

Merry-Go-Roundup

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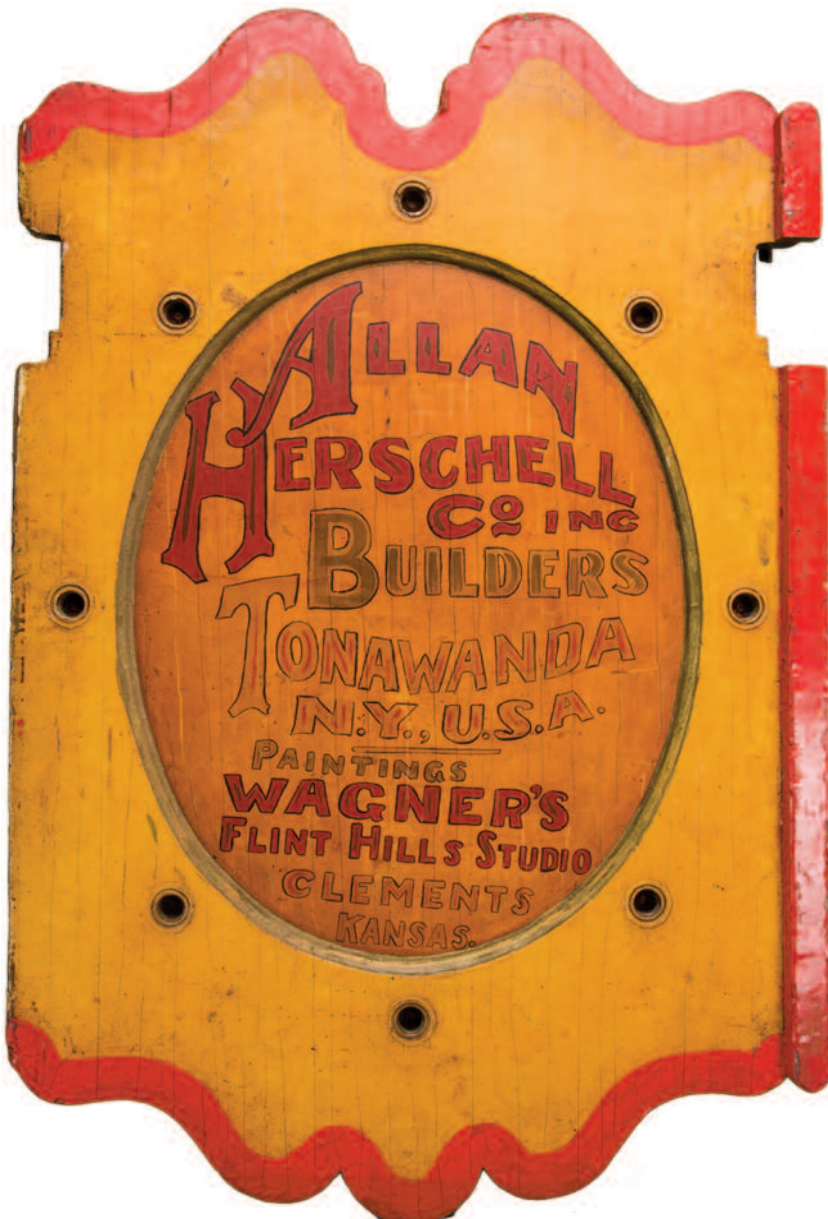
L. Wagner Davis Art Panels on the Carousel of Smiles

Clay Hutchison

Center sign panel, redone in original style in the 1940s to also credit the artist who updated the scenery panels.

—Photo:
Clay Hutchison

The Summer 2017 *Merry-Go-Roundup* (Vol. 44, No. 2) introduced the Carousel of Smiles. After it was found languishing in two trailers in a sheep meadow outside of Kansas City, the ride made its journey to Sandpoint, Idaho, and was unloaded in December 2016. Most of the carousel had not been out of those trailers in the 64 years since it last operated in 1952 for the Kansas State Fair in Hutchinson.



The Carousel of Smiles is an intact and original Allan Herschell machine, circa 1920, with its full set of thirty-six horses, two chariots and complete forty-foot diameter frame and mechanism. This gem is an important part of our national heritage of saved Golden Age carousels. Finding the Allan Herschell center sign panel was gratifying confirmation.

The thirty-six steeds, freed from their trailer “stable,” are all in very good condition. There are seven iconic Allan Herschell roached-mane trojans, and all twelve outside-row horses are bejeweled. Restoration and painting on the ponies has begun. A subsequent issue of the *Merry-Go-Roundup* will include more on the herd.

Packed away in the other trailer were two crates containing the fourteen inside panels. Obscured and muted by decades of grime, decayed varnish and various animal nests, they nonetheless held the promise of some wonderfully painted scenes. The thirteen images are all western-themed except for one which depicts a Pacific Island hula dancer. We realized not with the initial unpacking but only later, upon further inspection, that these panels were all signed. The investigation began, starting with the signature of L. Wagner “Davis.”

Lotteva Wagner Davis (1910–1993) was a well-known tattoo artist and also a painter for carnivals and circuses. According to her cousin, Christopher Wagner (who, after we located him, confirmed we had the correct L. Wagner Davis), Lotteva started painting colorful signs and banners with scrollwork and flowing script for circuses and carnivals when she was only about twelve years old.

Lotteva’s parents, “Gus” and Maud Wagner, were well-known figures in the early circus and tattoo worlds, both as pioneering artists and as attractions in their own right. Gus was known far and wide as “the most decorated man in America,” and Maud, an aerialist and contortionist, was the first known female tattoo artist.

Lotteva started in the family tradition of “hand-poked” tattoos when she was just nine years old—and never once used electric

tattooing equipment, in a career that spanned seven decades. Although she was never “inked” herself, Lotteva was known internationally in the tattoo world, and was honored for her life’s work in 1989 at the annual convention of the National Tattoo Association.

According to family lore, Maud refused to let her husband tattoo their daughter, making Lotteva somewhat of a rarity—a tattoo artist who didn’t have any tattoos of her own. After Gus died, Lovetta decided that if she could not be tattooed by her father she would not be tattooed by anyone.

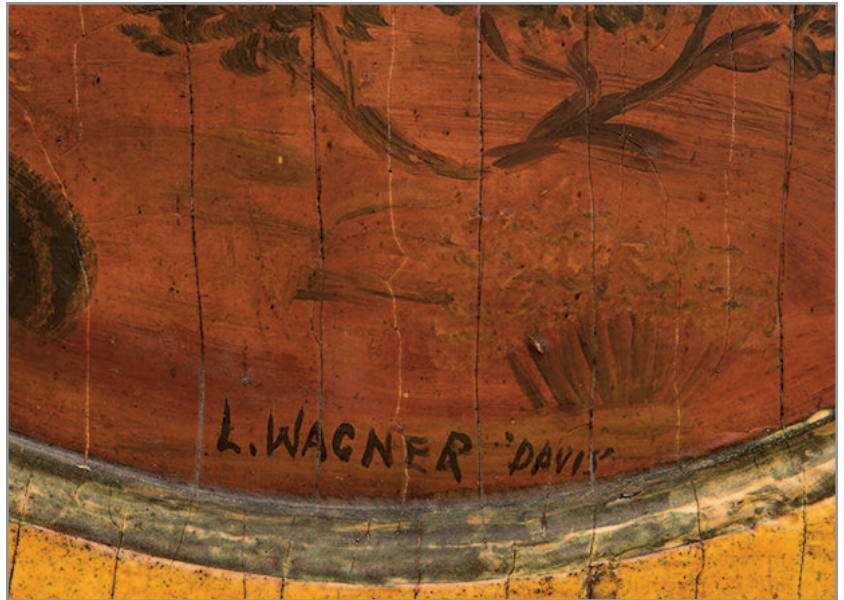
Information provided by Lovetta’s cousin has helped to date the paintings and even to determine some of the operational history of our carousel. Lotteva signed her name “L. Wagner” prior to marrying Russell Davis in 1941 (interestingly, she signed our panels with quotation marks around “Davis”).

Inside scenery panels gave a distinctive character to each carousel that included them. In the 1920s, carousels were still considered rides for adults, and original scenery paintings from this era often reflected somewhat bawdy themes of the “Roaring ‘20s.” By the 1940s, societal norms had changed, carousels were more family-oriented, and themes in American art were often inspired by Norman Rockwell or western themes such as those of artist and illustrator Will James. A refresh 20 years or so after a carousel’s manufacture was logical.

Realizing the importance of Lotteva’s art panels and the special care that they require, we engaged the services of Christina Krumrine, a New York City-based Art Conservator. Working with one of the panels in New York, Christina has carefully determined the proper conservation methodology for these panels and has revealed the vibrancy of the paintings done by Lotteva.

Christina also believes there is the possibility of revealing, through X-ray analysis, the subject matter of the original paintings that likely still exist under Lotteva’s work. As the panels themselves certainly are original to the ride’s manufacture, overpainting them would have been a common practice.

The celebrity status of Lotteva and her parents in the tattoo world led us to New York City during the summer of 2017. Both the New York Historical Society and the South Street Seaport Museum had exhibits relating to tattooing and its surrounding culture, and both featured the full Wagner family. Gus’ tattoo designs and his journal and sketchbook from his merchant seaman days are part of the South Street Seaport



Museum collection, providing an intriguing link to the art form represented by Lotteva’s panels. Further research will reveal to us additional connectivity, and possibly show links to Lotteva’s inspiration, perhaps drawn from her father’s travels in the South Seas or from her local environs.

Lotteva Wagner Davis signature on a Carousel of Smiles inside scenery panel.

—Photo:
Clay Hutchison

Nominations Sought for Historic Carousel Award

Each year the NCA grants the Historic Carousel Award to a carousel that meets the following criteria:

1. Historic significance
2. Innate quality or character
3. A proven program of restoration and maintenance
4. A regular schedule of operation
5. An owner or support group likely to ensure that the carousel will continue to be available to the public as an operating machine

Nominations from members are welcome by June 1, 2019. Please send your recommendation, with how the carousel best meets these criteria, to Jim Shulman, 4050 Sunbury Rd., Galena, OH 43021, email jesjmskali@aol.com. Review past recipients at Carousels.org (scroll over “Census” and click on “Awards/Special Features”). Carousels not selected in 2018 may be renominated for 2019.

More photos,
next page

Left and right,
the same panel
before and after
conservation by
Christina Krumrine.

—Photos:
Clay Hutchison



Lotteva Wagner
Davis in the early
1990s, when she
was in her early
80s. Inset, circus
banner painted by
“Wagner’s Flint
Hills Studio.”

—Photos:
Christopher Wagner,
International
Independent
Showmen’s Museum
(inset)

