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## OBJECTS FROM THE ALLEY: THE WORK OF REV. ALBERT WAGNER

by Debbie Ritchey

**P**raise the Lord," says Rev. Albert Wagner as he welcomes visitors into his East Cleveland home, and with one step into his house, an amazing journey begins. Wandering through Rev. Wagner's home is an overwhelming experience, as the visitor is bombarded with visual images. From the front porch through all four levels of the interior, Rev. Wagner has bared his soul, his spirituality and the history of his life in countless paintings, drawings and imaginative found-object sculptures. Every wall is completely covered with artwork. The floors are showcases for sculptures, and even the ceilings provide additional display space for various paintings and assemblages. Aside from a bed, a file cabinet, a couple of folding chairs and a desk, there is virtually no other furniture in the whole house. After three or four hours, it is obvious that one visit is not enough to fully enjoy and appreciate the sheer magnitude of work in his home.

Rev. Wagner is a man of impressive stature, with large hands, a full beard and soulful eyes that reflect a lifetime of experiences, both good and bad. He was born 72 years ago, on January 24, 1924, in Crittenden County, Ark. When he was five years old, Rev. Wagner remembers



*Rev. Albert Wagner's Home.  
Photographs by Debbie Ritchey.*

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making airplanes and cars out of mud on the back porch of his home. He recalls his mother saying, "Son, if I could send you to school you could be somebody." He was formally educated only through the second grade. With his mother and brothers, he moved to Cleveland when he was 17 years old. He married at 18 and was a preacher by age 20. He had 16 children with his wife Magnolia, and created a successful furniture-moving company.

However, Rev. Wagner admittedly made many mis-

takes after he had achieved success. His business allowed him to travel around the country, and he became involved in relationships with other women. He began using false names, buying cars and homes for other mistresses, and fathered four more children. By the age of 40, Rev. Wagner says he had fallen away from his beliefs and had become a slave to sex and women. In the mid-1970s, after recalling a childhood memory of his days in the cotton fields, he was inspired to begin painting,

*Rev. Albert Wagner.*

something he had always wanted to do. However, he continued to struggle with his weakness for women and other temptations for several years. He says he finally decided to amend his life after witnessing the effect that his behavior was having on his children and grandchildren who were succumbing to lives of lying, drugs and fornication.

In 1981, Rev. Wagner established his own church, The People Love People House of God, in the basement of his home. He began focusing all his energy on preaching and making art. Since 1975, Rev. Wagner estimates that he has created more than 31,000 works of

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## REV. WAGNER

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art. He calls his work "Objects from the Alley," because he uses mostly found objects to create sculptures and paintings. The roots of a huge upturned tree stump and an old door transformed into a table top provide the basic frameworks for two of Rev. Wagner's most amazing sculptural accomplishments, now on display at the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, Md. These immense assemblage sculptures, entitled "Out on a Limb" and "City Beneath the Sea" respectively, were years in the making. Rev. Wagner continually added objects such as marbles, bowling balls, empty plastic containers, abandoned toys, tires, costume jewelry, computer parts, wire, coins, beads, and old cans — to name just a few. While in his home, each of these sculptures completely filled a separate room on the first floor. In addition to such large-scale works, Rev. Wagner has made many other smaller sculptures, including crucifixes, human-looking assemblages, and several non-specific sculptures which are scattered

Right: Rev. Wagner in front of mural.  
Below: Interior of Rev. Wagner's home and a group of his paintings.  
Photographs by Debbie Ritchey.

throughout the house. Affixed to the ceilings are various objects such as knives, sleds, skis and tennis rackets that have taken on an artistic quality in the context of his art-filled home.

Discarded cardboard, particle board, masonite and plywood become the artist's canvas. He uses virtually any type of bought or salvaged paint to make unusual paintings that vary greatly in style and subject matter. Some are simple portraits of friends, acquaintances or fictional people painted on flat solid-colored backgrounds. These have names such as "Freida and Fran," "The Stroller" or "Mr. Nibbles is Napping." Others depict people interacting, illustrating a story or a lesson that Rev. Wagner wants the viewer to understand, such as "The Beggar Woman," "Peeping Tom" or "Path of Fire."

In many of his paintings and in his preaching, Rev. Wagner often accuses his black community of self-oppression, disregard of responsibility and a weakness for sexual gratification. Given his calling as a



preacher, he is also fond of depicting religious scenes, such as Mary and the baby Jesus, Noah's Ark, Moses

and the parting of the seas, or priests and nuns as missionaries. There are several self-portraits, revealing Rev. Wagner's temptations with women, his past mistakes, and a touching painting of his last day with his dying mother. Finally, there are the semi-abstract paintings, those with swirling figures and faces emerging from the depths of the backgrounds. According to Rev. Wagner, he "sees" the images in the brush strokes after painting solid-color backgrounds and merely outlines these images with paint to bring them out.

All of his paintings and drawings contain human figures or faces. Typically, all of the faces that he portrays are flat with upturned noses, somewhat oblong and often tilted to one side or the other, sometimes unnatu-

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## REV. WAGNER

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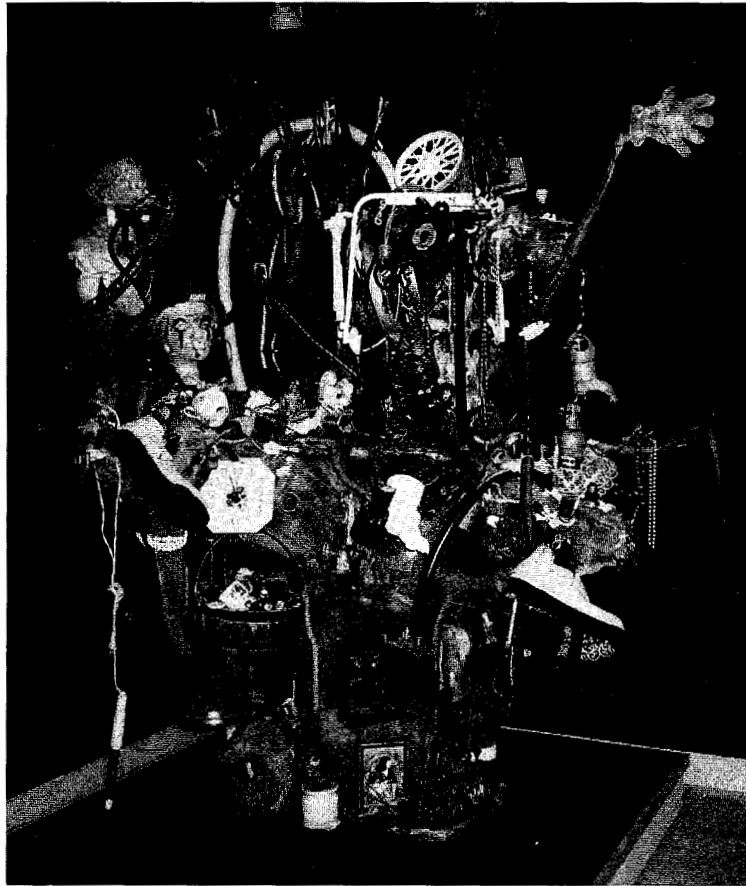
rally so. His figures are usually outlined in black and often have thick, knock-kneed legs and turned-in feet. Rev. Wagner frames all of his work himself, using second-hand, ready-made frames or homemade frames that he paints to match.

The "Wagner Museum" and church is nestled on a tiny street in a rough Cleveland neighborhood. Emblazoned on the exterior of the cheerful, light-green home are the phrases "Come Home Ethiopia" and "Jesus Loves You" in black lettering, cut out of wood.

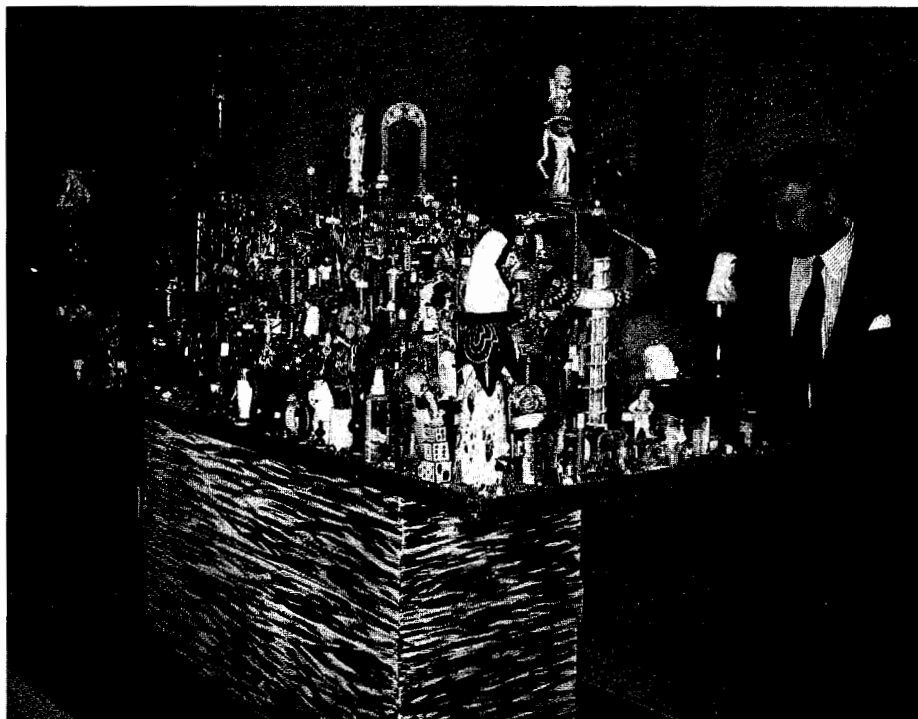
Rev. Wagner's ministry is an eclectic mix of the Old and New Testament, and most of the members of The People Love People House of God are family members, children and grandchildren. He keeps the Sabbath from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, with an all-day service on Saturday. According to Rev. Wagner, Sunday is the "first day," Monday is the "second day" and so on, and the Roman year 1996 is actually the year 5756. He recognizes Jesus Christ as the Savior and Moses as one of the most important Biblical figures.

His basement church is complete with wooden pews and folding chairs and decorated with his religious paintings. The room is equipped with an electric guitar, a drum set, a microphone and amplifiers for preaching and playing music. According to Rev. Wagner, his church keeps the "original" holidays as outlined in the Bible, not the pagan holidays. He also points out that the Bible tells him that he is an Ethiopian, not a Negro or a "colored boy."

Rev. Wagner's art work is an extension of his ministry and personal beliefs, and he eagerly receives visitors into his home, especially the neighborhood children. He



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THROUGH HIS WORK OR SIMPLY RECOGNIZE  
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hopes that people can find a path of spiritual healing and encouragement through his work or simply recognize a spark of creativity within themselves.

Rev. Wagner says: "All of these years have passed since I was that little boy on my mother's back porch, and now I realize that all I wanted to do is paint. I'm not trying to make myself different from anybody, but God made me what I am, and it is important to me to introduce to the black world, my little black sisters and brothers, that you can take an old television, and an old stove, anything you want, and make a sculpture out of it. Even the bottom of an old dresser drawer, a door or a window. At first, I thought I had nothing to work with, but then I found that everything I wanted was in the street or the alleys. Everything in here is made up of Elmer's glue, good will, gifts from people and the streets. So now I have a whole museum to show the whole world." ❖

*DEBBIE RITCHEY, executive director of the Folk Art Society, lives in Cleveland, Ohio.*

*Above: Out on a Limb by Rev. Albert Wagner.  
Left: City Beneath the Sea by Rev. Albert Wagner.  
Photographed by Ann Oppenheimer at the American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Md.*