

OHIO ARTS COUNCIL'S

RIFFE GALLERY



APRIL 26<sup>th</sup>  
JULY 8, 2001

MADE BY LOVING

HANDS

AMISH CHILDREN'S  
CLOTHING, TOYS AND QUILTS

FROM THE THOMAS AND MARSHA FRENCH COLLECTION

## ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

At a time when people seek to rediscover the value of family and community within the context of contemporary life, it is helpful to examine the ways of the Amish as they strive to protect a simple way of living. This exhibition helps us to understand Amish children as they explore a world free of technology but full of color, free of material wealth but full of imagination; a world defined by the strict discipline of faith tempered by love. Organized by The Kent State University Museum, this exhibition features Amish objects from the Thomas and Marsha French Collection.

## WHO ARE THE AMISH?

In the 16TH century, after Martin Luther initiated the Protestant Reformation, some members supporting church reform in Zurich, Switzerland, became impatient with the slow progress of change. Called Anabaptists, or “re-baptizers” because they re-baptized their members as adults, the group was harshly persecuted and sought refuge in Moravia, Alsace, the Palatinate, the Netherlands, and North America. The Anabaptists believed in a radical obedience to the teachings of Jesus Christ; the church as a group of believers accountable to one another and separate from the world; and an ethic of love that rejected violence in all spheres of human interaction. In 1693, Jacob Ammann, an Anabaptist leader in Alsace, advocated different religious practices. He called for communion twice a year instead of once, for foot washing to be part of the communion ritual and for excommunicated members to be shunned.

Those supporting Ammann withdrew from the Anabaptist Mennonite group and formed their own community known as the Amish.

## THE AMISH AND THE LANGUAGE OF THEIR DRESS

It is the clothing of the Amish that speaks most forcefully of their separateness from mainstream Western urban culture. Amish clothing symbolizes a commitment to the belief that God’s people should be distinctly separate from the surrounding world and that discipleship encompasses every area of life, including dress.

Most Amish clothing is made at home, from patterns approved by the group, of plain fabrics and natural fibers, now often blended with synthetics. The Amish color palette includes shades of purple, blue, wine, brown and gray. Red is used with caution; pink, yellow and orange are rare. Most groups advocate quiet, subdued colors as more in keeping with modest clothing and humble demeanor but interpretations vary. The colorful stockings in the exhibition would rarely be seen beneath long skirts and high-topped shoes, but they indicate that other colors are used in private circumstances. Traditional Amish quilts made of dress scraps can give some idea of the variety of colors available.

Many aspects of Amish dress have meaning. Little girls wear pinafore aprons and their hair in braids, but by seven or eight they wear their hair in a bun, a cape over their shoulders and gathered half aprons that pin in the back. Females wear

a head covering (kapp) of white organdy or sheer cotton, however, from age thirteen until marriage most girls wear a black kapp to church services.

There is no decoration on the clothing. Jewelry, including wedding bands, is not worn. Buttons are used for children, and some work clothes, but the majority of adult clothing uses hooks and eyes or straight pins.

## AMISH CHILDREN AND WORK

Living in large, extended families, children observe work in the home and on the farm. By the time they are able to walk, they have some participation in the chores of daily life. They are taught to despise sloth and enjoy the hard, practical, hands-on work that contributes to the welfare of the family and community. Work is determined by sex roles, and children learn which tasks are appropriate for them by observing their parents and siblings. It is not unusual for a boy under

ten to drive a team of horses in the field. Girls learn to keep house, help with younger children, sew, cook, quilt, garden and do farm chores.

## AMISH CHILDREN AND PLAY

Although work predominates in Amish life, the activities of the extended family and community bring many opportunities for children to play together. Visiting is an important part of life, with friends and neighbors coming together for relaxed evenings that include good food and song. Amish children are given presents of games, toys and dolls on special occasions such as birthdays and Christmas. They enjoy swimming and ball games in the summer and sledding and skating in the winter. Parents read familiar nursery rhymes and Bible stories to children, and repeat family oral history.

## AMISH CHILDREN AND SCHOOL

Prior to 1960, Amish children attended the same rural one-room schools as the majority of American farm children. The academic calendar was based on the fact that farm children needed to help with planting and harvesting. The Amish enrolled their children in public schools, but school attendance beyond the elementary years was not considered desirable or necessary for the agrarian Amish life. Most farm children attended school only four months out of the year, but as the movement to eliminate one-room schools gained momentum, legislation required a longer school year and more years of



compulsory education. The Amish found this a direct threat to their way of life. It was not until the Supreme Court decision of 1972 that the controversy surrounding the Amish and compulsory education was resolved by allowing the Amish to create their own school system. Today, Amish children attend one-room schools without electricity, are taught by Amish teachers and learn from books published by the Amish.

## AMISH CHILDREN AND WORSHIP

At six weeks of age, children are brought to worship services for the first time. Services are held every other Sunday at the home of a member. Worship lasts from 7:30 a.m. until noon, followed by a meal and informal visiting. There might be thirty families or more in one congregation, and as many as 250 people present. Benches and folding chairs used by the congregation are brought to the home on a special wagon. Children attend the church services seated on backless benches according to age and sex. Attending services helps children develop patience, obedience, humility and a sense of unity. Of all aspects of Amish life, the worship services have changed the least in more than three centuries of practice.

*From an essay by Jean L. Druesedow,  
Director of The Kent State University  
Museum*

ORGANIZED BY THE KENT  
STATE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM

JEAN L. DROESEDOW, CURATOR

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