



# MONIKER: IDENTITY *Lost & Found*

Railroad history and art at the Massillon Museum. | Story and photos by Missy Ricksecker

**E**VERY ASPECT OF *MONIKER: IDENTITY LOST AND FOUND*, on view at the Massillon Museum through October 21, is built on inclusiveness and respect. The exhibition's opening weekend was impressive: visitors from 32 states, three Canadian provinces, and the District of Columbia (and a few dogs) attended this event at a small art and history museum in a rustbelt town. The diversity of the crowd was striking: the area's distinguished museum patrons mixed seamlessly with heavily tattooed individuals from the fringes of society—some of whom had ridden the rails across the country to attend the event.

Conversations ranged from discourse about the art and history represented in the show to colorful storytelling about life on the rails, including a spellbinding tale from a transcontinental traveler, who recounted rescuing her dog from the deadly grip of a “blue-nose pitbull—you know, a real

junkyard dog” by stabbing the beast to death. In the long line to purchase the exhibition catalogue, folks broke out in song; there were rumors of a music gathering under a certain bridge in town later that evening. *Moniker* artists sat on the floor and in the grass to sign each other's catalogues—with their unique monikers, of course—and graciously signed the catalogues of museum patrons.

## **SYMBOLS OF DEEP MEANING**

During the late 1800s, blue-collar workers and travelers began drawing unique symbols and words on the sides of railroad cars in chalk, ephemeral marks that crossed the countryside, exposed to anyone who idly watched passing trains. Over time, mark-making developed into a coded system of communication. Through repetition, recognition, and transcontinental exposure, symbols took on a deeper meaning. A drawing became a moniker: a name, an identity.



**LEFT:** The exhibit attracted a diverse crowd with distinguished museum patrons mixing seamlessly with heavily tattooed individuals—some of whom had ridden the rails across the country to attend the event. **CENTER:** *Moniker* artwork by Hold Fast from the collection of Kurt Tors. **ABOVE:** Artists featured in *Moniker: Identity Lost and Found* sign exhibit catalogues.

**Moniker: Identity Lost & Found,** an unprecedented documentation of mark-making and monikers—grassroots movements which began in rail yards in the late 19th century and continue today—was funded, in part, by a major grant from Ohio Humanities. The exhibition opened at the Massillon Museum June 23 and continues through October 21, 2018. The exhibition catalogue is sold out; a reprint is forthcoming.

*Moniker* blends railroad history and artistic heritage by highlighting the work of contemporary moniker practitioners and writers from the past. All 35—including Colossus of Roads, Coaltrain, The Rambler, Smokin’ Joe, The Solo Artist, and Swampy—are represented in the exhibition with their unique marks on 19-inch raw steel panels. That body of work has been built from relationships developed between the museum’s curatorial team and active moniker practitioners, some of whom have been working in this field since the 1960s.

The enthusiasm for *Moniker* has continued. “The response to the exhibition on Instagram from those who have attended, and those yet to attend, is phenomenal,” said Massillon Museum Executive Director Alex Coon. “we have been archiving the conversations as they reveal how impactful the project has been to those who have been part of or have followed the moniker tradition.” ♥

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