



TELLING THE STORY

STEVEN PATTIE

Like other collectors, in my lifetime, I've fallen in love with lots of things and the stories they reveal. In part, collecting satisfies my appetite to know and understand, to chronicle a story—even multiple stories—that capture my imagination.

I place some of the credit for this passion on my parents. During family vacations and weekend getaways, we routinely made stops at antique stores, the local Goodwill, and garage sales looking for that special treasure. They collected what they liked. My father, a mechanical engineer, was always on the lookout for some ancient mechanical gadget; or, he and my mother, for something like an antique lamp or wonderful piece of furniture to incorporate into the home.

Naturally, I followed suit. With varying degrees of commitment, over the years I have collected things that stir my passion—American Arts and Crafts furniture (and period accessories), Zuni fetishes, Navajo rugs, contemporary American photography, vintage Mexican silver jewelry, books and art of the Beat Era (especially the books and paintings of artist/writer/publisher/provocateur Lawrence Ferlinghetti), and whatever along the way captured my imagination or shed light on a story I wanted to tell.

Eventually I discovered contemporary American Folk Art, and in a big way. From a distance, I was intrigued by the work of self-taught artists—what some describe as folk or Outsider Art. Creating work outside the traditional mainstream, and free of external expectations or guidance, these artists tell their stories with unbridled voices through their expressive outpourings and influence what is happening in the so-called art-world-at-large. I found this compelling. My journey began, as is true for many with an interest in self-taught art, with the work of the Reverend Howard Finster.

I started collecting Finster, and eventually other self-taught artists, in 1994, after running across a feature story about him in the *Los Angeles Times*. Having casually followed Finster's astonishing career from the beginning, I was impressed by his vitality and originality. His story began to accelerate in his late 50's, when, one day while painting a bicycle, a smudge of enamel that looked like a face appeared on his finger. It instructed him to "paint sacred art" in order to plant the word of God "on every brain cell." Honoring that instruction, Finster cemented all of his tradesman's tools into the walkway of his garden to mark—and ensure—his allegiance to this new call. "Working night and day for you all," Finster went on to create more than 50,000 works of art. Rivalled in quantity only by Pablo Picasso, he produced more individual works than anyone in recorded history.



I found an address, and wrote him a brief note expressing enthusiasm for his art and admiration of his passion. I asked whether he ever sold any of his works (figuring I might get a better deal negotiating with the artist, and in the bargain perhaps develop a relationship with him). With limited resources, married, and the father of two young boys, I assumed that owning an original Finster was likely beyond my budget and out of the question. His work had already been placed in the permanent collection at the Smithsonian, represented at the Venice Biennial, featured in major New York, Chicago, and Atlanta galleries, the subject of two major books and scores of articles, and more. By 1994, Finster was already a star.

But I thought I'd ask anyway. I've never been afraid to ask.

Two weeks later I received a small, handwritten letter in the mail. Written personally by Finster in his crabbed handwriting, the note expressed gratitude for "fans" like me, and appreciation for my interest in his art. He gave me his daughter's phone number and instructed me to call her to find out what might be available from his studio.

I made the call. His daughter picked up the phone and greeted me in her friendly northwestern Georgia drawl. I introduced myself, told her I had received the number from her father, and wondered aloud if there might be any original works for sale. She had one painting available. I asked how much.

"\$75," she replied.

I was astonished. That an original work, whatever the quality, by someone already considered an American master, was available for that mere sum was incredible. I asked her to describe it for me briefly, although I was already sold. I couldn't pull my credit card out fast enough. A week later it arrived in the mail. We all loved it.

With that, I was on the road to collecting the work of Howard Finster. Also, at an increasingly accelerated pace (my late wife might have said "alarming"), I invested in the work of other important self-taught artists, mostly from the Deep South. But as my collection grew, I maintained a major focus on Finster, and on telling his story.

My business travel often took me to the South. As soon as it could be arranged, I headed to Atlanta for a few days of work, and then drove 90 miles north to Summerville to drop by his studio one humid summer afternoon. I wanted to get to know him personally—as I eventually would other artists in the region.

I continued to buy wonderful works directly from Finster at a fraction of the price they were fetching in galleries, but it was not enough. To better understand and tell his story would require other strategies of acquisition. I was interested, for example, in his earlier works, which were only available through galleries, auctions, and trading with other collectors. I was keen to find some of the clocks, furniture, picture frames, and knick-knacks he made to supplement his livelihood as a pastor—works going back to the early 1940s—before he began creating the visual art for which he has become so famous. And then there was the ephemera related to his work as a pastor, like early religious tracts he had written, and more, which provided some glimpse into the soul of the man and the *tour de force* he would become. Though I was on a limited budget, my collection eventually required at least a few minor masterpieces to round out the story. And so, from auction houses and a prestigious New York gallery, I made a few judicious investments.

Aside from my passion for American folk art, a practical reason for collecting was that it was relatively affordable, as compared to other art on the market. And in many ways it still is. From good to great examples of work by Finster and other self-taught artists could be had at the right auction for relatively small sums—though I would be the first to admit I often paid handsomely for just the right work to round out the collection I was building.

My ultimate goal was a small collection representative of Finster's entire body of work. While I knew I would never own major masterpieces, I bet on patience, an intelligent following of the market, and some measure of good fortune to lead me to some solid acquisitions. Again, because I was focused on his story, and to a lesser degree the stories of other artists, I was able to research, evaluate, and discern effectively the works in which I wanted to invest.

Along the way I realized that focus is the key to being really good at collecting in a certain field (in this case, self-taught art) and knowing how to invest. It has been a purposeful 22-year commitment on a limited budget. Today, our collection is among the largest collections of self-taught art on the West Coast, and is publically enjoyed around the country in galleries, museums, colleges, and universities. Our family is both humbled and proud to be counted among those people telling Finster's story.



Steven Pattie (shown here with a self-portrait of Howard Finster, 1944) is an active visual artist, writer, collector, art dealer, and more recently executive producer of the documentary film *I Can Feel Another Planet In My Soul* about Howard Finster. The recipient of numerous awards in visual art, music, and communications, Pattie is currently a Vice President with Keller McIntyre & Associates and is a graduate of Westmont College (B.A.) and Fuller Theological Seminary (M.Div.). stevenpattie@hotmail.com