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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Julia S. Ardery. *The Temptation: Edgar Tolson and the Genesis of Twentieth Century Art.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. x + 353 pp. $27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4700-8; $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2397-2.

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Published on H-Appalachia (December, 1998)

Depending upon who one interviewed, Kentucky folk artist Edgar Tolson was a god, a wastrel, a genius, a derivative craftsman, a canny self-promoter, an impoverished drunk, or the last of the true mountain craftsmen. Out of such contradictory appraisals, Edgar Tolson fashioned a public persona that capitalized upon all those vagaries. As Ardery notes, "Tolson also molded a personal mythology" to captivate and intrigue those who visited Wolfe County, Kentucky and admire his art. Perhaps less well known than folk artist Howard Finster, Tolson shares an aesthetic with him. Both come from evangelical traditions that eschew ornamentation within the church sanctuary, yet their religious impulse propels them to express their faith artistically. Like Finster, Tolson was a lay preacher for a time, but consistently expressed Christian themes in his work.

Tolson led a checquered life. He abandoned his first wife and children for another woman, which led to his incarceration for a year. His drinking binges combined with his weak health (he suffered from a cornucopia of ailments) eventually killed him. The father of twenty-two children, his skills at parenting were repugnant. Yet this enigmatic, toothless man in striped pants possessed a real talent that superseded the more unsavory elements in his life. He relished the celebrity created around him, but squandered it on booze and women.

The folk arts movement emerged in the tumult of the 1960s and Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society." Young, idealistic college students flocked to the newly recognized third world at home, Appalachia, joining VISTA, the Appalachia Volunteers, and a number of other programs intended to improve the lives of benighted mountaineers. They came with an agenda and their own twisted perspectives of the region. For many, the journey to the mountains of Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia was a self-fulfilling prophecy, and they soon grew disillusioned. Others, however, found a way to market the mountains as a means of self-sufficiency. Those like members of the Grass Roots movement, who marketed Appalachian quilts, cane bottom chairs, and the primitive carvings of Edgar Tolson, exposed this so-called "outsider art" to a broader world. The appreciation of the AVs and VISTA workers piqued the interest of academics from a variety of disciplines–art, art history, sociology, folk lore studies, and anthropology–which validated this work as worthy of attention.

What Julia Ardery does quite well in this engrossing study is her examination of the nexus between the artist, the so-called arbiters of art, and the consumer. Edgar Tolson became what the arbiters/consumers wanted. Though his objet d'arts initially came to the attention of friends and acquaintances as he recovered from a stroke, he whittled pieces and gave them away as tokens of appreciation. Tolson's "discovery" by the Grass Roots developers, the VISTA workers and AVs threw his work into a larger arena. Though the Grass Roots movement failed, Tolson's work remained popular. His art was championed by Michael and Julie Hall who brought him to the attention of Herbert Hemphill. It was Hemphill who suggested that Tolson carve a version of the Adam and Eve story which became a staple piece in Tolson's repertoire. Through the Halls, Hemphill and others Tolson's work changed to meet the expectations of collectors and critics.

The book could just as easily have been titled *The Creation of Edgar Tolson*, for Tolson is just as much a creation as any of the pieces he carved. The artist emerged from the coaxing, cajoling, and suggestions of academics, collectors, and critics. Tolson responded to their suggestions and created a persona of the artist-rake as hillbilly. Ardery's discussion of the politics of folk art should inspire further discussion. Her interviews with several of the participants involved in the creation of the movement represent the contradictions inherent in legitimizing art. Who determines the distinction between art and craft and why? Tolson's work is regarded by those involved as

original art rather than craft due to originality of interpretation of subject matter, but is that enough?

Julia Ardery's compelling book is copiously illustrated with examples of Tolson's prodigious output and photographs of those who discovered him and brought him to national prominence. The book tends to be repetitious at times, recounting people and events with which one is already familiar. This volume should appeal to scholars from a number of disciplines and provoke some spirited discussion.

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Citation: Michael E. Birdwell. Review of Ardery, Julia S., *The Temptation: Edgar Tolson and the Genesis of Twentieth Century Art.* H-Appalachia, H-Net Reviews. December, 1998.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2584

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