

Lund's Scenic Garden, Found and Lost

In the summer of 1990, I was on a road trip, traveling in the American Midwest with a friend, when we stopped to take a look inside a former granary-turned antiques shop in Beulah, Michigan. My friend thought he might find some old tools for his father or maybe one of the early 20th century panoramic photographs he liked to collect. Just a quick look around, he said. You never know.

The mid-day sun had been white-hot, and I blinked when I got inside the converted storehouse. As soon as my eyes adjusted to the low light, I saw them: the row of saints and wise men. I felt a little electric start of recognition, pierced immediately with sadness and alarm. I knew at once the painted fiberboard figures before me were from Lund's Scenic Garden, a grassroots art site that writers Jane and Michael Stern had once compared to "a Rousseau painting, but with a religious theme." Looking at the Garden's staggered stage sets at night, the Sterns had written, was like peering into "an ornate Easter egg."

This was my first trip to Michigan and I had never visited the Garden, but I had seen the site in documentary photographs, reproduced in a catalog of 20th century Michigan folk art. Why weren't the dozen, life-size figures lining the loft of the granary where they had been since the 1940s, where they *should* be—interspersed with hundreds of others among painted cut-out animals and trees and rocks and angels, set into a marsh and woodland tract miles to the north, in Maple City?

I asked the shop owner about them. Yes, he said, they were from the Garden. He had helped to disassemble it in November of 1987. No one could keep it up any more. Orpha Lund, one of the artist-evangelists who had created the Garden, had died in the 1960s, but what, I asked, had happened to her husband? The owner said that E.K. Lund was in his late eighties and was losing his sight. One of his daughters had been helping to keep

up the place, but now it was too much for her, too. The shop owner had been called in to take apart the Garden's thirty-six scenes, and to haul away over 300 cutout figures. "Those are all that's left," he said, gesturing to the twelve in the loft. The others, he said, were gone.

I was traveling in a small rental car and wasn't a collector of anything, never mind pieces of a ruined art environment. Nevertheless, I bought a figure of a woman carrying a water jug for twenty dollars and angled it inside the compact car with the intention of showing it to a representative from the Museum of American Folk Art when I returned to the east coast. Perhaps they would purchase the remaining figures for their collection.

As I was leaving, the shop owner handed me the top half of another Garden figure, a turbaned wise man. It had broken in two after falling off his truck, he said, and he didn't know where the rest was. He was throwing it in as an extra. I put it in the car next to the water carrier and told him about contacting the Museum when I got home. "I might have some pictures and a booklet about the place," he added. "I'll send those to you if I can find them."

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I wrote to the Museum when I got home and waited for a reply. In the meantime, the antiques shop owner, Colonel Archy Rogers, mailed me an undated booklet written by Rev. Orpha Lund, *A History of Lund's Scenic Garden, Maple City, Michigan*. With this firsthand account of the Garden's origins, the Stern's *Amazing America*, and C. Kurt Dewhurst and Marsha MacDowell's *Rainbows in the Sky: The Folk Art of Michigan in the Twentieth Century*, I set out to write a brief text about the Garden, in case the Museum should decide to buy the remaining works of art from Colonel Rogers.

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The way Orpha Lund told it, in 1938, she and E.K. (Earl Kline) were painting scenery for church plays when the idea came to them: create a series of scenes portraying the life of Jesus and place them in a permanent outdoor setting. “We give the Lord credit for giving us this impression,” Orpha remarked, adding that she and her husband had pictured the woodland-based biblical scenes linked by a “comfortable trail,” to encourage contemplation of art, nature, and “the greatest story ever told.”

The two felt certain they could fulfill this vision. E.K., the primary draftsman, had learned sign painting in California and had easily applied those skills to church murals and stage sets; Orpha had painted alongside her husband, adding color to his sketched figures. Yet in their travels throughout the Midwest (conducting revival campaigns for various churches at night and vacation Bible schools during the day) the Lunds had had trouble finding a site suitable for their Garden, and they lacked a predictable source of income to guarantee savings for such a parcel. In their evangelism, they had always relied on free will offerings.

Undeterred, the couple continued over six years to prepare for their project. They painted figures on fiberboard and stored them for the day when they could acquire some woodland property. In the meantime they lived in their house trailer, traveling with their own tent and equipment to different churches.

In 1944, the Lunds were invited to Traverse City, Michigan, to conduct revival meetings for a local church. A pair of congregants had heard of their garden idea and offered to show them some land they owned about twenty miles away, in Maple City. The dense woodland and marsh the Lunds viewed from the window of the couple’s car seemed wild and unpromising at first, but “the very moment we stepped on the ground,” Orpha later recalled, “it seemed the Lord, looking down from heaven, said: “This is it.”” When the Lunds

told the property owners they could not afford the asking price for the sixteen-acre parcel, the couple gave it to them.

That transfer of property initiated four years of intense and difficult labor for the Lunds, who mostly worked alone on the project, and who were not young when they began. E.K. was 45 (born Anoka, Minnesota, 1899) and Orpha, who had battled blindness and a heart attack a year earlier, was nine years his senior (born Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, 1890.) Four summers were dedicated to ground clearing and bringing in fill, burning brush, felling trees with axes, grubbing stumps and building trails. In cold-weather months, the two painted and constructed twenty-eight stage-like scenes “from the Annunciation to the Ascension.” (They continued to add scenes after the opening, eventually settling on thirty-six.)

During this period Orpha Lund also joined her husband as a minister in the United Brethren of Church. He had been ordained in 1940. Although the Lunds were proud of their affiliation, Orpha made clear in the booklet she wrote that the Garden was their “own project” and “undenominational.”

While the Lunds’ project was in the final stages of construction, a reporter from the *Traverse City Record Eagle* came by. His illustrated feature ensured a large local turnout when the Scenic Garden officially opened on August 15, 1948. In keeping with their beliefs, no admission was charged, but free will offerings were accepted. The Garden was open daily, 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., from Memorial Day through the first of October.

The Lunds conducted tours during the day and evening. Visitors followed them over a meandering, 1,400-foot sawdust-covered trail (the sawdust was donated by a local mill) to view the artist-evangelists’ “painted story of faith” among stands of old hemlocks and along small streams. Each scene, the Sterns would later note, looked “like a stage-set, flatly two-

dimensional, depth being created by placing one flat in front of another.” Rather than viewing the lush woods behind and around each scene as mere background, the Lunds believed that nature, too was to be appreciated as a “creation of God.” In her booklet, Orpha Lund explained: “The Garden answers a three-fold purpose. There are many who enjoy it, perhaps, just for the comfortable walk through the woods, to enjoy nature. Others enjoy the artwork. [...] Then, thank the Lord, there are many who enjoy it for the story it tells, because the love the Lord.”

Although she noted “the trouble with many people is they think God only meets them in church,” Orpha also recalled meeting others who said that visiting the Garden had encouraged them to go to services and to send their children to Sunday school.

Eleven thousand people visited the Garden during the 1951 season. With such numbers, daytime tours became self-guided. But lectures continued to be offered during night tours, when scenes of brightly robed figures and pale-winged angels, highlighted by electric lights, seem to come forward out of the lush, green-black woods. The Lunds built a little gift shop and sold postcards, paintings by E.K., and a recording of the guided night tour.

Each year the number of visitors increased, with as many as 20,000 people from across the United States and from other countries walking the woodland trail in one summer. “To the best of our knowledge, it is the only Garden of its kind in the world,” wrote Orpha. “Most art is carefully guarded in a building, while, for the most part, this is a setting right out in the open woods, under the trees.”

Orpha Lund died in 1965, but E.K. continued to keep up the Garden, opening every day during the summer with the help of family members, friends, and visiting seminarians. New generations, the authors of *Rainbows in the Sky* noted in 1978, were drawn to the site as

“a popular cultural attraction, much to the surprise of the artist.” Nevertheless, the Garden and its surviving artist-evangelist were perhaps too modest, too gentle, too non-commercial to become the darlings of folk art enthusiasts. There are few references to the Garden or to the Lunds in contemporary folk art literature.

Lund’s Scenic Garden continued much as it had for decades until 1980, when its lighting equipment failed. E.K. Lund decided the expense of rewiring the display was simply too great. Evening hours were halted. With his eyesight growing dim, the artist’s daughter, Kathryn Thornberry, began to retouch some of the faded paint on the thirty-six biblical scenes and signs.

In this way, the original idea of E.K. and Orpha Lund remained intact, with the same hours, the same free-will offering, the same walk through the woods, until 1987. That November the property was sold, and, as antiques shop owner Archy Rogers recalled, “Lund’s Scenic Garden was all torn down.”

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The water-carrier and the bust of the turbaned wise man were propped up in a corner of my apartment for a long while. The Museum of American Folk Art was slow to respond, and eventually told me they didn’t want to pursue acquisition of the remaining pieces of Lund’s Scenic Garden. Another year passed while they considered, then accepted as a donation, the two figures I’d acquired in Beulah, the pieces I had never wanted to own.

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About a year after I met him, Archy Rogers sent me a letter offering for sale a few slides of Lund’s Scenic Garden, which he said he’d acquired from E.K. Lund. I don’t know

who made these images, but I'm grateful to the photographer, not only for producing this small record of a now-vanished art environment, but also because I've found in viewing them a sense of what it might have been like to walk through the Garden, especially at night. They are the only color images of the site I've ever seen.

Looking at these slides, I thought of geographer J.B. Jackson's essay, "The Sacred Grove in America," in which he describes woodland clearings that became the sites of revival meetings in 19th century rural America. These were places that were made holy *by their use*, as opposed to the holy places of antiquity, when a sanctuary was erected on a site because "the holiness belonged to the site itself." Of course, Lund's Scenic Garden had tied to the traditions of roadside signage and roadside attractions, too; E.K. Lund applied his sign painting skills to present spiritual messages, to teach, to inspire, and to make tangible the mysteries of faith.

If the Lunds had created a holy place with their installation, would a museum gallery with its reassembled figures also become a spiritual space? I remembered that visitors prayed and held services in the Smithsonian Institution art gallery that hosts James Hampton's magnificent, foil-wrapped construction, *Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly*.

But the slides of the Garden made me doubt this notion, for it seemed the power of the Lunds' creation came from recognition of both the primacy of place (in antiquity) and the primacy of use (in Christendom.) For visitors coursing the Garden's sawdust path and footbridges through dense woods and over marshland would come upon a clearing for each biblical scene, finding the artificial placed within and juxtaposed with nature. They would find in groves sheltered by towering hemlocks groups of static, robed figures, with sweet, flatly rendered faces; stage sets adoringly painted with leaves, each separate and perfect.

Grounding, didactic, hand-painted biblical invocations were installed at every scene, but one can imagine the vertiginous feeling of also coming upon pastel-colored angels suspended in mid-air.

Lund's Scenic Garden, open to the public for 42 years, a kind of sacred grove for travelers, a place of refreshment, is gone. E.K. Lund died in 1999, at the age of 100. But I was moved while viewing his slides again, to build this small stage so the Garden he and Orpha created might be seen and considered once more. We may imagine and mourn the loss of a woodland walk that can bring us to the outlined wings of masonite angels, to ever-attentive painted deer with ears turned to hear the story of Jesus, to painted fields of lilies illuminated in the dark. We may imagine all this, reflected as it once was in the little streams that trembled when a sudden breeze moved through the woods beyond the painted world.

Sources

Dewhurst, C. Kurt and Marsha MacDowell. *Rainbows in the Sky: The Folk Art of Michigan in the Twentieth Century*. (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 1978.) The description of the Garden as a "painted story of faith" comes from this source.

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