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Cahoon Museum Opens With 'A Swedish Folk Tale'

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Forty-plus artifacts are on view in the Cahoon Museum of American Art's "A Swedish Folk Tale" exhibit. On view through June 3, the show traces the early life and influences of Martha Farham Cahoon.

Despite a lingering winter, the Cahoon Museum of American Art opened for the season on March 23 with a schedule of exhibits that allows for reflecting on the past as well as appreciating contemporary artists and showcasing artists working with traditional materials in new ways.

The first major show of the 2018 season is “A Swedish Folk Tale” and provides a nod to Martha Cahoon, her background and education in traditional folk arts, and how she later influenced her husband, Ralph Cahoon, and the direction of their art.

“Ralph Cahoon’s career tends to overshadow that of Martha’s,” museum director and curator Sarah Johnson said. “We wanted to give Martha her moment to shine and also acknowledge her influence on Ralph.”

Martha Cahoon (1905-1999) was born Martha Farham in 1905 to parents who had immigrated to the United States from the south of Sweden. Her father, Axel Farham (1876-1946), was an artist trained in his homeland in the art of decorative painting. Upon arriving in the US the Farhams settled in Boston, where Axel worked for several firms.

The first part of the exhibit is focused on Martha’s early life and especially the career of her father. In 1915, Axel Farham moved his family to Harwich, where he eventually opened his own shop. The show includes several design samples from the shop along with larger finished pieces such as a decorated fireplace screen and a jade-colored rocking chair painted by Axel and Martha’s brother Eric. Also included are still life and landscape paintings by Axel and his portrait of a young Martha busy sketching.

If you want to learn as well as look, the exhibit offers an education in Swedish design motifs, such as kurbits and rosemaling, designs that heavily feature sprays of flowers, birds, vining leaves, and fruit. There’s also an example of a decorated scutching knife, a mainstay of Swedish farming life.

The exhibit includes many furniture pieces, ranging from chairs and a chest to several large secretaries and bureaus, a round table top, and a long deacon’s bench. “There are a lot of artifacts on loan,” Ms. Johnson said.

An accomplished student in school, Martha’s teachers encouraged her to go to college but Martha, described by her father as “always sketching,” chose instead to apprentice in his shop.

After marrying in 1932 Ralph and Martha moved to the Bennett House in Osterville where they set up their first shop. Ralph also apprenticed under Axel and was taught techniques by Martha. In the folk art tradition the couple decorated their house by painting scenes and motifs directly on the walls; one such painting—preserved by later owners of the house and later removed from the home—is part of the show. The large panel is of a horse and rider surrounded on either side by sprays of flowers and leaves.

Initially the Cahoons sold their own refinished and painted furniture as well as other antiques from their home business.

“The 1930s were a stressful period heading into World War II,” said Ms. Johnson. “People were looking back to the past and feeling nostalgic. The time was right for this kind of art.”

From the 1930s to the mid-1940s Ralph and Martha’s business continued to thrive, with the couple incorporating Swedish and American folk art as well as Pennsylvania Dutch motifs into their painted furniture designs. One case in the exhibit houses several of the books the couple used as references. “They had an extensive library,” Ms. Johnson said.

As a comparison, works by another Cape folk artist, Peter Hunt (1896-1967) are included in the show. Mr. Hunt, whose work is also highly collectible, had a shop and painted in Provincetown. “He was huge for a time,” Ms. Johnson said. “There was a real craze for his work.”

The show also includes work by present-day heritage artist Christina Keune who still works in the Swedish folk art tradition, keeping it alive for future generations by creating functional and decorative works.

In 1945 Ralph and Martha purchased the Crocker House in Cotuit (the location of the present-day Cahoon Museum) in order to have a larger home and studio in which to work on bigger pieces of furniture.

In the 1950s the couple’s career path began to take different trajectories. While they were still creating painted furniture the motifs they were using became more their own. Instead of traditional flowers and fruit designs they began incorporating seashells, native birds, and other nautical themes into their work. The couple started moving away from painting furniture and into wall art when a client who was opening a new gallery asked for some framed pieces that she could sell. When the pieces sold quickly, Ralph and Martha began creating more, embracing the change because furniture restoration and painting had become a labor-intensive venture for the couple.

Although her paintings certainly confirm that she was, Martha Farham Cahoon didn’t think of herself as an artist. “She really never considered herself an artist,” said Ms. Johnson, “a decorative artist or an artisan, but not an artist.”

The show includes two-dimensional paintings by the artists and leaves the couple just before Ralph’s signature mermaids came onto the scene.

If You Go

“A Swedish Folk Tale” will be on view at the Cahoon Museum through June 3. In conjunction with the show, contemporary folk artist Christina Keune will be at the museum on April 12 to give an artist’s talk, “Travels of the Swedish Fairytale.” It will focus on Axel Farham, his rural Swedish influences and how he brought these traditions to Boston, adapting his talents and sharing them with his family. The talk is free with museum admission but reservations are required by calling 508-428-7581.

Ms. Keune will also give a workshop on April 13, “Making Ornaments in the Folk Art Style,” in which participants can paint a series of three ornaments on birch wood based on decorative folk art motifs. The workshop is limited to 20 participants; registration is required. Cost is \$85 for members, and \$100 for nonmembers. Call to reserve a space.

Upcoming shows this year also include “The Pollinators,” from June 8 through August 12; “Herman Maril: The Strong Forms of Our Experience,” from August 17 through October 28; and “Twisted, Twined, and Woven: Contemporary Fiber Art,” from November 2 through December 22. On view for the entire season will be the special exhibit “Scrimshandering: Ralph Cahoon, Scrimshaw, and Nantucket Whaling Heritage.”