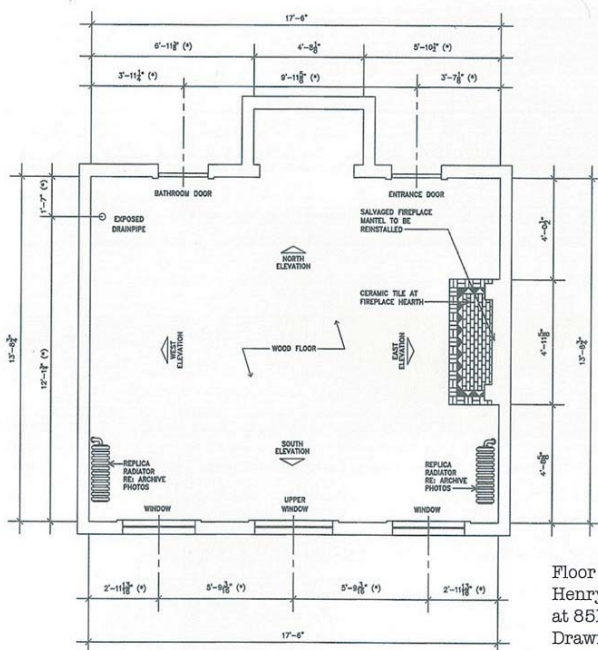


From 851 West Webster to Intuit

Preserving a place for Henry Darger studies in Chicago

In 1999, when it became apparent that the second floor room at 851 West Webster St., where Henry Darger lived from 1932 to 1972 was to be demolished, Intuit committed to saving as many artifacts as possible, to eventually create a place to honor Darger's extraordinary artistic legacy in the city where he lived and worked. In 2000 Intuit acquired much of the room's contents through a gift from Kiyoko Lerner, owner of the building and Darger's landlord (with Nathan Lerner, 1913-1997). Intuit had to act quickly to pack and move the contents of the room. The cast iron firebox with its glazed tile surround and oak mantel, the chandelier, fragments of the original wallpaper, Darger's worn furniture, and numerous other artifacts from Darger's rich, condensed life in the room were carefully inventoried, packed, and moved by Intuit's devoted cadre of volunteers. Once safely in storage, the project to create a complete collection catalog and database was undertaken¹, and Intuit began working through the issues of preserving and exhibiting the collection, while determining a location for a permanent room for the "Henry Darger Room Collection." Through two "dress rehearsal" installations of objects and architectural features in Intuit group shows² the curators worked through many of the physical and conceptual challenges of preparing fragile artifacts from an artist's studio for exhibit.

Intuit knew from the start that this would not be a project to replicate the original room, but rather, to evoke the intimate scale and dense setting of Darger's combined home and studio, through the use of authentic artifacts in a space imitative of the room's original feeling and features. The earliest photo-documentation of the room was made after Lerner and David Berglund (an art student and tenant at 851 W. Webster St.), discarded a large measure of the room's contents, primarily Darger's copious collections--piles of shoes, hundreds of eyeglasses, and other things generally described as "detritus". After they unearthed Darger's art they stopped clearing things out, however, many things were rearranged.



Floor plan of
Henry Darger's room
at 851 West Webster St.
Drawing: Larry Harris

1. The collection catalog was created by Juliana Driever and Jessica Moss, who both received Roads Scholarship for Research and Travel grants, awarded in the Integrated Visions: 20th Century Art Environments art history class at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, taught by Jim Zanzi and Lisa Stone.

2. Studies and Sketches from the **Henry Darger Collection at the American Folk Art Museum**, March 14 - June, 2003; **Genesis: Gifts and Promised Gifts from the Permanent Collection** September 10 - December 30, 2004

From 851 West Webster to Intuit

Although the room was not photographed intact as Darger left it, the creation of the "Henry Darger Room Collection" was guided in part by David Berglund's description of it:

"The feeling you got when you went into the room was that the clutter was overwhelming! It wasn't anything you would expect... there was a tremendous amount of stuff. Things were layered. Newspapers and magazines piled in bundles up to the ceiling. If there was one pair of glasses there must have been two hundred. Rubber bands, boxes of rubber bands. Shoes, lots of shoes. But you went into the room and it was organized. There was this path through the room. It lead from the door, to the desk, to the bed, and around in back. Everything was just piled and piled and and piled. The table was cluttered to a depth of two to three feet, except for a working area. He had all these drawings and pictures across the top... That was the feeling that you had, just the tremendous amount of time and energy that had been poured into that room.³"

Henry Darger's room reflected the living space of an ordinary man, if by "ordinary" we mean someone who was born and remained on a low economic tier, who worked at menial jobs, and lived in modest quarters. But Darger was not ordinary, in the sense of countless people who are satisfied to be superficially entertained, who accept the status quo, who ignore aspects of life that are intense and difficult, without clear answers, and who accept power structures without question. As lived in by Henry Darger, the original room reflected the creative life of an extraordinary artist who explored the human condition in mythological proportions, creating searing representations of the universal experiences of good versus evil and innocence versus the uncontrollable forces of the adult world. Intuit's installation is intended to shed light on Darger's artistic process through the contents and context of his studio. This glimpse into his working process is not intended to explain away or demystify his work (or to fetishize his belongings), but rather to amplify the reality of its creation, "the tremendous amount of time and energy that had been poured into that room...", the tangible link between his epic "Realms of the Unreal," and real life.

Preserving artists' studios: research and models

Working through the issues of reinstalling a room that could not be preserved in situ, or to its original floor plan, the curators studied historic rooms recreated in new locations, such as Marianne Moore's Greenwich Village living room, relocated and recreated relocated and recreated in the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia, and Frank Lloyd Wright's living room from the Francis W. Little house, relocated and recreated in the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The installations of these and many other preserved or period rooms strictly adhere to house museum conventions. Artifacts are meticulously prepared, and in becoming conjoined to their new lives in the museum, they often become critically disconnected from their former roles as objects from lived-in spaces. Doorways to rooms are fitted with barriers, affording visitors the detached experience of peering into rooms from the outside, further emphasizing the disconnect that occurs in the transformation from the home to the museum environment. Wishing to avoid this, the curators looked to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York as a model for preserving the authentic patina of time and use, rather than sanitizing artifacts for a museum setting.

3. Quote from John MacGregor interview with David Berglund, John MacGregor, *Henry Darger In the Realms of the Unreal*, New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002, p. 79.

From 851 West Webster to Intuit

Interest has been growing among contemporary curators and art historians, in exploring artists' creative processes and their studios as extensions of creativity-- rather than places where creativity just happens to occur--in order to amplify the understanding of their works. In 2000 The National Trust for Historic Preservation established the Historic Artists' Homes and Studios (HAHS) program, to encourage professional development and peer collaboration among a consortium of sites that preserve places where important American art was created. Adhering to a fundamental tenet of historic preservation, that a site loses an essential measure of its integrity if it's divorced from its original location, HAHS sites all preserve artist's studios in situ.

Intuit's challenge was to find successful examples of studios that could not be preserved in their original locations, and to be an innovator in the genre--to create a deeply evocative space to ponder and connect with the art of Henry Darger, and a springboard to experiencing its artistic and intellectual dimensions. The John Michael Kohler Arts Center's relocation and installation of Loy Bolin's Beautiful Holy Jewel Home, from Macomb, Mississippi to the Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, preserves this remarkable adorned interior space while offering visitors an intimate, "at home in the museum" experience. Another notable example was found in the project to move Francis Bacon's studio, which was deconstructed from its original location in London using archaeological methods, and reinstalled at the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery in Dublin. The rationale for the Herculean effort of moving Bacon's studio was thus articulated: "For some of those close to Bacon in his lifetime, the studio was an heroic statement, a work of art in its own right, created over many years to distill and give form to his aesthetic intentions."⁴ Both Bacon's and Darger's studios were dense and chaotic manifestations of their artistic processes; the reconstitutions of their studios provide tangible links to the gestation of highly original and significant bodies of art, despite their dislocation from their original architectural, geographic, social, cultural, and otherwise real world contexts.

Documentation and research

The original room (17'6" x 13'9" x 9'8") was carefully documented in photographs. Measured drawings, which are thought to be the truest record of an architectural space, were made of the plan and two elevations. The "Henry Darger Room Collection" is installed in a 10'6" x 11'3" x 8' space, purpose-built for the collection, but condensed in floor plan and height. The installation focuses on the east elevation of the original room as it appears in a photograph by Nathan Lerner, circa 1973-4. With the fireplace mantel-symbol of hearth and home, and Darger's Vivian Girl portraits--his muses, this is the single area of the room we believe had the most integrity to Darger's time there. To create the feeling of a cohesive room rather than artifacts installed in a museum setting, salvaged hardwood flooring, baseboard, and crown molding were installed, similar in size and design to those in the original room. (During Darger's tenancy the floor was covered with carpet over linoleum, but the room was not photographed before both floor coverings were removed.) The fireplace mantel, inlaid tile surround, and firebox were installed in the new room, and the chandelier hangs over Darger's dining room/studio table. Determining an appropriate wall covering presented a challenge, as the wallpaper in the original room was unevenly stained with years of coal soot; in some areas the pattern was visible, and on the east elevation, the wallpaper was darkened overall. Since the project was not an exact recreation of Darger's original room, we rejected the idea of artificially darkening new wallpaper, even if a close match to the original could be found (searches were fruitless), or creating (at great expense) a run of reproduction wallpaper. Rather than fake elements of the room that could not be salvaged, we focused on the authentic artifacts. The room was painted by an artist who mixed a dusky blend of paint, based on the colors and patina of the original soot covered, patterned paper.

4. John Edwards, *7 Reece Mews Francis Bacon's Studio*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001.

From 851 West Webster to Intuit

Conservation and preparation

The room is filled with most of Darger's furniture, art supplies, and remaining collections, in an arrangement guided by the narrated description of the room: amid piles and layers of clutter, it was curiously ordered. A representative selection of scrapbooks filled with comic strips, magazines, and other paper objects--some bound by Darger, and others loose--were treated for mildew and arranged in stacks, in the manner, but not in the exact locations that they had been piled in the original room.

Darger's copious art supplies are arranged on his work table, en masse, to present the range of materials he collected and used, in the way he presumably lived and worked with them, rather than in an ordered, museum-like exhibition of artifacts.

This installation deviates from the standard museum practice of protecting objects in vitrines and other archival housing strategies in order to offer a direct, unmediated experience. We selected scraps of paper ephemera from Darger's encyclopedic collection of source materials to frame and hang on the wall behind the work table, to illustrate his prescient process of appropriating and transforming source materials from the commercial world of print culture, into the realms of his visual narrative. We placed fragile paper objects that required support or protection in mylar sleeves to present them on the mantel. Covers are placed on all fragile objects and displays when the room is not being shown, to protect them from light and dust. Intuit will continue to explore solutions to the conservation and preparation of the collection in an effort to achieve the dual goals of preserving the artifacts, and presenting them in a visually unobtrusive manner.

The Vivian Girl portraits--the key original works of art that hung in the room-- were acquired by a generous lender, specifically so they could anchor the "Henry Darger Room Collection." The works were cleaned, stabilized, and rehoused in their original frames (a few of which were modified to accommodate conservation glass and spacers). More extensive and intrusive conservation has not been undertaken at this point. Darger placed the Vivian Girls in frames, some with and some without glass, and some were found with broken glass. They are incredibly fragile collages; their physical fragility and the fact that they have managed to endure, metaphorically parallels the role they played as heroine characters in "The Realms"--perpetually under siege, but eventually outlasting the enemy.

Nearby, Darger's trusty Remington typewriter (one of the two that he used) is a bulky, prematurely antiquated object, which nonetheless has a peculiar gravitas, in that Darger pounded out a portion of his 30,000-plus pages⁵ on this lovely old machine. "In the Realms of the Unreal" was completed before Darger moved to 851 West Webster St. (from an apartment a few blocks west). The typewriter is to his writings--albeit in a more abstract way--as the source materials and art supplies are to his visual work.

5. This is one of two typewriters on which Darger wrote and typed over 15,000 pages of *The Realms of the Unreal*, and its sequel, an autobiography, and weather journal, which were all in the range of 5,000 pages each.

From 851 West Webster to Intuit

Absent but not forgotten

As the project to create the "Henry Darger Room Collection" evolved, the curators pondered elements that had been in the original room that are missing from this one. Some elements include:

Light: natural and city light from the windows, colored light from the stained glass window, electric light from his chandelier, and firelight from the coal stove.

Sound: tall stacks of records--presumably 78s--that appear in a vintage photograph, were discarded at some point, so it's not known what music he listened to on the extant Victrola. Intuit salvaged 57 punched music discs (the type that are played on antique players) but does not have the machine to play them on. The Lerners and other tenants overheard Darger's animated, theatrical conversations with himself and "others" in the room over the years. The "Henry Darger Room Collection" lacks the aural dimension of Darger's 40 years of artistic and performative life the room.

Collections and personal belongings: we know that a large volume of his collections, understandably perceived of as junk at the time, were thrown out and are forever gone from the record of his possessions. Some furniture and other archival materials salvaged from the room are not on view due to space limitations. A steamer trunk of Darger's clothing, whose contents are poignant as tangible artifacts, ordinary but intimate, close-to-the-skin, comforting possessions, are not on view, as they don't relate to the art of Henry Darger, and to avoid fetishizing his possessions.

Art and writings: In 2000 The American Folk Art Museum (AFAM) in New York acquired a major collection of Darger's artworks, and many primary materials from the room including "The Realms of the Unreal" and Darger's other voluminous manuscripts and typescripts, and diaries, correspondence, notebooks, studies, tracings, photographs, books, and paper ephemera. These materials reside in the AFAM's Henry Darger Study Center. With Intuit's "Henry Darger Room Collection" (the title refers to both the room installation and archival objects not on view but available for study), there are now two extensive and complementary resources, replete with primary materials, to support the study and appreciation of Henry Darger's remarkable oeuvre.

Intuit's "Henry Darger Room Collection" is a work in progress.

Lisa Stone

The Henry Darger Room Collection

Reflecting on Darger's Artistic Process

Henry Darger's one-room apartment on Chicago's North Side reflected a unity of home and studio, revealing a life fully entwined with art. He devoted his environment to "The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion." His epic saga, known as "In the Realms of the Unreal," follows the misadventures of the seven Vivian sisters as they aid the invented Christian nation Angelinia in the fight to free child slaves from their sadistic adult captors, the Glandelinians. Begun around 1910, "In the Realms of the Unreal" took Darger over twenty years to complete and provided the foundation for his art for the rest of his life. Defying the constraints of his intimate quarters, he made twelve-foot long, double-sided watercolor /collage drawings that were bound together in three rectangular books -his room was too small to accommodate opening them. Darger was so dedicated to making art that he sacrificed his bed to store these books, opting to sleep in a chair by his desk. Completing hundreds of drawings and more than 30,000 pages of writings, Darger applied the same zeal to collecting art supplies as he did to producing his work, cocooning himself within the imagery of his art. From balls of twine to comic strips, coloring books to newspaper clippings, his room overflowed with materials amassed for the inspiration and implementation of his art. Intuit's "Henry Darger Room Collection" brings together a selection of these artifacts along with Darger's artworks, architectural elements, and furniture from his apartment to offer viewers a portal into his working process and extraordinary artistic achievements.

Art supplies

Paints covered Darger's worktable in pots, tins, tubes, tablets, and boxes. He favored children's art supplies -watercolor trays, crayons, colored pencils, and pencil-by-number kits. Themed coloring sets like "Cowboys n' Indians," "Under the Big Top," and "Our Guardians," had storybook graphics that resembled his own aesthetic, and also functioned as source material. Despite the seeming chaos in Darger's cluttered room, he maintained an underlying order. He poured tempera paints into their lids, which hardened into homemade watercolor pads, and attached individual labels with descriptive titles such as "Storm Cloud Purple" and "Flesh Colour." He grouped tablets of like colors together in tins assigned hand-written labels such as "21 poiple colors," declaring their contents and revealing his sense of humor. Other labels were merely descriptive: "Red, blue, a few purple, orange, and dark green," and still others provided sites for Darger to poetically play with language, such as, "Seven not heaven dark green colors" or "Bright colors no. 3 Retain not Spain full of pain."

Darger was of modest means and wasted nothing when it came to his art supplies. He used pencils down to their stubs and then attached lengthening devices such as syringes or pen caps to their ends in order to keep using them. He saved and sorted rubber bands by size and shape, keeping them in cigar boxes labeled with directives such as "Rubber bands rubber bands know it." He painstakingly repaired any broken bands with tape. However, in spite of his frugal nature, his masses of watercolors were primarily unused, ceremoniously preserved in pristine condition without drops of water ever added to muddy their vibrant colors. Darger's reverence for his art supplies transcended thrift.

The Henry Darger Room Collection

Source material

Images of little girls, soldiers, storms, fires, flora, and fauna abounded in Darger's apartment, ever ready to be lifted into his work. Since appropriation was critical to his practice, and because Darger believed he was a poor draftsman, he took most characters and scenery for his drawings from media sources -magazines, coloring books, newspaper advertisements, articles, and comics- which he then altered to serve his artistic purposes. His transformation of source materials is both startling and profound: innocent little girls gained penises or weapons, and many faced hostile circumstances and death. He gave appropriated girls bird or butterfly wings, ram horns, or tails to form "Blenglomenean Serpents" or Blengins, for short.

Darger left his marks all over his source materials -holes from extractions, hand-written captions, pencil outlines, or the blue marks from carbon transfer -indicating the direct relationship of specific images to his finished works. He would then use collage or carbon tracing techniques to import the objects into his drawings. In 1944, Darger discovered a process that radically altered his working process. He had negatives made of key images at the local drug store, and then enlarged or shrunk the negatives to the scale he needed, freeing him from the limitations of the source's original size. Examples from Darger's process are on view in the "Henry Darger Room Collection," including several original materials with their corresponding negatives: an ominous coloring book image of a girl, a strip from the comic "Little Annie Rooney" (a reoccurring character in "In the Realms of the Unreal"), and the large work of girls in a meadow that he had hung on his wall.

"The Henry Darger Room Collection" includes stacks of magazines that Darger scoured for information and images. "National Geographic" magazines (dating as early as 1902) offered maps and images of volcanoes. These likely informed Darger's three hand-drawn maps in the collection -colorful depictions on brown wrapping paper that document the locations for his story, including the Bleglomenean Islands, the Boyking Islands, and Catherine Isle. There are piles of "Saturday Evening Posts" and "Life" magazines (from the 1950s through early 1960s), some with cutouts, and many missing their title pages. "Life's" serial "How the West Was Won," might have captured the artist's interest for its illustrations of horse and riders, a subject he occasionally included in his battle scenes. "Parents' Magazine" (1953) and "Good Housekeeping" (1958) were also culled for imagery, articles, and inspiration.

Children's stories were another valued resource. Darger constructed a composite scrapbook from children's coloring books, including those based on "Peter Pan" and "Tom Sawyer," stories that reflected his interest in literature. Authors who also explored childhood misadventures, such as Charles Dickens, L. Frank Baum, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, were among those represented in his home. Darger even appropriated an image of Goldilocks, illustrated in "Old Time Fairy Stories" (on view on the table), into his cast of characters.

Comics provided a treasure trove for Darger. Like his drawings, they combined narrative text and image. At times he mirrored the presentation of comic strips further by drawing two unrelated scenes side-by-side on a page. Comics appealed to his sense of humor and corresponded to topics in his own work, such as the childhood scenes and mishaps from "The Family Circus" and "Dennis the Menace," the girl praying for a family in "Little Orphan Annie," and the super powers of "Mandrake the Magician." Darger systematically catalogued his comics in countless binders, scrapbooks and even phone booth phonebooks, binding stacks together in twine and piling them high on his floors. While he focused on two favorites, "They'll Do It Every Time" and "There Oughta Be A Law," some scrapbooks contained a wide variety of comics, and others were designated "For Sunday Comics Only."

The Henry Darger Room Collection

Scrapbooks

Darger not only collected source material but he ordered, catalogued, and made books to hold his volumes. The proliferation of these meticulously created, densely-packed scrapbooks reflects his impulse to archive each and every clipping he cut, further reflecting his profound devotion to his materials. While Darger primarily filled his scrapbooks with comics, a few stand out as vessels for source material that was especially important. He repurposed a children's scrapbook entitled "Coloring Gallery for Pictures of fires big or small in which firemen or persons lose their lives." Inside, coloring book childhood scenes peek out from beneath clippings of articles on death and disasters caused by fire. Similarly, he used the "Jolly Time Coloring Book" to hold loose clippings (dating from 1942 to 1960) about natural disasters including fires, volcanoes, hurricanes and explosions, which illustrated a central theme of immanent danger. He augmented many of these images, outlining smoke clouds in pencil, hand-coloring others with electric yellow paint, and added captions such as "fiery" next to explosions.

Significance

Darger's catalogued images reflect the aesthetic of his drawings seamlessly. He designated his scrapbooks' inside covers for more sinister images than the comics that generally filled them, primarily battle scenes and injured children. Darger had an encyclopedic knowledge of the Civil War, and used this history as a model for many battles of "In the Realms of the Unreal." He was also captivated by images of children in distress, and collected articles and images of them just as he wrote about them and depicted them in his drawings. These images were far more charged than mere source materials. Early on, the loss of one particular clipping from the "Chicago Daily News" of missing five-year-old Elise Paroubek, had profound effects on both Darger's life and his fiction. Darger prayed to God for the return of his lost article, but to no avail. When his prayers were unanswered, he switched sides in "In the Realms of the Unreal;" whereas he had previously written himself into the story on the Christian side, he now joined forces with the Glandelinians, and many of the most horrific battles ensued. Darger cast Paroubek in his story as the Vivian Girl's friend and child rebel leader Anabelle Aronburg. He prominently depicted Aronburg in the portrait hung to the left of his fireplace.

The plight of injured and orphaned children paralleled the difficulties of Darger's childhood. When he was four years old, his mother died shortly after giving birth to his sister, who was then immediately put up for adoption. A few years later, because of his father's ailing health, Darger was placed in a Catholic boys' home and later transferred to the Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children in Lincoln, Illinois. In 1908, he fled the Asylum and found menial work in a hospital; he was employed in hospitals for the rest of his working life, as a janitor, dishwasher, and bandage roller. Lacking the support of family, he created alternative relationships to sustain him.

Perhaps the most significant relationship Darger found in his work was that to the Vivian Girls. Individual portraits of the young beauties were given the auspicious position surrounding his mantel, the place frequently reserved for pictures of loved ones. About them he wrote: "Every one of the Vivian Girls has so sweet a temper, and ways more charming than their beauty, that they were the greatest pleasure to all the nation...and on some occasions when dressed at their best and cleanest, were almost too dazzlingly beautiful to be looked at." In addition to highlighting the Vivian Girls, his mantel held more images of children, small curiosities, and many devotional objects. A deeply religious man, Darger sometimes attended Catholic Mass several times a day; rosaries, statues of Jesus, and figurines of the Virgin Mary adorned his shelves. Both Darger's faith and devotion to artistic practice are manifest on his mantel.

The Henry Darger Room Collection

Darger's home was a deeply personalized space that reflected the depth of activity that took place in it. Darger created an environment to serve his artistic pursuits, which became a work of art in itself, an installation of his imagery and sources of inspiration. Reimagined in Intuit's "Henry Darger Room Collection," this room offers the possibility to examine the creative process of this truly innovative and remarkable artist. We hope this invites deeper penetration into Dargers work--a realm that may never exhaust its imaginative possibilities.

Jessica Moss

[Acknowledgements:](#) Sincere thanks to the late Nathan Lerner for discovering the genius of Henry Darger and to Kiyoko Lerner for her generous gift of the contents of Henry Darger's room to Intuit. Thanks to all donors and contributors: Robert A. Roth, for his critical financial support and for acquiring and loaning the Vivian Girls portraits, and to Kohler Foundation, Inc., John MacGregor, Patrick King/Midwest Freeze Dry, Kavi Gupta, Jim Zanzi, Barbara and Kent Manning, Ellen and Richard Sandor, The Roads Scholarship for Research and Travel/The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and contributors to the Darger's Army fund. This project is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.

Measured drawings: Larry Harris, Kent Manning. Interior architecture: Angie Mills. Packing/moving Darger room contents: Stuart Grannan/Architectural Artifacts staff, Mike and Jim Hinchliff, Tim and Katie Tuten and the Hideout staff, Judy Saslow, Randy Vick, Jamie Young, and all volunteers. Darger Room Collection catalog: Juliana Driever, Jessica Moss, Farris Wahbeh. Conservation consultation and treatment: David Chandler, Dan Cochrane Conservation, Margo McFarland. Production, construction, room preparation: Sherry Diaz, for expert carpentry, design, and preparation, and Matthew DuPont. James Connolly, David Olfasen/Ole's Country Store, Jan Petry. Photography: Bill Bengtson, John Faier. Print Art Direction: David Syrek and Joe Darrow. Thanks to all Intuit staff who contributed to this project from 2000-2008.

[Co-curators:](#) Jessica Moss and Lisa Stone.