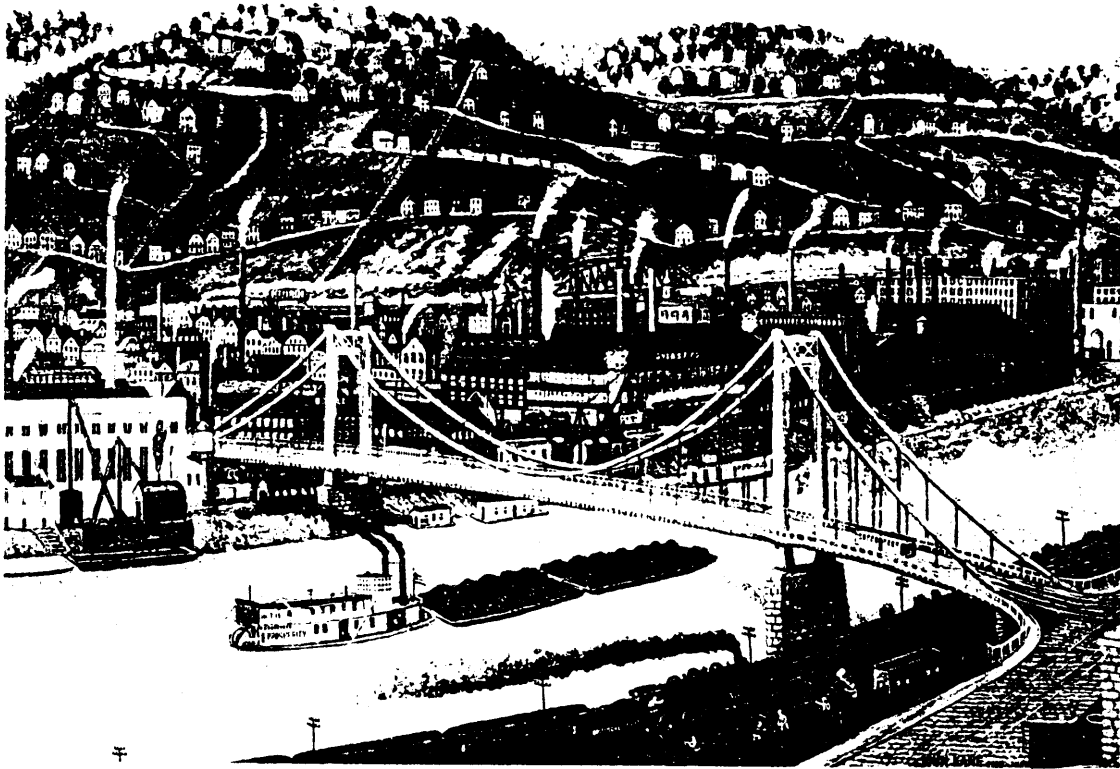


Illustration 5: John Kane. Prosperity's Increase. 1933.
Oil on canvas. 31 1/2" x 39 1/2". Collection William S. Paley.

scribbling. Their drawn monsters can become threats and nightmares. However, children learn at an early age how to manipulate their monsters with the simple tool of a pencil or crayon. Tribal people and children all over the world have been, and still are, using the magic of the line in order to control the threatening forces of nature and of the imagination. The universality of this linear quality and of the graphic evolution of children's and tribal drawings is clearly portrayed by Rhoda Kellog in her fascinating book Analyzing Children's Art (Illustrations 6 and 7). In Illustration 6 children's drawings are organized in a radial fashion, going from the most basic shapes of children's first scribbling--the cross and the circle--to the more complex drawings of people, plants, animals, houses, cars, etc. I especially like this representation because it is circular. This not only gives it an interesting aesthetic quality but also explains the stages of development more clearly. The African alphabet (Illustration 7) portrays more elaborate linear expressions. However, when one looks closely, one recognizes that most of these letters have grown out of the same basic shapes as the children's drawings (circles, crosses, squares, rectangles, triangles, etc.). It is evident in both illustrations that primitive art is based on the direct observation of the environment.

At age six my daughter, Theresa, made a colorful drawing about a rainbow (Illustration 8). It is interesting to compare it to the "Rainbow" by Grandma Moses because

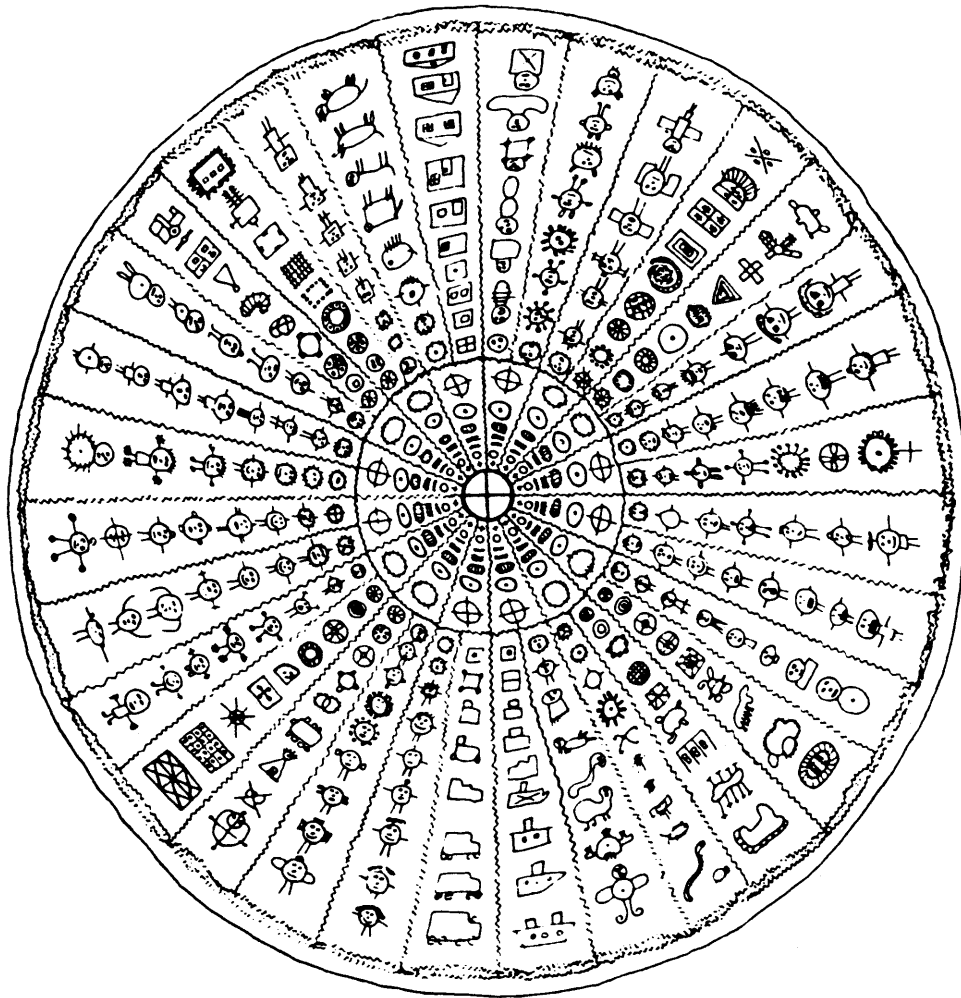


Illustration 6: Rhoda Kellog. Analyzing Children's Art, 1969. Scheme of the evolution of pictorial work from earlier drawings, beginning with the structure around the center and extending out. The scheme shows common sequences in the classification of child art, but many other sequences are possible (author's sketch).

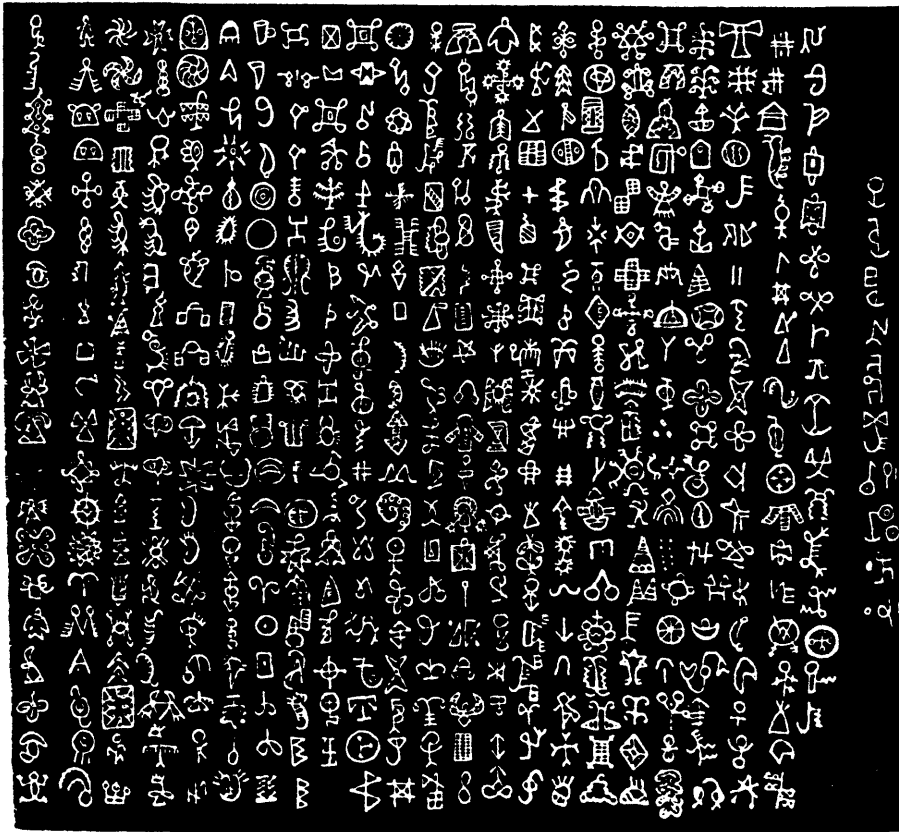


Illustration 7: Analyzing Children's Art. Letters designed by an African chief in 1904 as a first attempt at an alphabet for his language. More than 140 of these symbols occur in child art.

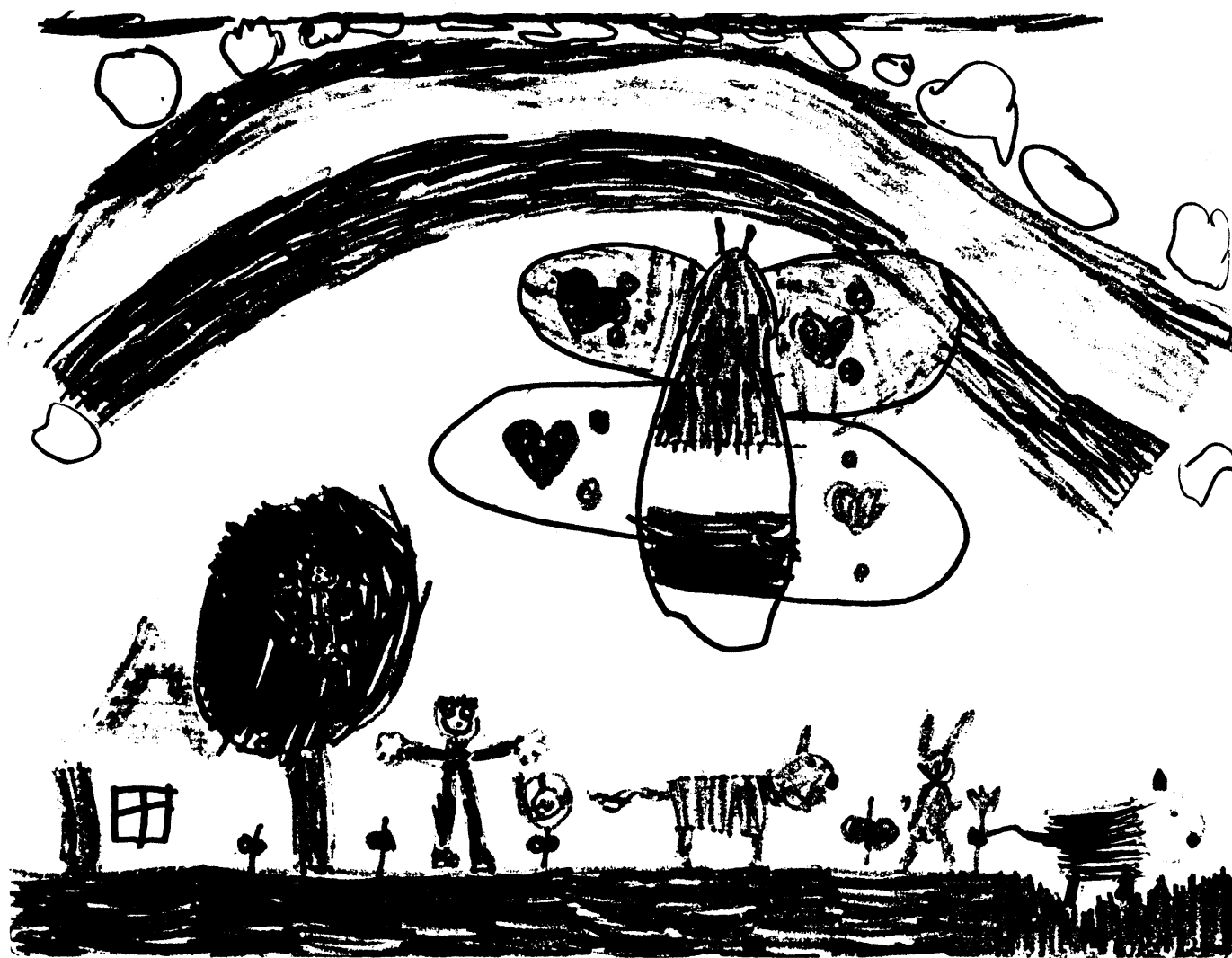


Illustration 8: Theresa Borak. Rainbow, 1985. Marker on paper 8 1/2" x 11".

Theresa treats the same subject in a similar way. Both artists are telling us a story. It is a personal story, and it is unfinished. Theresa told me the story as she was drawing. The pink house is her house. The tree is her tree outside her bedroom window. The bird is the robin who built a nest in her tree. All the animals have names; they are Theresa's pretend pets. Is the man going to pick the flowers? The sun is pushed into the upper right corner; it is far away. Not much space was left for the blue sky. Then, Theresa remembered that you need clouds if you have a rainbow. She arranged them in symmetrical order over the rainbow, emphasizing balance. Theresa put the rainbow above the world. It not only dominates by size but also gives its bright colors to everything in the picture. We get the same impression in the "Rainbow" by Grandma Moses (Illustration 1), where light and warmth emanate from the rainbow. In both pictures the colors wake up a wonderful world of happiness and love and give energy to everything that is alive. In Theresa's drawing the huge butterfly is reflecting the colors of the rainbow. It is the mediator between the mystical world up there and the stage in the foreground.

The "Rainbow" by Grandma Moses illustrates the same duality between an upper and a lower world (Illustration 1). We are looking at a farming scene on a summery hay day in Eagle Bridge, New York, where Grandma Moses spent most of her life. The rainbow is the focus of the picture. It starts in the world beyond, behind the mountains on the

left, and ends behind a tree, at a reachable distance from the farming people in the foreground. The farmers, servants, their houses, the animals, trees, bushes, and fields are all portrayed in the lower half of the painting. On the bottom left the servants are cutting the grass with scythes. A boy is busy with two black horses. A loving elderly couple is centered on the bottom edge. Grandpa's back is curved from old age and years of labor in the earth. He puts his arm around Grandma "still loving her after all those years." Grandma is pointing up to heaven; Grandpa is pointing down. One of the men in the hayfield is pointing straight up to the rainbow. Except for the elderly couple, all the people look strong. Their big arms and shoulders remind us of football players with shoulder pads. Their dark hats and white blouses protect them from the sun. On the bottom right a musician is ready to perform a jig. To his left is a pink flowering bush out of which emerges a hay wagon drawn by two oxen. Trees and bushes are dancing throughout the picture. Nevertheless, one tree is overpowering by its size and by its placement straight underneath the rainbow. It connects the earth and the heaven, just as Theresa's huge butterfly does. The farm animals live as close friends of the people. The cows are eating, the oxen are pulling the hay wagon, the horses show their affection to the little boy, and the dog watches over the farm. The houses on the right side are the living quarters of the farming people. The barns are on the left side. In

the back on the left are the school, the church, and the city's administration building. The houses have bleak, white outside walls, while it is dark inside as shown by the black windows. Only the house at the very right has light inside. The signature of Grandma Moses underneath this house leads me to believe that this is the house where she lived. The golden yellow haystacks are huge, indeed larger than some of the houses. The fields are glowing with this same warmth which originates in the yellow stripe of the rainbow. We are in an environment of weary, hot sunlight. The purple-blue mountains give the impression of distance. They disappear in the haze towards the right side. The entire sky is a bluish haze of mystery.

There are no definite shadows as light impregnates everything. There merely are areas of warm yellows and reds; cooler greens, purples, and pinks; and cold blues, whites, grays, and blacks. The colors generally are bright. They come in pure rather than blended tones. Grandma Moses expresses her love for nature in rich yellows and greens. The same palette was used 13 years earlier in "The Thunderstorm," (see Illustration 9) which is a prelude to the "Rainbow."

The style of Grandma Moses is very complex. She sees the world with the eyes of a child and, at the same time, as a wise elderly woman. Freshness and inventiveness are coupled with the clarity and maturity of an elderly person. Still learning at 96, she admitted, "I am changing my style,



Illustration 9: Grandma Moses. The Thunderstorm, 1948.
Oil on canvas. 20 3/4" x 24 3/4". Private collection.
(K. 729).¹²

getting modern in my old age."¹³ She was referring to her late style, which is more abstract, more painterly, and less linear. Indeed, the figures in her later paintings are reduced to expressive symbols. They reflect the distorted reality that Grandma Moses saw on shiny hubcaps and on the window panes of her porch.¹⁴ The figures in the "Rainbow" are "primitive" flat surfaces in an impressionistic background. Was it her unsteady hands of old age that forced her to loosen up?¹⁵ Her trees became blobs of paint. This varied density of the pigment lets the painting breathe. The artist's background in needlework is recognizable in the heavy texture and in her love for pattern. The patches of grass are arranged carefully and so are the bushes, trees, fenced paths, and houses. They speak for her spontaneous sense of order.

Academic perspective is replaced by a composition of multicolored fields, which create the depth of the painting. The viewer has the impression of looking onto a stage of action from a slightly elevated place such as the first balcony in a theater. The foreground, a "broad panoramic vista," usually is filled with unfinished anecdotes as in "Haying Time"¹⁶ or "Maple Bush" (Illustration 10). The landscape paintings of Grandma Moses all are composed by two horizontal strips. The bottom part is the material reality of the living, while the upper part represents the unknown spiritual reality of the dead. In striving for balance between the earthly and the heavenly, Grandma Moses joins



Illustration 10: Grandma Moses. Maple Bush, 1953. Oil on canvas. 12" x 18". Former collection Louis J. Caldor. (K. 1088).¹⁷

the tribal cultures around the globe. She achieved this balance through her choice of colors and composition.

The rainbow was known as a bridge to the heavens to the ancient Greeks. According to the Old Testament, God gave Noah the rainbow after the big flood as a symbol of "God among us." Grandma Moses gives us the rainbow as a doorway to the world of mystery. The "Rainbow" became a symbol for her own journey into the world of the unknown when she died soon after the painting was finished. The hay wagon, emerging out of the flowering bush, turned into the chariot that took her into the world beyond. The following statement about her landscape paintings reveals her understanding of life and rebirth: "I like to paint something that leads me into the unknown, something I want to see away and beyond."¹⁸

Grandma Moses spent her entire life in a rural environment. She was born in 1860 in Greenwich, New York. After she married Thomas Salmon Moses, she lived for 18 years in Virginia working with her husband on the farm, raising her children, and participating in the rural traditions--weddings, funerals, and harvesting.¹⁹ Anna Mary Robertson Moses (her real name) was a strong woman in every sense of the word--physically, emotionally, and psychologically. She always was active and believed that a woman should never depend on a man for support. Her ability for business showed in her production and sale of butter and potato chips. In 1905 Grandma Moses and her family moved back to

New York State. They bought a farm in Eagle Bridge. At 58 she started her career as an artist by painting her first picture on the fireboard in the parlor.²⁰ Louis J. Caldor, an amateur New York City art collector, discovered her and introduced her work to Otto Kallir, a New York City gallery owner. Kallir loved her paintings because of their charm and spontaneity. He knew the public was waiting for the kind of art that expresses hope. Grandma Moses found in Kallir a new friend and a talented businessman. As a result, at the age of 80, she traveled to New York City for the first time. It was for the opening of her exhibition. Grandma Moses was blessed with a long life that gave her the time to develop her personal style. Indeed, she never stopped growing until her death at the age of 101.

We are lucky to have inherited many wonderful paintings. They are all about life with its joys and struggles. Grandma Moses shows us the magic of being alive in the simple setting of a farm. The "Rainbow," her self-portrait at the end of her life, stands as a witness of her loyalty toward her folk. Despite all fame, she remained one of them, namely, a "folk" artist. Her last painting is a metaphor not only for her thoughts and feelings but also for the ideas and emotions of all the hardworking people. Grandma Moses stayed in the folk tradition all her life as she kept making "Uncommon Art of the Common People."²¹ Grandma Moses has deserved to be called the "mother of twentieth century folk art."²² Her art transcends "folk" art. I prefer to

call it "primitive" because it is marked by the freshness of children's art as well as the mystery of tribal art.

ENDNOTES

¹Jane Kallir, Grandma Moses, The Artist Behind the Myth (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1982), p. 150.

²Bruce Chatwin, The Songlines (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1987), p. 14.

³Jane Kallir, Grandma Moses, The Artist Behind the Myth, Pl. 26, p. 41.

⁴Ibid., Pl. 28, p. 44.

⁵Jay Johnson and William C. Ketchum Jr., America Folk Art of the Twentieth Century (New York: Rizzoli International Publications Inc., 1983), p. 241.

⁶E. L. Mattil, Meaning in Crafts (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1971), p. 14.

⁷Ibid., p. 20.

⁸Ibid., p. 3.

⁹Jane Kallir, Grandma Moses, The Artist Behind the Myth, Pl. 27, p. 42.

¹⁰Rhoda Kellog, Analyzing Children's Art (Palo Alto, California: National Press Books, 1969), pp. 272-273.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 224-225.

¹²Jane Kallir, Grandma Moses, The Artist Behind the Myth, Pl. 132, p. 112.

¹³Ibid., p. 148.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁵Otto Kallir, Grandma Moses (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1973), p. 255.

¹⁶Jane Kallir, Grandma Moses, The Artist Behind the Myth, Pl. 2, p. 6.

¹⁷Ibid., Pl. 172, p. 141.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁹Johnson and Ketchum, American Folk Art, p. 206.

²⁰Otto Kallir, ed., Anna Mary Robertson Moses, Art and Life of Grandma Moses (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1969), p. 73.

²¹Beatrix T. Rumford, "Uncommon Art of the Common People," in Perspectives on American Folk Art. eds. Ian M. G. Quimby and Scott T. Swank, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1980), p. 13.

²²Johnson and Ketchum, American Folk Art, p. 206.

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