



Fig. 4 Carved panel in the Roger Brown House

Roger Brown House

Roger Brown (1941–97) graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and bought a late 19th-century shop in a rundown district. He turned the shop into a studio and lived on the first floor, which he filled with a collection of folk art and ceramics collected from street markets and thrift shops. His furniture included family pieces, such as a humble brown-varnished ‘pie safe’, that seemed the essence of American Vernacular, and a group of hickory chairs with split willow seats (one, by repute, made by his great-grandfather).

He was part of an elastic movement of artists called the Chicago Imagists who lived amongst their vernacular finds. Brown used his collection as inspiration for his bold paintings, referring to it as his ‘muse’. He introduced what he called an attitude to his collection, which to him was free of hierarchy, every item having equal value in his eyes. Brown left his study collection to the Art School in Chicago to be used ‘as a lab’.

Lisa Stone, the curator of the collection, assisted by Nick Lowe, introduced us to the artist, his work and his collection and described the difficult task of cataloguing this large collection of diverse objects. We were then free to explore the upper rooms lined with Brown’s own canvasses

and those of friends, teachers and unknown amateurs – every shelf and table filled with diverse and fascinating objects. As a touching reminder of Roger Brown's world, the garage behind the house contained his immaculate black Ford Mustang.

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