



BY LORI MYERS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARL SHUMAN

folk art in the family

With Schaefferstown
artist Barbara Strawser,
a Central Pennsylvania
tradition
comes home.



*Barbara Strawser's
folk-art paintings and
works by other family
members fill her Lebanon
County home, left. A
painted giraffe carved by
her father, Walter
Gottshall, right.*



Barbara Strawser paints the things she loves to look at.

Painted worlds

Barbara Strawser's paintings are filled with angels that float above Pennsylvania farmlands, pink moons that cast a soft glow onto hammocks, and black cats that seem to peer into your soul. Her framed works and those of family members grace the walls of her kitchen, where she deftly creates a lunch of homemade bread and soup, herbal tea and salad drizzled with Austrian dressing.

Strawser's art, and her world it represents, are centered in a 12-room 1890s Victorian house near the square in Schaefferstown, Lebanon County. "My kids think I'm crazy for living in this big house," she admits. "But when I travel, I long to come back to be here. It's peaceful."

The house and its furnishings, along with its spacious backyard garden, have become an extension of Strawser. Here there is good food — fresh and satisfying — put together with her own hands. Color — turquoise, yellow, orange — is reflected throughout the home in Strawser's paintings and décor. The furniture is simple, Old World, basic. Her art, depicting everyday pleasures real and imagined, is harder to describe. "I always say, 'I just paint,'" she remarks casually. "I never feel like it's realistic. I just think that I'm a folk artist of today. I think folk art is the art of the people. Folk art would've been like a father making a toy for a child, or drawings a grandfather would've made for a child."

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Central PA has a rich history of folk art, which has less to do with the image, the color or the style drawn on canvas or carved in pine, and more to do with the people who hold the paintbrush or carving knife. "It's an ambiguous term," explains Peter Seibert, executive director of

the Heritage Center Museum of Lancaster County. "Folk art is a passing of tradition within a family or a narrow, small community like the French of Louisiana or the Pennsylvania Germans. It's art that is part of the world, yet a little isolated from it."

Strawser's home is a melting pot of her family's creative energies. Family is important to her, and she is passionate about keeping family members nearby and holding them close. Many of them — a great-aunt, a grandfather, her parents, two sons and a daughter — were or are artists, continuing a creative tradition that has run in Pennsylvania families such as the Wyeths and the Peales. Proud of her family's accomplishments, Strawser is quick to point out paintings by her grandfather, Luke Gottshall, a small table made by her son, Dan Jr., and a wooden frame with carved hearts made by son Tim, which now holds one of his mother's drawings.

Daughter Melissa, who earned a master's degree at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London, also has made art her life's work. But she has veered away from her family's folk-art legacy to delve into the avant-garde. "She works at a sculpture studio [in Bally, Berks County] and she's been doing sculptures of turtles and things," Strawser explains. "For some reason she loves frogs and toads and turtles."



Pumpkins and angels are recurring images in Strawser's paintings.

Strawser traces her artistic inspiration to her hometown of West Reading, where she was captivated by the works she saw at the Reading Museum — from Impressionist paintings to renderings of the Susquehanna River. She grew up in a home filled with antiques, but as a child she longed for the modern furnishings her friends had. Now she is uncomfortable with modern amenities, and any modern items she may have in her home are hidden away. "Maybe I'm an old soul," she muses.

She found her artistic bent while in her teens, when she started painting animals and little houses. She had a difficult time getting good grades in school, possibly due to an undiagnosed learning disability, but found art classes enjoyable. Her parents, Walter and June Gottshall, saw their daughter struggle with schoolwork, noticed her interest in art and provided encouragement by sending her to after-school art classes.

"I was married at a very early age, 19, and I think I sold my first painting for \$8, and it was a little snow scene," Strawser recalls. "After that I always sold my paintings. I started doing little local shows and eventually started doing bigger paintings. There's a collection of a series

of garden paintings at Boscov's department store in Reading that I did, and they bought them and they are in their permanent collection. I have a shop in Westport [Connecticut] that handles my work. Strawser also does a show in Nantucket once a year.

Strawser brings to her art a sense of self, making sure she paints the objects that define her personality. "I'm usually working out of my head all the time, like picking bits and pieces of things that I love looking at, and then I'll make paintings of those," she says.

As an artist, Strawser is largely self-taught. With so many family members involved in art, some might think that she "gets it honest," as the locals like to say. But it was Strawser who prompted other family members to find their own creativity. "She was the start of it all," says her mother, June.

Strawser was an artist even before her great-aunt, well-known Lancaster County artist and antiques dealer Hattie Brunner (1889–1982). Known as the "Pennsylvania-German Grandma Moses" for her paintings of country auctions, farmhouses, snow scenes and the

simple life, Brunner, who died at age 94, began painting at age 67.

In the 1920s, Brunner became the prime supplier of Pennsylvania-German antiques for Henry Francis du Pont as he went about acquiring the valuable ceramics, corner cupboards and dressers that are now part of the collection of the prestigious Winterthur Museum. When the supply of antiques began to dry up, Brunner started painting.

Strawser loved her great-aunt's paintings, and, at first glance, Brunner's brush-stroke style resembles that of her great-niece. But a closer look shows that the subjects of their work differ. Brunner focuses on rural scenes with a community feel, while Strawser's work is dreamlike, mystical, somewhat surreal. "Somebody said to Barbara one time, 'Oh, you copied Hattie,'" June Gottshall recalls. "But she painted long before Hattie ever painted and



Artist Barbara Strawser, above, creates colorful and nourishing meals in the kitchen of the Victorian home she shares with her beloved bulldog, Sancho, left.



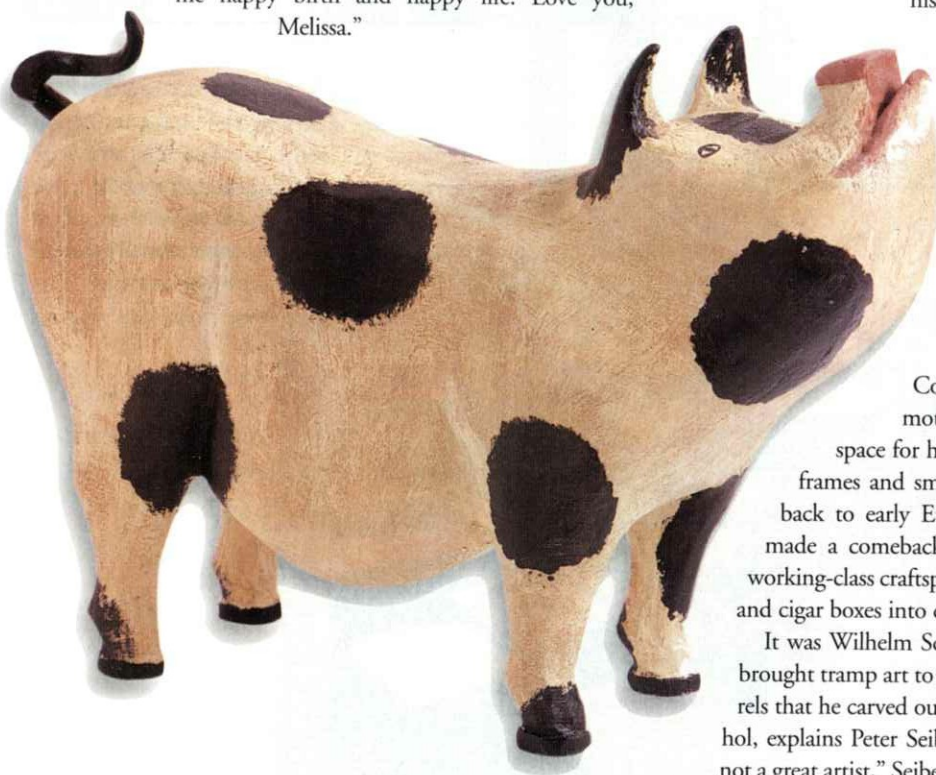
she changed because she didn't want people to think she was copying Hattie."

Yet Strawser had great admiration and a strong connection to her great-aunt's talent. When Strawser's first marriage ended after 15 years, she left with just a shopping bag filled with her children's clothing and a painting by her Aunt Hattie.

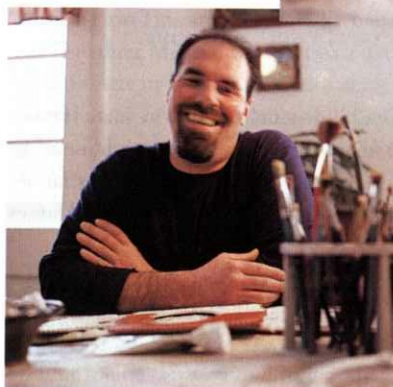
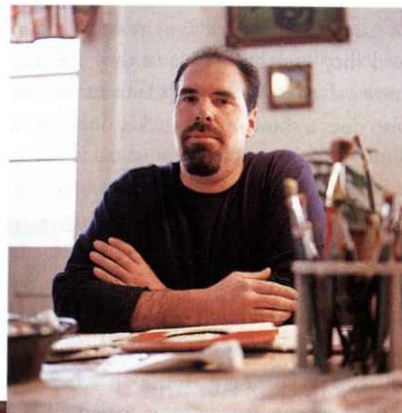
Despite her own parents' encouragement, Strawser did not steer her children toward an artist's life. "It's not the easiest," she says. "I probably wanted them to avoid any kind of struggle. I don't feel that way as much now as what I did, but I do remember thinking I don't want those children to even think about art." But now that her children have become artists, Strawser is happy about it. "It would be glorious if you didn't have to worry about your bills and things," she says. "I wish I could just paint and give them away as presents, just give them away."

Strawser brings to her art a sense of self, making sure she paints the objects that define her personality. "I'm usually working out of my head all the time, like picking bits and pieces of things that I love looking at, and then I'll make paintings of those," she says. "I have this thing for mermaids. Every year I do a series of mermaid paintings. I have a painting in the front room that is mermaids, witches, angels, and I guess they're just those sort of things that you know about but you really don't know for sure." Strawser has always loved angels — a subject she used to talk about with her Aunt Hattie. "I was doing them, and they were coming into my work more and more, and then they came in full-blown after that," she says.

Amid Strawser's paintings of hovering angels, smiling mermaids and yellow horses, there is a postcard on her refrigerator. It is from her daughter, and it gives Strawser great pride. It is proof of what family has meant to her and how sometimes an artist's world can be filled with riches. It reads: "Thank you with all my love for giving me happy birth and happy life. Love you, Melissa."



A painted pig carved by Walter Gottshall.



Tim Strawser of Reinholds followed in the footsteps of his family's folk artists.

tramp-art treasures

Tim Strawser looks around his Reinholds rancher and realizes, much to his amazement, old-style furniture is slowly filling up the spaces in his home. He grew up with furnishings of this type as a child and felt it was uncomfortable.

"Everything was just wood," he says. "There was a lot of folk art in the house, and woodcarvings and old furniture. I didn't really like it then. We had a room upstairs that had a television and the soft furniture and stuff like that, but that was the only one. The rest was just workspace for them, because my dad carved and my mom painted the carvings, plus she also painted."

The small dining area in his Lancaster County residence, a 20-minute drive from his mother's home in Schaefferstown, is now a workspace for his tramp art — wood carvings of ornate picture frames and small pine boxes with lids — whose origins date back to early European ornamental wood carving. Tramp art made a comeback during the Depression, when itinerants and working-class craftspeople transformed discarded wooden fruit crates and cigar boxes into chip-carved decorative objects.

It was Wilhelm Schimmel (1817–1890), a "drunken bum," who brought tramp art to Central PA in the form of little eagles and squirrels that he carved out of scrap wood in exchange for a bottle of alcohol, explains Peter Seibert of the Heritage Center Museum. "He was not a great artist," Seibert says. "He died in a poorhouse in Cumberland

County, but today his art is worth anywhere from \$20,000 to \$70,000."

Tim, his brother, Dan Jr., who lives in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and his grandfather, Walter Gottshall — whose circa-1770 log cabin in Reinholds is about a mile from Tim's home — are all tramp artists who have carried on the tradition in true form. June Gottshall paints the carved figures created by her husband.

Seeing Schimmel's tramp art for the first time inspired Walter Gottshall, then in his 50s, to begin his own journey into the world of carving and notching wood, and creating soldiers, primitive birds, cats, giraffes and even a scene of a young Abe Lincoln intently focused on splitting wood, a piece that the Gottshalls created during the U.S. Bicentennial.

The Strawser brothers and their grandfather use sharp knives or razors to create the angled cuts that result in multi-dimensional works of art. They put their own stamp on their work by adding color and decorative carved figures, such as mermaids and pigs, to their creations.

"Seeing the mermaids my mom did, I thought I might like to carve one of them," Tim explains. "But I mostly work out of my head. I look at pictures. I just try to do different things on top of boxes."

At 35, relying on selling his tramp art to put food on the table has been an eye-opening experience, Tim Strawser says. "I used to take [my mom's] work for granted until I started doing this. I found out it's not an easy way to make a living."

Tim was 15 when he began carving by watching his father and grandfather work, but his interest was sporadic. After traveling with the Army and then working in construction, he recently made the decision to become a full-time artist. At 35, relying on selling his tramp art to put food on the table has been an eye-opening experience. "I used to take [my mom's] work for granted until I started doing this. I found out it's not an easy way to make a living. Lugging your stuff to these shows isn't easy. Remember now, you never know if you're going to sell or not, and you have to pay a lot of money to do some of these shows."

The art of grandson and grandfather has created a close bond between them, a mutual admiration both personally and professionally. Tim is quick to let people know that it was his grandfather who taught him. And, like a proud mentor, Walter Gottshall speaks highly of his grandson's talent. "Tim's at that point now, he's good," says the elder artist. "I help him out a lot, of course. We work together." PA



Walter and June Gottshall of Reinholds, Lancaster County, are part of the family tradition of folk artists begun by their daughter, Barbara Strawser.



A contemporary tramp-art frame carved and painted by Tim Strawser surrounds one of his mother's paintings.