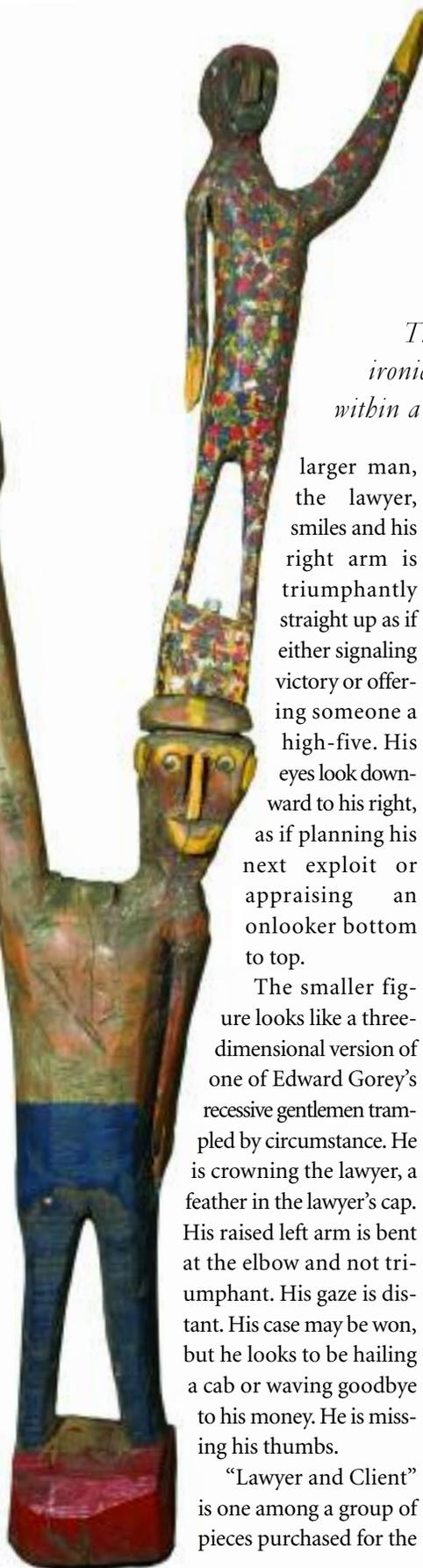


Vanderbilt Holdings

Collections and collectibles

HOMER GREEN'S painted wood sculpture "Lawyer and Client" is set out of the way on the edge of the Law School's Blackacre Courtyard, just in front of some shrubs and a wall. But, like any good art, it refuses to fade into the background. Viewers sometimes joke about it—it is a humorous piece. But if its apparent lack of sophistication (Green's main sculpting tool was a chainsaw) is the source of mirth among the law students, the joke is on them. When someone asked Green which of the two figures in the piece was the lawyer, he answered, "He ain't the one crying." It may seem strange that such an object should find a home in a law school, but remember that no one enjoys a good lawyer joke more than a lawyer.

It is fitting that a work by Homer Green displayed in the Law School should satirize the practice of law. People who knew him say that beneath his curmudgeonly exterior was a dear, sweet man. But it would have been entirely against Green's nature to fall in step with anyone's expectations or agree with anyone else's opinion on just about any topic. He was a born contrarian who, much of the time, carried a gun or a chainsaw and liked to give the appearance of someone dangerous. If his opinion of lawyers was not high, it was not simple-minded. The sculpture consists of a small man standing on the head of a larger man, both with a raised arm in clear reference to swearing in. The



Outside the Law

The Law School's collection of outsider art ironically places the seemingly unsophisticated within a context of order. By REED RICHARDS

larger man, the lawyer, smiles and his right arm is triumphantly straight up as if either signaling victory or offering someone a high-five. His eyes look downward to his right, as if planning his next exploit or appraising an onlooker bottom to top.

The smaller figure looks like a three-dimensional version of one of Edward Gorey's recessive gentlemen trampled by circumstance. He is crowning the lawyer, a feather in the lawyer's cap. His raised left arm is bent at the elbow and not triumphant. His gaze is distant. His case may be won, but he looks to be hailing a cab or waving goodbye to his money. He is missing his thumbs.

"Lawyer and Client" is one among a group of pieces purchased for the

Law School through a 1999 gift from Mickey Babcock and installed in 2001. When Babcock approached the Law School with the idea of the gift, she specified that it be used for folk or "outsider" art. The proposal was more than agreeable to then-Dean Kent Syverud, who was himself interested in self-taught art and artists. Babcock was put in contact with Eve Utley, director of building design and development during the Law School's expansion. Utley, as luck would have it, was a neighbor of Dan Prince, a widely known authority on self-taught art, a collector, dealer, writer, a self-taught artist himself, and a Vanderbilt alum (BA'73). His book *Passing in the Outsider Lane* contains reproductions of work by, along with essays about, 21 self-taught American artists, including three of the four whose work was eventually picked for the Law School Collection. Prince recently had curated a large show on campus at the University Club and in 1998 had donated his papers, with the support of Chancellor Emeritus Heard, to the Jean and Alexander Heard Library's Special Collections archive. It is a growing archive, called the Self-Taught Artists Resources (or STAR) collection, currently containing 76 cataloged boxes that are consulted by scholars, dealers and curators from around the country.

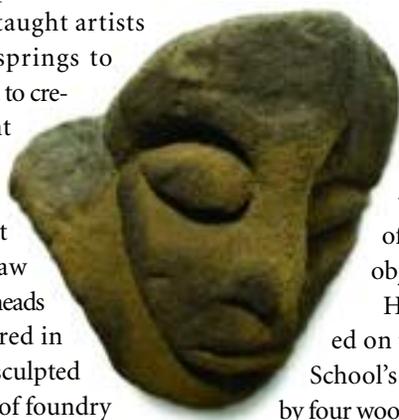
The plans for which art to use, how many pieces, and where to place them went through several changes, but, working with Prince's leads and suggestions, Babcock and Utley eventually selected nine pieces by four different artists for the Law School's permanent collection.

In addition to Homer Green, the other artists in the collection are Lonnie Holley, Alvin Jarrett and Robert E. Smith. Lonnie Holley is the youngest of the four. Holley, from Birmingham, Ala., was the seventh of 27 children and was forced by circumstances to be independent from a young age. When his sister's two children perished in a house fire in 1979, the family was too poor to buy headstones for their graves, so Holley, in profound grief, fashioned headstones out of discarded sandstone from a nearby foundry. At the end he discovered a gift for expressing his heart in workable materials. Within two years his work was included in a traveling Smithsonian exhibit of work by self-taught artists, and since then his work has been shown in New York and Europe.

Like many self-taught artists (Howard Finster springs to mind), he uses his art to create the environment of his house and yard. He uses any material at hand, but the pieces at the Law School—three small heads that Prince discovered in Holley's yard—are sculpted from the same kind of foundry sandstone as the original headstones he made in 1979. Foundry sandstone is manufactured material much rougher and more porous than natural sandstone. Exposed to the elements it can last only six or seven years before it starts to disintegrate. "In the meantime," Prince says, "it is rounded off by wind and rain and is at its best point just before it really falls apart." Knowing a bit about the tribulations of Holley's life, one can see the faces as metonymies for the artist as a survivor.

Prince says Holley "takes out of everything a real deep kind of wisdom, and you can see that in those faces. They look weathered—they've weathered the storm and are still here."

Holley had a background in whittling, but he turned it into something uniquely imaginative and individual. According to Prince, "Self-taught artists are not influenced or influenceable. For artists with an academic background, it is natural to use training, to go to libraries and museums and read books, but self-taught artists pull all their resources



out of themselves and their guts. It's more a visceral approach than a conceptual or theoretical approach. It's what they can touch, handle, do. The ideas kind of flow into their minds from the objects themselves."

Holley's sandstone heads are mounted on the wall to the right of the Law School's café entrance. They are flanked by four wooden dancing men carved by Alvin Jarrett. The figures all have moving parts with joints made of pins and wire hoops. Prince says, "Jarrett's dancing men come from a folk-art base that goes back to the 18th century," and he explains that "folk art expresses certain cultural norms, and uses techniques inherited from that culture." Jarrett's figures express a certain style of whimsy. It's hard to look at them and not want to make them dance.

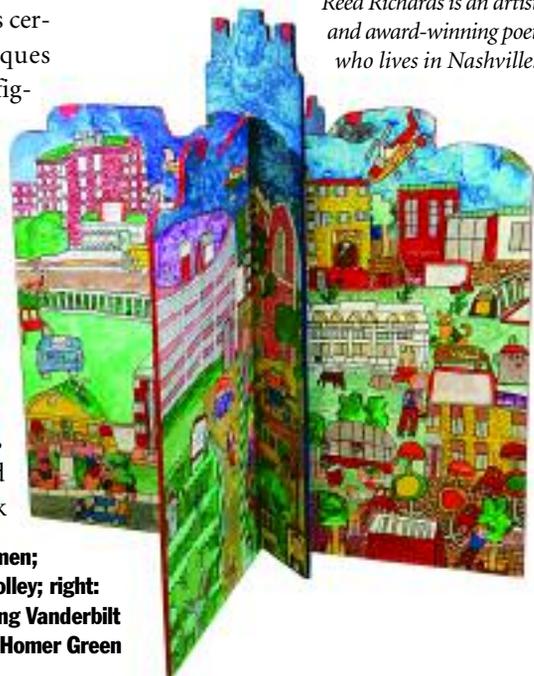
Resemblance of Robert E. Smith's hilarious piece on the second floor near the Law Library to the chaotic and colorful work of trained artist Red Grooms (who attended Peabody College in the 1950s) is hard to miss but purely accidental, although according to Prince, "Red Grooms knows Robert's work and likes Robert." It is the most complex work

Above, top: Alvin Jarrett's wooden dancing men; above: a small sandstone head by Lonnie Holley; right: a painted screen by Robert E. Smith depicting Vanderbilt life; opposite page: "Lawyer and Client" by Homer Green

in the collection. Six two-sided panels radiate from an axis. All surfaces are painted with scenes of Vanderbilt campus life. It is the only commissioned work in the collection and is based on photographs Prince shot and sent to Smith in Missouri. Smith, who is easily the most eccentric personality in this group of artists, used whatever struck his fancy from the photos and added, for his own reasons, anything that would make the campus appear the way he thought it should.

"It's the whole Robert E. Smith world superimposed on the whole Vanderbilt world," Prince says. "He's got stories with all the stuff that's going on in there. If there's nothing referring to Elvis on campus, there should be since it's Nashville, so Robert tucks an image of him into one of the corners." Buildings look made of jigsaw-puzzle pieces, people are rubbery, helicopters tumble in the sky, a bluegrass band plays, a penguin lies on its belly in the sky over the stadium, and among the many other animals are turtles, a raccoon, some fish, and a couple of spotted critters of unknown morphology. In the upper left of most panels is a blood-red sun.

The Law School's self-taught artists collection is small and doesn't get much attention from busy and preoccupied law students. Nevertheless, it contains important and entertaining work from outsider artists of significance and is worth taking a side trip or a pause between books to see.



Reed Richards is an artist and award-winning poet who lives in Nashville.