

## CURATOR'S STATEMENT

Curator: a keeper or custodian of a museum (or other) collection

I am not the keeper of a collection of mangle boards. I am the keeper of a body of knowledge about mangle boards, a body of knowledge that I am responsible for developing. Of course I had help, and that help came from curators and collectors and university students and many others. Some of my knowledge was drawn from people who had studied mangle boards but their studies were more limited in geography or time than my own. My study covered seven countries, three hundred years and involved direct contact with about 7,000 mangle boards across two-dozen collections.

When I began my study I knew what a mangle board was, but nothing more. I could not tell one from another in terms of their geographic origins. One of my aims was to acquire sufficient insight into mangle boards so I could distinguish them geographically, by their aesthetic characteristics, that is, by their appearance.

My mind has been engaged with the appearance of things since childhood. For example, by appearance I could reliably declare the year of manufacture of any American car made between 1959 and 1972, the years that mattered to me. Soon I began to select and keep custody of groups of objects: at first, stones, and later Matchbox cars. I was intentional and serious about this activity. As an adult, solely because of their appearance, I began to collect streamlined electric clothes irons of the 1930s and 1940s.

Many, myself included, have wondered why the appearance of things matters. My answer was found through an education at The Barnes Foundation (Merion, PA), where I studied in the 1970s and later, taught. The answer is that art is the record of an experience, the experience that an artist had. The artwork is the manifestation of that experience. We, the observer, can recreate the artist's experience within ourselves, *if we dedicate our sustained and dedicated efforts to that aim*. In other

words, we can share in something that was part of the life of the artist and we can know something of what it was like to be that person. This is profound and, I think, universal: every human is inherently interested in knowing other humans and in gaining a sense of what it is like to *be* them.

To accomplish this, one need not meet the artist or read anything by or about them. One can accomplish this through the study of their artwork and the study of the genre of artwork that preceded their work. For example, to recreate the experience of a painter, one must become facile in the language of paintings through *studying paintings*. The wider and deeper one's knowledge of paintings, the richer and more accurate will be one's recreation of a painter's experience.

In applying this to the study of mangle boards, I had to establish their visual traditions, that is, to establish the set of visual characteristics common to boards made in Denmark, the characteristics common to the boards of the Netherlands and so on for the mangle boards of each of seven northern European countries. I intended to accomplish this by studying the boards themselves, not by reading about the boards. (I was soon to learn that very little had been written about their aesthetics). I looked at thousands of boards and studied about 1,200. I wrote descriptions and analyses of the 267 boards that appear in my book, *Mangle Boards of Northern Europe*. I succeeded in establishing the traditions of the mangle boards, which are summarized on the exhibition labels.

It is my hope that you, the new observer, will feel the life of those who made these mangle boards through my study of the boards. It will be an indirect experience, but one that you can replace with your own direct experience, through your own dedicated study of the boards.

I was rewarded in my study of mangle boards with a sense of the broad experience of the people of these countries. Their collective experience, through my experience of hundreds (sometimes thousands) of mangle boards, became palpable. As you read

the summarizing statements posted within this exhibit you will find my thoughts about this. I offer two here, as a primer:

#### **GERMANY**

My reading of German history provided a very small window into the milieu into which these boards were born. The sense I came away with is of a fractured land and a traumatized people at a loss to sense their unity, leaving them at a disadvantage at establishing their own cultural and artistic identity. This is in evidence in their *Mangelbretter*. Even the uniquely German boards were formed in the manner of the Baroque, a style *imported* to Germany.

In the end, the sensations of the German boards are—despite the display of feelings in the faces and contortions of the figures—primarily intellectual. Through complex sculptural designs, they express the intellectual sensations of engineering, of construction, and of how this object in space relates to that object in space, or, in other words, the order within the physical universe. German boards are beautiful, but it is a beauty of the mind, not the heart.

#### **ICELAND**

Beauty is, of course, a subjective quality. It arises when a combination of aesthetic qualities pleases our senses. I find these mangle boards (more than those of the other countries) aspire to beauty, and succeed. They succeed through a profusion of complex textures and intricate spaces; through the drama created by confinement, density, and contrast. They are compact, which makes them feel precious and engenders the sensations of treasure.

In the course of research for this book, I spent time in Iceland. It is a beautiful land. It is my judgment that the experience and characteristics of an island nation have been expressed through their *trafakefli*: confined, composed of contrasts in close proximity, influenced by—but separate from—the mainstream, and unmistakably beautiful and bizarre.

Jay Raymond, April 2017