

Large-Print Visual Descriptions of Select Objects for

State Fairs: Growing American Craft

First Floor

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State Fairs: Growing American Craft

Step right up! Gather round! Experience the great tradition of state fairs. Since the first state fair, held in 1841 in upstate New York, fairs have sparked the American imagination with their celebrations of agricultural bounty, mechanical innovations, and skilled handcrafts.

Craft has always been an essential element of state fairs and Native American tribal fairs, expressing the creative and practical values of handmade goods in American society.

State fairs enable artists to display and sell their work and help sustain unique regional and cultural traditions.

Each gallery in this exhibition considers personal stories found in different areas of the fairgrounds, from the art exhibits and heritage villages to the

parades, dairy barns, and rodeos. Ribbon-winning artworks and engaging craft demonstrations illuminate the lives of the artists their families, memories, honors, and struggles. The exhibition also calls attention to people and communities whose experiences with fairs are entangled with histories of exclusion and displacement. With more than 240 artworks on view, dating from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, this exhibition registers the many ways the craft of state fairs has enriched the lives of artists and deepened the understanding of American art.

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State Fairs: Growing American Craft is curated by Mary Savig, the Fleur and Charles Bresler Curator-in Charge at the Renwick Gallery, with contributing curators Amber-Dawn Bear Robe, Elana Hain, Jon Kay, and Sara Morris, and with curatorial support from Elizabeth Routhier. Exhibition design by Meghan O'Loughlin and graphics by Nathaniel Phillips.

We tip our tiaras to the many extraordinary artists, historians, librarians, conservators, dairy princesses, cowboys, and cotton candy vendors who helped make this project a reality.



Photo by Albert Ting

Label Text

State Fair of Texas

SRO Associates

based Dallas, TX

Texas Scenic Company

Boerne, TX

Big Tex's Boots

2013

steel, Styrofoam, aqua resin, fiberglass, and acrylic paint

Big Tex first welcomed visitors to the State Fair of Texas in 1952, wearing size 70 cowboy boots. In 2013, he debuted a pair of bigger, better, size 96 boots after the original pair (along with the rest of Big Tex) burned in an electrical fire.

The design of these 2013 boots pays homage to a 1949 Texas themed boot design by master bootmakers Jesse Garcia and Carlos Hernandez Jr. of the Lucchese boot company.

Big Tex's boots feature signature motifs from the state: the flag; the capitol building in Austin; the state flower, a bluebonnet; and the state bird, the northern mockingbird. These boots were handmade and hand-painted in Dallas, Texas.

Courtesy of State Fair of Texas

Visual Description

On either side of the large double doors on the front of the Renwick building stand two enormous cowboy boots. They both face to the right and are taller and wider than a person. An adult could easily stand inside one of the boots.

The boots are brown and each has a painted mural that depicts sites and motifs related to Texas. On the top of the left boot is red stitching. Below the stitching, there is the text “1883 Lucchese Bootmaker” in white font. Two red longhorn bull heads are behind this text. Down the shaft of the boot, there is a mural of the state capitol building in Austin. The building is brown and mimics the

color of leather. The building has a central dome in the middle flanked by horizontal buildings on either side that have yellow rectangular windows. A gray path flanked by dark green sections extends from the building towards the viewer, and bright blue flowers with pointy green leaves are painted on the right side of the path. Behind the building is the American flag. At the foot of the boot, under the building, there is a section of light tan detailing which contrasts to the dark toe of the boot. The dark brown toe box features a light tan longhorn bull's head with white stars on either side and decorative yellow patterns wrapping around the toe. The heel of the boot was painted to look like wood.

On the right boot, painted red stitching adorns the top edge and the word “Texas” is written in capitalized white letters. Below this is a central image that includes, from top to bottom, a grey and white bird perched on a branch and the Texas state flag. The left side of the flag has a vertical blue stripe with a large white star. On the rest of the flag, a horizontal white stripe is painted above a red

stripe. The entire image of the bird and flag are set against a red and white stripe background that mimics the American flag. To the left of this image are the same bright blue flowers seen on the other boot. The toe box of the boot has the same pattern and colors as the other boot.



Photo by Albert Ting

Label Text

Kern Studios

founded 1932, New Orleans, LA

State Fair of Texas Parade Float Signage

2022

aluminum, plexiglass, and plastic

The fifty-five-foot-tall Big Tex and his “Howdy Folks” greeting capture the spirit of the State Fair of Texas. This sign was created for a float in the Starlight Parade, a nightly fair tradition.

Courtesy of Kern Studios and Mardi Gras World

Visual Description

At the beginning of the exhibition is a tall neon sign that nearly reaches the ceiling of the gallery. The sign is about the width of a person standing with their arms outstretched. At the center of the sign, starting from the top and going down, there is text in big bright neon yellow lettering that spells “Howdy Folks”. The letters

are capitalized, and the font is like the typeface often used in old timey displays or recreations of the Old West. The text stretches down the entire length of the tall neon sign. A border of individual neon lights surrounds the text in a rectangular shape with an arch at the top. The lights flash red, white, and blue. Each light was carefully programmed to flash a different color at a certain time, which creates the effect of the colors chasing each other around the border.

There are two smaller arches on each side of the big arch. These smaller arches are yellow and are lined with black. On the inner arches, there is a single vertical neon strip of light that glows different colors along its length. The colors flow upwards going from purple to green to blue and more. The outer arches each have three strips of vertical neon lights that also glow with the same colors as the inner arches. The dynamic moving lights and bright neon colors emphasize the “Howdy Folks” text and give the sign a joyful, celebratory, and exciting impression.

Label Text

Grace Snyder

1882–1982; resided North Platte, NE

Flower Basket Petit Point Quilt

1942–43

cotton

Growing up in the Nebraska Sandhills, Grace Snyder learned to quilt at the age of six to keep herself occupied during long days of watching cattle. While raising four children on a ranch, she still found time to enter her quilts in state fairs. In 1944, this quilt won the Sweepstakes Award (Best in Show) at the Nebraska State Fair, earning a prize of \$2.50.

This work is one of the best-known American quilts. By piecing together approximately eighty-seven thousand tiny triangles, Snyder created the illusion of needlepoint on a pieced quilt. She adapted the pattern from

a porcelain design produced by the Salem China Company in Ohio (illustrated), which itself imitates the petit point embroidery technique.

Courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society

Visual Description

This quilt is so large it could fit on a king size bed. The overall design of the quilt's interior section is composed of a trellis-like pattern that creates large square-shaped diamonds. Each diamond contains a brown basket of flowers. Each brown basket has yellow lilies, red roses, and small blue and pink flowers, and is set inside a white diamond in alternating rows of two and three diamonds across the quilt. Red roses with green leaves and a brown stem are featured in triangular sections on the perimeter of the trellis design. A green zigzag pattern denotes the edges of the diamond shapes created by the trellis pattern. Bordering the entire pattern is a green vine with flower buds in various stages of development, from bud to flower.

At first glance, this large square-shaped fabric quilt appears to be made of needlepoint stitches but is, in fact, made of thousands of tiny triangles. The way the triangles were stitched together to create this pattern gives a dynamic, three-dimensional look to the quilt.



Photo by Albert Ting

Label Text

Mary Ann Titrud

born 1947; resides Clarissa, MN

Butter Carton Dress Worn by Princess Kay of the Milky Way

1965–66

paper (butter cartons) and fabric

The crowning of a dairy “princess” is a Minnesota State Fair ritual. The 1965 Princess Kay of the Milky Way, Mary Ann Titrud, modeled this dress to promote the state’s creameries. The idea came from Howard T. Ryan, public relations director for the American Dairy Association of Minnesota. Ryan’s mother, Wilma Ryan, made the dress with Mary Ann Titrud. The skirt, capelet, and shift dress contain approximately 475 cardboard squares cut from butter cartons.

Such a dress would not look the same today because many state dairy operations have been consolidated. Titrud placed a carton from Clarissa Creamery, in her

hometown, on the capelet. The dress also features the Land O'Lakes logo depicting a stereotypical “Indian Maiden,” designed in the 1950s by Patrick DesJarlait (Ojibwe). The company altered its branding in 2020 amid criticism of Indigenous stereotypes in popular culture.

Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society

Visual Description

This dress is immediately striking because it was constructed out of cardboard butter cartons. The style is relatively simple: the skirt is mid-calf in length and the top is a capelet, a short cape that comes down to around the elbows, with a white collar. The capelet drapes over the shoulders about mid-way down the torso and is open in the front where the capelet has white rick rack (or wavy) trim sewn along the interior edge. The collar is made from a white fabric which is also used as a lining and a structural layer to support the butter cartons. The back of the skirt has two clear buttons to fasten it at the

waist. The long edge of the skirt is also trimmed in white rick rack.

Each of the butter cartons were layered together like fish scales to create this dress. There are many different brands of butter including Utica, Hawley, and Land-O-Lakes. Yellow is a dominant color for the butter cartons, which feature red- or blue-lettered branding. Some visitors may not recognize most of the brands of butter included on this dress.



Label Text

Carol St. Clair Johnson

born 1954; resides Albuquerque, NM

O Fair New Mexico—41 Fair Years

2023

satin ribbons

After unexpectedly winning her first blue ribbon for a sewn cape in 1981, Carol St. Clair Johnson developed an enduring love for the New Mexico State Fair. The quilt *O Fair New Mexico—41 Fair Years* incorporates more than six hundred of the ribbons she won at the fair every subsequent year except 2020 (when the fair was canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic). Johnson earned ribbons for needlework, knitting, crochet, pies, cookies, cakes, canning, jewelry, flowers, vegetables, and potted plants. The title of the quilt is a reference to the state song, and the design places the state's Zia sun symbol at the center. The quilt earned Johnson yet

another ribbon: Best in Category (miscellaneous quilt) at the 2023 New Mexico State Fair.

Courtesy of Carol St. Clair Johnson

Visual Description

This large, dazzling quilt, about the size of king-sized beadspread, is made of many shiny ribbons won at the New Mexico State Fair. At the center of the rectangular quilt is an abstract geometric and symmetrical pattern. A square is outlined in blue ribbons. Inside this square are red ribbons set against a golden yellow background. A smaller red square in the middle of the quilt contains four circular gold ribbons with frilled edges. Four red ribbons are placed on each edge of the red square giving a sunburst effect. Two large circular gold ribbons with frilled edges are in each corner of the large blue square and surround the smaller red square. On the yellow background, there are various shades of yellow flowers which are the dimensional button tops of large ribbons—some with ribbon tails and others with just the button flower. Bordering the center square is another geometric

pattern so complex that it looks like a maze. Blue ribbons create lines around red, white, and yellow ribbons. Dotted throughout the quilt are colorful flowers also made of the tops of ribbons.

The border of the quilt has two different patterns. On the right and left borders, there is a red vine with colorful ribbon flowers and red leaves going up each side on a gold background. On the top and bottom borders, there are two rows of ribbons in alternating color patterns of orange, purple, blue, red, white, and black.



Label Text

Verne Lucero

born 1930; resides Rio Rancho, NM

Fireplace Companion

2007

carved wood, punched tin, paint on glass, and repoussé on tin

The arts of tinwork and reverse glass painting are vital categories in the Hispanic Arts Gallery at the New Mexico State Fair. Verne Lucero, a US Army veteran, took up the traditions following his retirement from Española Hospital in 1994, and by 1996 he was winning awards.

The matchbox and match safe are made of traditional Spanish colonial punched tin, adorned with two reverse-painted glass panels. The work also includes a punched-tin shovel, broom, and bellows with reverse-painted glass panels, assembled in a freestanding, spiral-carved frame.

The work earned the Tradición Revista Award at the 2007 New Mexico State Fair.

Courtesy of Verne Lucero

Visual Description

A large piece of furniture, about three feet tall and two feet wide, stands before you. It is made of a maple-colored, shiny wood and matte silver tin. Overall, it is U-shaped: a horizontal wood base sits just a few inches above the floor and is connected to perpendicular posts that are carved like a twisted rope. The center of this object, which connects the two perpendicular wood posts, is made of punched tin and has a scalloped edge. This central area includes a pocket to store kindling, the tiny pieces of wood used to start a fire, and a matchbox. This is a fireplace companion, a functional piece of furniture that includes a useable brush (on the left), bellow (in the middle), and shovel (on the right).

On the left post, there is a small gray hook near the top. Hanging from the hook is a brush with a gray handle with

a cone shape near the top and a flower at the tip that attaches to the string used to hang the brush. The brush bristles are made from what looks like blonde straw or thin twigs. On the right post, a gray shovel hangs from an identical hook. The shovel has a wider handle at the top with an etched twisted rope pattern. The handle narrows as it connects with the shovel which has an intricate scalloped pattern bordering the perimeter.

Between the two posts, at the center of the object, there is a large gray panel that has a rounded shape with scalloped edges. In the center of this panel, there is a box that holds kindling. The box occupies most of the space on the front of the panel and has a textured diamond pattern with a layered fish scale pattern on its border. At the center of the box, there is a smaller box that holds matches. This matchbox is bordered with an intricate, organically shaped texture pattern. The cover of the small box features a panel of painted glass. Painted on the panel are bright pink flowers that look like peonies, big flowers with many petals. Below the center panel,

there is a gray post that is attached to the wooden base. Hanging beneath the box holding the kindling and matches is a wood bellow which is the same warm maple color seen elsewhere in the object. Covering the front panel of the bellow is another glass panel with the same pink flower motif in the center with darker pink flowers and brown leaves. Light tan string is wrapped around the bottom part of the bellow that narrows into a metal point where the air is pushed through an opening.

The back of the large central gray panel has an intricate pattern featuring a large flower with leaves and circular berries. The border was carved with a diamond pattern and an intricate organic outline with dots and indents. If you could touch the pattern, you could feel every element and follow the pattern.

Label Text

Robert Arneson

1930–1992; resided Benicia, CA

No Deposit, No Return

1961

earthenware

As a teenager, Robert Arneson watched Antonio Prieto throw large pots at the California State Fair. Years later, Arneson did the same for fourteen dollars a day in the fair's *Art in Action* program. He later recalled how much he enjoyed sharing "the magic of the mud."

Participating at fairs sent Arneson's ceramic practice in a radical new direction, breaking down hierarchies between craft and art to create pop-inspired objects. During a 1961 demonstration, Arneson created what he called "a handsome, sturdy bottle about a quart size."

The bottle is marked with an X and the words “NO DEPOSIT.” By sealing the bottle closed—rendering it useless in a traditional sense—Arneson signaled his rejection of functionality in ceramics.

Courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Visual Description

This brown, bottle-shaped ceramic vessel is about ten-and-a-half-inches tall and five inches in diameter and it is close to the size of a large mason jar. It has a slightly narrowed base which then curves out in a full bottle shape until it narrows again at the top where it has a very small mouth that is topped with a bottle cap also made of ceramic. The bottle is dark brown like a growler used for canning. The surface of the bottle is smooth except for the lettering and marks on its surface. Near the top of the bottle in capital letters is the phrase, “NO DEPOSIT.” Just beneath this is a large, raised, light blue square with a big red “x” mark at the center. The bottle cap at the top is the same light blue color as the raised square. The colors, while rich and vibrant, are also earth tones. The blue

glaze has brown blemishes and marks, and the brown glaze has darker spots which gives the bottle an earthenware texture and appearance.



Label Text

Ronna Thorson

born 1959; resides Edina, MN

Tine

2023

oil on wood

Rosemaling, a decorative freehand painting style, originated in rural Norway in the mid-1700s and was brought to the Upper Midwest by Norwegian immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century. Rosemalers have competed at the Minnesota State Fair since the 1930s.

Ronna Thorson has entered her rosemaling in the Minnesota State Fair's creative activities competition for more than twenty years. In 2021, she won a first-place ribbon for her rosemaling on a *tine*, a Norwegian box used to carry lunches and other provisions. Thorson paints in the Telemark style, characterized by overlapping scrolls.

Courtesy of Ronna Thorson

Visual Description

This black, oval-shaped lunchbox is made of wood. It has a flat lid with a handle that curves up out of the top with two decorative peaks on either side of the box. Two pieces of wood on either side of the box fasten the lid to the bottom and curve outward into points, almost like horns. On the front of the box, there is an intricate floral design with bright colors including orange, blue, pink, red, and green. The design is duplicated on both sides of the box.

On the top of the box's lid, there is a similarly intricate design with the same bright colors creating flower-like patterns. The rim of the lid has a textured, faint, light blue edge that allows the black paint to show through.

The handle is delicately outlined with a single blood red line. Painted red flowers are on either side of the handle peaks. The latches are also outlined in the same blood red color. At about fourteen-by ten-inches around and eight inches high, this box would comfortably fit a delicious lunch.

Label Text

Zac Weinberg

born 1986; resides Sunderland, UK

Kitsch Alchemy

2018

mixed media including blown, cold-worked glass, broom, found lamp, and electric motor

Perhaps a bristle broom and a cutesy bird lamp belong not in an art gallery but in a thrift store. At least, that's where artist Zac Weinberg found them. Weinberg transmutes mundane objects into art, encasing them in transparent glass fixtures. The glass makes visible elements of modern infrastructure, like electrical wiring, that are often taken for granted. The broom hovers an inch above the ground and spins in its glass case, always at work but never actually cleaning.

Weinberg loved attending fairs as a child. *Kitsch Alchemy* won both Juror's Choice and New Artist awards at the 2018 Ohio State Fair.

Courtesy of Zac Weinberg

Visual Description

This sculpture is about four feet in height and resembles a scientific instrument. There is a wooden broom standing upright inside clear glass that was molded to fit the entire form of the broom. The base of the broom is surrounded by a bell-shaped glass that has three wheels attached along its edge, like the kind found on office furniture. The top of the broom handle is connected to an S-hook, which is connected to a small “eye hook,” or loop. The “eye hook” is attached to the base of a cylindrical motor which continuously turns the broom. The motor makes a low humming sound.

The top of the broom handle widens slightly. The glass surrounding the broom handle is divided up into sections and each section is attached with screws. Leaving these joints exposed shows the visitor how this object may have been assembled. There is white and black wiring lining the inside of the tube of the broom handle which connects to the tiny lamp at the bottom. The exposed joints and wiring gives the object an industrial feel but is

also contrasted with the delicate nature of the clear glass and everyday object inside.

Just above the base of the broom handle, there is a glass tube that arches down to separate, smaller, bell-shaped piece of glass. Inside this glass there is a small table lamp with a perched white bird on its base. The lampshade is off-white and semi-opaque. Its hexagonal shape shows scenes of doves and roses on each side of the lampshade. It has small lightbulb inside which casts a warm yellow light on the miniature bird perched below.

Label Text

Sam Barsky

born 1974; resides Baltimore, MD

***Sweater Depicting the Washington Monument,
Baltimore***

2023

wool

Sam Barsky learned to knit in 1991. He has earned acclaim—and several ribbons from the Maryland State Fair—for his site-specific sweaters. He creates a knitted image of a site, improvising the design while he knits, and then poses at that site in the sweater.

Barsky won a first-place ribbon at the 2023 Maryland State Fair for this depiction of the Washington Monument in Baltimore.

Courtesy of Sam Barsky

Visual Description

This knitted sweater is made from a heavy wool yarn of different colors. The top of the sweater is blue down to the elbows in the sleeves. Under the neckline, there is a tall green-gray pillar that widens gradually towards the bottom and is set on a rectangular base. In front of the pillar, there is a large gray rectangle with a blue circle at the center with another smaller, white pillar at the center of the circle. Surrounding the gray rectangle is a light blue border that seems to be water. Those familiar with the sites in Baltimore, Maryland, may recognize this image as the Washington Monument. The sweater has a geometric style with small, pixelated squares that accentuate the knitted pattern.

The rest of the sweater around the central pattern has been color blocked. The bottom of torso area of the sweater up to the armpits is made of a maroon yarn. It is a multicolored yarn with many shades of maroon and gives the sweater texture. A horizontal strip of brown sits just above the maroon behind the pillar of the Washington

Monument. And above the brown, a light blue yarn covers the shoulders across the chest behind the top of the monument. This sky blue extends down the sides of the arms which turns into a light brown and finally ends with a dark brown at each wrist.

The sweater looks warm, cozy, and quite stretchy.

Label Text

Arturo Alonzo Sandoval

born 1942; resides Lexington, KY

Moth III

1971

wool, Lurex, and flax

In 1974, Arturo Alonzo Sandoval submitted *Moth III* to the Illinois State Fair's fine arts competition. According to Sandoval, the moth is a symbol of transformation—a fitting theme, given that the artist had recently graduated from the Cranbrook Academy of Art and become an instructor on the art and design faculty at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE). *Moth III* earned first place and was purchased directly from the fair's exhibition by the influential collector and conductor George Macaulay Irwin.

Courtesy of Krannert Art Museum

Visual Description

At first, the idea behind this sculpture may not be obvious. It is a large, person-sized, cocoon of knitted wool yarn in a light tan or cream color that hangs on the wall. The yarn used to knit this piece is quite thick and has a ribbed texture. Vertical iridescent stitching runs the length of the piece and catches the light. The sculpture is narrow at the top with the tip dropping down with long light-tan strands of flax that create a mane and hang down the front of the sculpture. The flax strands are almost as long as the entire sculpture, which widens in the middle, almost mimicking the size of a person, and narrows again at the bottom. The shape of this object gives the impression of being a cocoon— something that caterpillars wrap themselves in before transforming into butterflies or moths. The title of the piece, *Moth III*, confirms this impression.



Label Text

Lillian Colton

1911–2007; resided Owatonna, MN

Abraham Lincoln

1973

timothy grass, rapeseed, wild rice, clover,
and bromegrass

Visual Description

At first, this seems to be a traditional painted portrait of President Abraham Lincoln. It is about two-feet tall by one-and-a-half feet wide in size. With close examination, it is revealed that this portrait was crafted using various types of seeds. Seeds of different sizes, shapes, and colors create texture throughout this bust-length portrait.

President Lincoln stares directly out and his bright light blue eyes seem to follow the visitor. His eyes are the only part of the portrait that were painted. His dark hair, eyebrows, and bushy beard were created with long grains of dark, almost black, wild rice. His facial features were

created with various shapes of small seeds ranging from light tan to dark brown. The shades of seeds give a painterly quality to the portrait. He is wearing a black suit with a black bowtie and white undershirt. Likewise, these items of clothing were created using black and white seeds with various shades outlining the details. The artist's signature was written in seeds at the bottom right-hand corner and reads "L. Colton". Other portraits in the same style and by the same artist in this gallery include Prince, Princess Diana, Dolly Parton, Oprah, and Barack Obama, to name just a few.



Photo by Albert Ting

Label Text

Liz Schreiber

born 1968; resides Minneapolis, MN

State Fairs: Growing American Craft

2024–25

brown flax, grits, sesame, yellow mustard, peeled mung bean, gold flax, thistle, bird's-foot trefoil, wild rice, quinoa, forget-me-not flower petal, adzuki bean, red lentil, cucumber, camelina, amaranth, watermelon, pink peppercorn, crown vetch, kidney bean, yellow split pea, garden cress, green millet, chia, amaranth, sorghum, black quinoa, romaine lettuce, and fennel with white glue on plywood

“I always say that the State Fair is one of the best galleries that you could possibly hang your work in, because it gets so many viewers.”—Liz Schreiber

Liz Schreiber’s prizewinning seed portraits have depicted the country singer Slim Whitman, Frankenstein, Vincent Price, and the rock band Weezer, among others.

Starting with an underpainting of watercolor and acrylic paint, Schreiber places each seed with a toothpick and a dab of glue to define intricate shapes and edges. For larger surfaces, she uses the “glitter method” of tossing seeds onto a swath of glue and shaking off the excess.

Schreiber created this artwork for the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum to evoke the spirit of the fair.

Courtesy of Liz Schreiber

Visual Description

There is a large, rectangular, and two-dimensional artwork on the wall about two-and-a-half-feet by two-feet in size. At first, it seems to be a painting. As the viewer gets closer to the object, it becomes clear that this not a painting. It was carefully crafted using different types of seeds. The seeds are arranged by color, shape, and size to create the image and its frame.

A dark brown frame surrounds a central image. Each side of the frame has two curled green leaves with orange

berry-like motifs. The corners of the frame feature a circular motif that is green on the exterior and dark brown and orange on the interior. Different size seeds add dimensionality throughout the frame and the central image.

The central image features several motifs seen in this exhibition, including a cow, roosters, corn husks, and award ribbons. Beginning at the top, near the corners, are two spinning wheels used to make yarn or thread with a light tan thread arching over the entire top of the piece. The threads go through silver needles on either side. The background of the entire work is a warm, dark brown like the color of mahogany wood or a rich caramel. Some of the seeds and grains might be familiar. Different colored lentils, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, and kidney beans were used throughout this work. If you could touch this object, you could feel the many different types of seeds and the shapes they create.

Below the spinning wheels is the text “State Fairs” written in large white capital letters made of seeds. In between

the words “State” and “Fairs” there is a delicate ear of wheat, also made of seeds. Moving down the image, there is the head of a cow looking straight at the viewer. Crafted with light yellow, gold, and white seeds of various sizes, the cow looks like it’s made of butter, likely in reference to the cow sculpted out of butter that is in this exhibition on the second floor.

Beneath the text and above the cow are two curled green leaves arching over the cow with two orange flowers on either side of the cow’s face. Next to the flowers are two blue ribbons, the kind that are awarded at fairs for prizes, that sit on either side of the cow. Below the cow is a decorative line U-shaped garland of pumpkin seeds followed by “Growing American Craft,” the title of the exhibition. On either side of the piece are decorative, colorful leaves and flowers. Near the bottom of the object, two roosters face each other and flank a bushel of corn framed by decorative green leaves that curve inward around the corn. The roosters are made of red, blue, orange, and brown seeds.

Label Text

Laurel Dabbs

born 1958; resides Westfield Center, OH

Great Blue Heron Decoys

2017–25

white cedar, nails, and house paint

Egret Decoys

2024

white cedar, nails, and house paint

Laurel Dabbs has demonstrated traditional decoy carving at the Cracker Country Living History Museum at the Florida State Fair since 1997. First designed by Indigenous people to lure migratory fowl, such decoys were essential to the survival of early colonists until they could establish successful crops. Over time, decoys have become an art form.

Living-history events enable Dabbs to demonstrate time-honored techniques with hand tools while she exchanges

stories with fairgoers, from seniors to students on elementary school field trips.

Courtesy of Laurel Dabbs

Label Text

Rick Whittier

born 1961; resides Lidgerwood, ND

Connie Whittier

born 1960; resides Lidgerwood, ND

Fish Decoys

2024–25

wood and aluminum with aerosol paint

Rick and Connie Whittier made their first fish decoy in 2004. They had recently retired from careers in law enforcement in Wisconsin and moved to Lidgerwood, North Dakota. They were surprised one night when a neighbor knocked on their door at 1 a.m. to request a favor. He needed a new decoy before the opening day of ice-fishing season. They put together a decoy using

scrap wood and sheet metal from a storm door. Since then, they have carved and painted decoys representing hundreds of fish species.

Each decoy is carved by hand and painted to resemble a particular species. The decoy is designed to enter the water and spiral to the bottom, attracting nearby fish with its natural-looking movements. The Whittiers carry on a tradition of decoy carving rooted in the distinct ecology and Indigenous practices of the Great Lakes region and have demonstrated their skills at the North Dakota State Fair.

Courtesy of Master Artists Rick Whittier and Connie Whittier

Visual Description

When objects in a gallery are described, there is usually one object at the center of attention. This installation, however, must be described differently because it occupies the entire gallery and contains many objects. Three artists contributed many carefully crafted objects

that were installed together to create this magnificent scene.

The room is cast in a shimmering blue light, which gives the effect of being underwater while a school of fish are suspended from the ceiling with iridescent fishing line. The fish cast shadows on the adjacent wall. There are numerous fish of various sizes and types, including salmon, rainbow trout, and sunfish. Each is a realistic representation. Some of the fish are large, about the length of your forearm. Others are small and could fit in the palm of your hand. The slight breeze in the galleries gently moves some of the fish from side-to-side making it seem like the entire school of fish is moving.

Beneath the fish are eight birds that were hand-carved out of wood. On one side, is a large great blue heron. About three or four feet tall, this heron was elegantly carved with its long neck curved backwards so its head rests on its chest. It has a long yellow beak and is looking down towards two smaller herons with similar grey-blue colors. These two smaller birds look up at the large bird.

Perhaps these are young great blue herons as they do not yet have the elongated neck or bright yellow beak. Instead, they have little black tufts on the top of their heads and small black beaks that are open as if calling out.

On the other side, there are five birds that are similar in size as the young great blue herons but are completely white with long black beaks and long necks. These birds are egrets and stand in a group. One is preening, or cleaning its feathers, while the rest look forward at various angles.

Each of the birds is set on a brown wood pole that is mounted to a natural wood log. The log was cut in half, so its flat side lies against the floor.

Fish are suspended above and are cast in a shimmering blue light while the birds are illuminated in a warm, yellow light. Noticing the tiny details on each object in this installation enables the visitor to truly appreciate the craftsmanship on view.
