

Basic Detail Report



Gourd fiddle

Date

1860 ca.

Primary Maker

James Russell Cluxton

Description

Violin with body made from a gourd. Extensively decorated with raised, carved decorative allegorical images relating to the flight of Black Americans from slavery via the Underground Railroad. Gourd fiddles were instruments that combined the West African tradition of making stringed instruments out of gourds with the four-stringed bowed violin of Europe. Surviving historical examples are extraordinarily rare due to the fragile gourd material. Most examples would have had skin tops, tacked

to the gourd body as in a banjo, but this example made by James Russell Cluxton features a carved top, along with much other carved decoration. Cluxton was a white man who lived in Sardinia, Ohio, just over 20 miles from Ripley, Ohio, a major site on the Ohio River where residents assisted fleeing enslaved people who swam across the river from Kentucky, as part of the Underground Railroad. He had family members who were involved in the Underground Railroad. According to family tradition of the maker, the fiddle was intended as an allegory for the Underground Railroad. The slot where the bow passed through the gourd to contact the strings represented the Ohio River. The bridge of the instrument was in essence a bridge to freedom. On the side toward the neck of the fiddle, two distressed Black American faces with arms extended upward are carved on each side of the fingerboard. The area adjacent to the string slot features a crouching black dog, representing slave catchers and bondage. Across the string slot, a crouching natural wood-colored dog represents the Underground Railroad and freedom. Two eagles, symbols of the Union, hold walnut shells, which may represent wisdom and clarity. The fiddle is preserved with its original display stand, which is in the form of an abstract figure of natural wood color with two boots, his head flanked with two additional walnut shells. Hidden inside a compartment at the bottom of the instrument is the tailpiece, which is carved with relief of a natural wood and white bone faces, perhaps representing the hidden nature of those who were Conductors or Agents on the Underground Railroad. While the instrument is an extraordinary piece of folk art with a powerful message, it was also a working musical instrument, and the fingerboard shows significant wear from its use. The fiddle is also preserved with a finely made original case. James Russell Cluxton (1829-1909) was a cabinet maker and a prolific inventor, holding patents for a reed organ (1869), washboard (1888), cushion (1888), and toy gun (1896). Top: two-piece, slab-cut softwood: wide grain, the grain converging on joint upper and lower portion covered by gourd with

center section cut out for contact point with bow; the cavities of the gourd faced with slab-cut softwood, the edges bound with angled pieces of alternating light and brown pieces of hardwood, the inside joints reinforced with softwood blocks; panelled sections removable for access to tailpiece and endpin Back and sides: half of a gourd; scalloped upper shoulders bound with alternating pieces of light and black-stained hardwood; decoratively cut bone button cap and neck heel Head: hardwood with two extra turns to scroll; inlaid on front spine with five graduated domed pieces of mother-of-pearl; eyes inset with bone Neck: three-ply alternating pieces of light and black-stained hardwood; neck lengthened by 29 mm using same materials Varnish: golden Fingerboard: black-varnished hardwood Nut: bone Tailpiece: decoratively carved hardwood with two carved faces, one of wood with inlaid bone eyes and other of bone; hidden by panel in gourd top Pegs: four tension tuners with brass stems and black-stained hardwood heads with serrated bone slices inlaid into ends Saddle: bone Endpin: bone F-holes: short with prominent notches, highly curved stems, and tapered wings

Dimensions

Total fiddle length: 545 mm Back length: 340 mm Upper bout width: 46 mm Center bout width: 75 mm Lower bout width: 155 mm Upper rib height: 30 mm Center rib height: 35 mm Lower rib height: 83 mm Stop length (at E-string): 190 mm Stop length (at G-string): 185 mm Vibrating string length (at E-string): 320 mm Vibrating string length (at G-string): 317 mm Neck length (bottom of nut to ribs): 132 mm