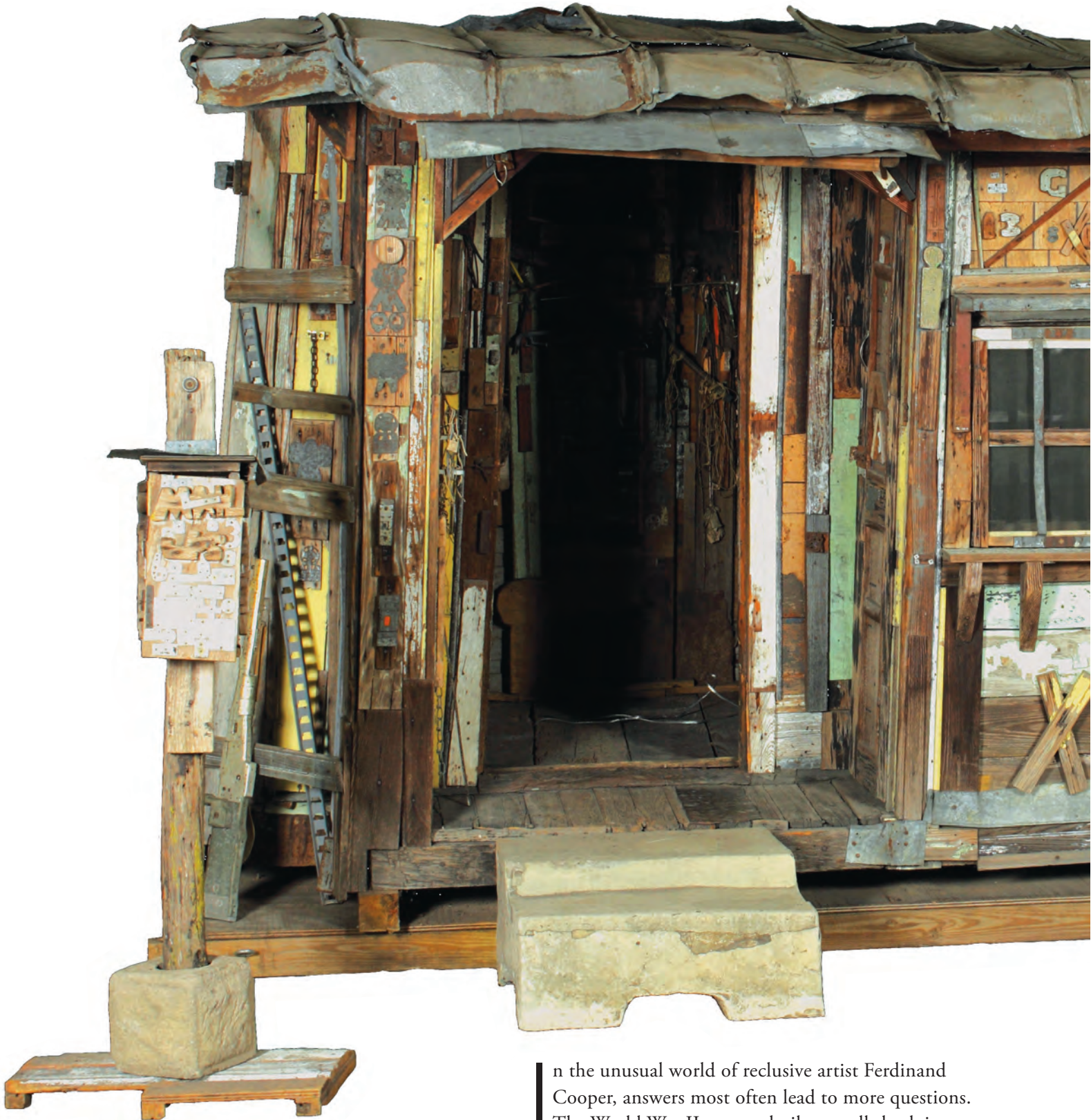


THE MAGICAL WORLD OF FERDINAND COOPER



In the unusual world of reclusive artist Ferdinand Cooper, answers most often lead to more questions. The World War II veteran built a small shack in a neighbourhood in central Florida that became his refuge from the world. He lived there by himself for

A Southern post-war recluse recreated unusable imitations of the trappings of modern life, carving wood and hammering tin into his versions of objects from the civilisation he had come to avoid

By REBECCA DIMLING COCHRAN

All works are undated (made between 1947 and 1998), mixed media
courtesy the Wieland Collection

left
Ferdinand Cooper's house
88 x 126 x 90 ins.,
223.5 x 320 x 228.6 cm
photo: mike jensen



nearly 50 years, with no electricity and no running water. The home was his sanctuary and he spent his life decorating it inside and out with carvings in wood and cut metal that provide a glimpse into the strange and wonderful world in which he existed.

Jimmy Allen, a self-proclaimed "Southern Picker", has spent the past 40 years travelling the southeastern United States finding hand-crafted

furniture, artworks and unusual antiques that he buys and resells. While researching another artist in the area, Allen discovered Cooper's house in 2000, sitting on a bare patch of dirt behind a home that once belonged to Cooper's parents. The artist was by then nearly 89 years old and living in a nursing home nearby. Since his only living relative, a sister-in-law in Jacksonville, had no interest in the house or its contents, Cooper willingly sold the work to Allen who brought it back to his home in Atlanta. He showed his discovery to Lynne Spriggs, then the curator of Folk Art at the High Museum of Art, who purchased a small chest. The house and all its remaining contents went to Atlanta collectors Sue and John Wieland.

Little is known about Cooper. Records show he was born in Sanford, Florida, in 1911. An announcement in the Colored Edition of the Sanford Chronicle indicates Cooper had a job as an insurance salesman. He was married to Ella Robinson in 1933 according to Seminole County records, but the marriage was not a success as Cooper listed his marital status on his enlistment records as "separated". He joined the army in 1943 and was trained at Fort Bragg. One of Cooper's personal documents claims he was "discharged P7e" (a medical discharge for an enlisted man), but what exactly happened to him during the war remains a mystery.

What is clear is that when Cooper returned from the army, he was not the same man. Rather than rejoin society, he chose to build a house in the back yard of his parents' home where he lived alone for the next 50-odd years. He constructed his 84-square foot house with scrap wood and added a sheet-metal roof. Two existing photographs show he made modifications to the structure, moving the location of the front door and closing in a section of the front porch to create a storage room.

Cooper made all his furniture as well. His "bed"



left
Interior view (phone)
26 x 8 x 11 ins.,
66 x 20.3 x 27.9 cm
photo: mike jensen

right, clockwise
Metal gun
33 x 4 x 2 ins.,
83.8 x 10.2 x 5.1 cm

Keys
6 x 4 x 2 ins.,
15.2 x 10.2 x 5.1 cm

Double sink on four legs
46 x 36 x 18 ins.,
116.8 x 91.4 x 45.7 cm
photo: margaret hidden



was the combination of an armchair permanently reclined at a 45-degree angle and a footstool. (Cooper told Allen that after a run-in with the Ku Klux Klan, he would never sleep lying down again.) Interestingly, these pieces are not fashioned after residential but rather commercial furniture. The chair, particularly the form of the headrest, appears to be borrowed from a barber's chair. On either side of the backrest, there are even wood pieces to emulate the lever to make it recline. The

footstool is small and plain, like those used to size or perhaps shine shoes. Cooper also built a small table and stool, a mailbox and even a fly swatter. It is difficult to imagine all this furniture fitting inside – more likely, some items were outdoors or stored in a small shed he also built.

Along with these functional items Cooper made household items he knew most homes should have, even though his lack of electricity and running water rendered



Interior view (bullets)

28 x 18 x 0.5 ins., 71.1 x 45.7 x 1.3 cm

photo: mike jensen

them useless. At one end of the house he set a double sink on four legs. Each side has a matching tap carved from wood and etched metal dials that look as if they might turn. Yet the sink is flat across the top: even if Cooper had access to water, there is nowhere for it to collect. At the other end of the room is an early twentieth-century wall-mounted phone. The carved wooden mouthpiece is attached to the wall and the earpiece, which is connected by actual cord, can be removed and replaced. Wires run from the phone up the wall and across the ceiling but, like the sink, it does not connect to anything outside. To the left of the front door is a doorbell that does not ring; the back of the house has light fixtures with no place for a bulb. There is a carved wooden thermometer, forever stuck at the same temperature, and a water meter with its gauges frozen in time. It is as if Cooper understood how the

world around him worked but he existed in it only peripherally.

Cooper used tools that he had fabricated himself to build an unbelievably rich fictional world within this environment. The numerous examples he left behind can be divided into two categories: metal-handled tools he fashioned with tips of different lengths, and wooden-handled tools with metal wire tips no larger than a pin point. These could be used alone or with the help of a hammer to etch designs into the wood or metal, not unlike how a metalsmith would chase silver or pewter.

It was a tedious and labour intensive way to work but that seemed to suit Cooper. Looking at a



notebook he left behind, it was easy to see that he favoured repetitive work. Many pages contained the names of individuals followed by a city and state. The locations range from Oregon to Pennsylvania, leading one to believe these were copied from a list, perhaps of fellow servicemen from the army? Interspersed amongst these were random but carefully-written words he most likely encountered in daily life: Goodyear, Singer Sewing Machine or Bible passages such as Acts 6:9, Romans 12:6 or Isaiah 6:18–19. A large number of pages were filled with sequential multi-digit numbers. Did writing these out slowly one at a time help calm his mind? Is that what the rhythmic tapping of his tools into his materials did as well?

Whatever the reason, meticulously creating these objects was Cooper's passion and, as Allen suggests, "His life's work". After the war, Cooper never

above, clockwise from left
Detail of mail box, 55 x 8 x 12 ins., 139.7 x 20.3 x 30.5 cm, photo: mike jensen
Ferdinand Cooper outside his house, c. 1980
Artist's tools, photo: margaret hidden

held another job. Rather he spent his time realising his unique vision of the world. He nailed his carved and cut metal objects on every surface of his furniture and home, creating a wonderland both inside and out.

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