



Article: Conservation of Howard Finster's eccentric *Bible House*

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CONSERVATION OF HOWARD FINSTER'S ECCENTRIC BIBLE HOUSE

Anton Rajer

The Bible House (Figure 1) is one of the Reverend Howard Finster's pivotal works of art, created circa 1976-77 as a juncture between his ambition to "collect one of everything in the world" and his calling as a full-time artist. The artifact is a large-scale assemblage - 16 ft. wide by 8 ft. deep by 12 ft. high - composed of discrete elements including found objects, tools, hand-painted signs, gifts, paintings, newspaper and photo collages, as well as a plethora of mirrors and furnishings, all enhanced with Biblical text, that make it a unique example of modern religious architecture. It is a chapel without an altar, a simple vernacular structure transformed by Reverend Finster into a powerful religious statement.

Reverend Howard Finster

Born in Valley Head, Alabama, in 1916, Howard Finster grew up with little education. At the age of sixteen, he became an Evangelical Baptist preacher, and through the years he has pastored at least ten churches. Married to wife Pauline for over sixty years, he has five children and many grandchildren.

What later became known as Paradise Garden sprang from Reverend Finster's hobbies as collector and handyman. Without a specific or long-range purpose, he began collecting pieces of popular culture and repairing bicycles and lawnmowers. Around 1965 he opened his sizable display to the public. Shortly thereafter he began to embellish the Garden with his own unique pieces of assemblage art, hand-painted Biblical texts and architectural environments. Finster, who calls himself "a man of vision", has repeatedly had visions from God, many of which instructed him to build the Garden.

In a vision in 1975, the Lord told Reverend Finster to make sacred art. This vision took place while Howard was painting a bicycle. He saw a tiny painted face on his finger and felt the presence of God, who spoke to him: "Howard, make sacred art to help people with salvation and heaven". Shortly after, he began to transform a simple wooden structure in the Garden into the Bible House. Today it stands as one of the finest examples of Finster's creative genius.

Reverend Finster is not only an active artist, but also an author and musician. His vita is filled with numerous honors, awards and popular recognition, including the album cover he produced for the rock band Talking Heads, all of which show indisputably that Finster is one of this century's most prolific and well-known folk artists. To date he has created more than 39,000 works of art, but his earliest and most important is the Bible House.

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Conservation Treatment

Early in 1995 the Bible House was transported from Paradise Garden in Summerville, Georgia, to Atlanta, where it was placed indoors for preservation. Due to swamp-like conditions at Paradise Garden, as well as constant exposure to the elements, the exterior of the house was severely deteriorated (Figure 2). A conservation project was designed to fumigate, clean and stabilize the structure. A wheeled wooden base, painted black, was attached to the underside of the Bible House for structural support. The conservation staff then thoroughly vacuumed each surface and repaired broken eaves with hide glue (Figure 3). The mirrors, furnishings and glass surfaces were cleaned many times with cotton swabs and a 3% solution of Orvus and water. Metal surfaces, like the canteen and iron wrench shown in Figure 4, were cleaned with alcohol. All painted surfaces were stabilized with an application of BEVA D-8 to retard flaking. In addition, insect infestations, dirt and pine needles were removed from the interior and exterior of the structure.

A concerted effort was made to include curatorial input and consultation with Reverend Finster on his house. The glass mirrors (over 45 in number) were cleaned and placed as closely as possible to their original position in the house (Figure 5). Throughout the entire process the aged and weathered appearance of the house was maintained as an integral part of the aesthetic associated with folk art. In addition to standard written documentation, the house was photographed at every stage in the conservation process.

Related Aspects of the Client and Conservator Relationship

The conservation of the Bible House benefitted from flexible, proactive relations between client and conservator. A smooth working relationship was established through frequent meetings, to keep all parties informed. The conservator empowered his staff to do their best and ask frequent questions. Above all, a sense of humor was maintained - along with the personal element of prayer - to manage the respectful and thorough conservation of the Bible House.

Summary

The Bible House is now on permanent display at John Wieland Homes. In their continuing commitment to acquire significant works of art that relate to architecture, Mr. and Mrs. John Wieland procured the Bible House in order to save it for posterity and to assure that future generations will be able to enjoy this unique example of the marriage of art and architecture popularized by Finster's folk art.

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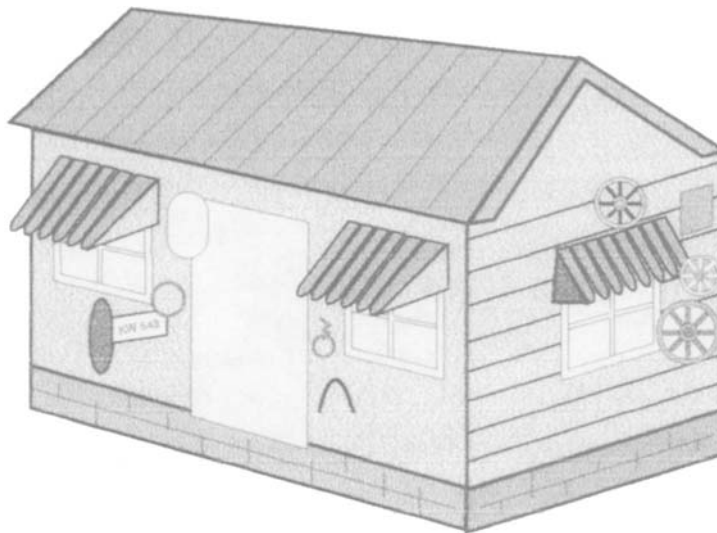


Figure 1. Howard Finster's *Bible House*.

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Figure 2. Exterior, showing deterioration of surface.



Figure 3. Detail of exterior: vacuumed and repaired.



Figure 5. Interior, showing mirrors.

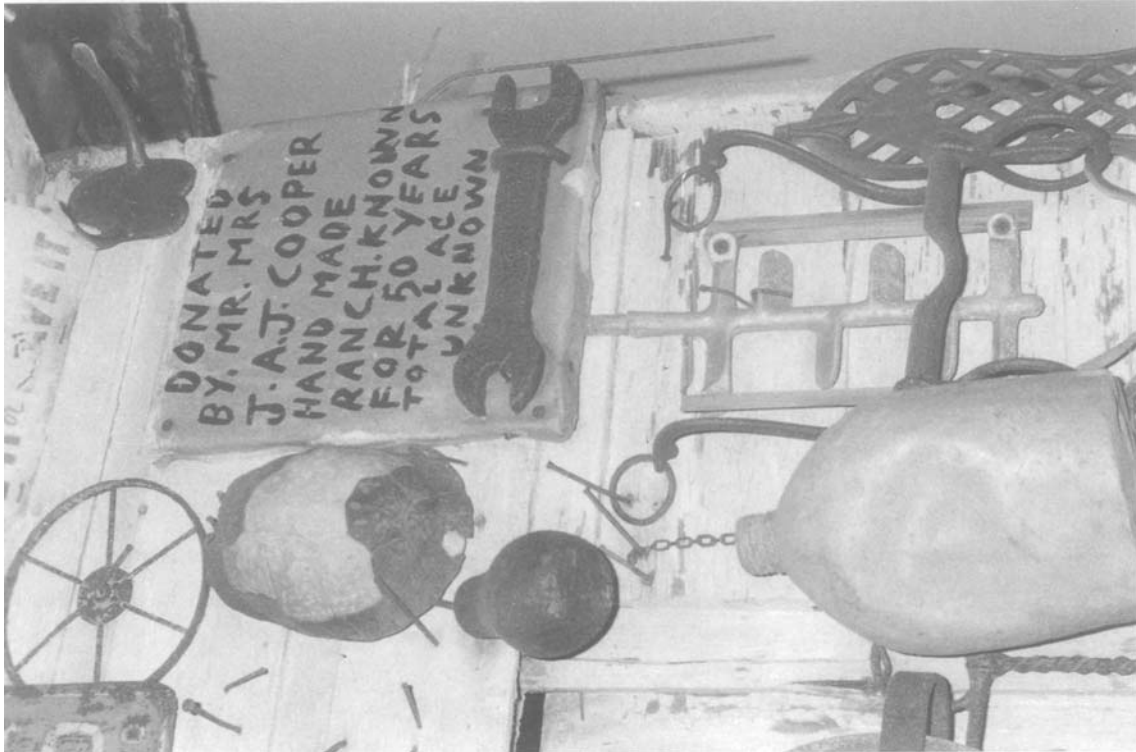


Figure 4. Detail of interior, with metal canteen and iron wrench.