

Determining the Facts Reading 2: Masters of the American Carousel

The tradition of carousel making immigrated to America at the same time as the craftsmen who built them. During the period between 1870 and 1930, many styles of carousel carving developed as specifically American styles. Three of these styles became icons of the American carousel: the Coney Island style developed by Charles Loof, the Philadelphia style popularized by Gustav Dentzel, and the Country Fair style from the Herschell-Spillman Company. Little is known about the men who carved most carousels, but their carving styles are recognizable around the world.

Coney Island, New York, became a center for carousel development for two reasons. Coney Island was the largest and most popular recreation area of its kind in the country. New York was also the main entry point into the United States for immigrants. This provided a flood of workers and craftsmen already familiar with carousels. Many immigrants operated shops producing carousel horses. The horses' appearance changed, moving carousels toward a new, American style. Charles Loof mastered that new style. He immigrated in 1870 from Schleswig-Holstein, in Germany. Loof earned some extra money by carving carousel figures in the evening after work. His carousel animals were different from those that came before. His carousels were elegant, well proportioned, and natural-looking. In 1876, Loof's first full carousel was installed at Balmer's Bathing Pavilion at Coney Island. Four years later, Loof opened a factory in Brooklyn to produce his distinctive and beautiful carousel animals. Carousels featuring these figures opened throughout the East Coast.

By the time Loof began carving carousel animals, the overhead crank system had been invented. This allowed the up-and-down ride associated with carousels. Loof developed an idea for "the total carousel experience." To Loof, carousels were elegant amusements. Music, bright colors, and lights, as well as the fanciful figures all added to the experience. The Crescent Park Carousel in Riverside, Rhode Island, built in 1895, best illustrates Loof's work. Featuring sixty-two beautifully hand carved figures and four fanciful chariots, the carousel includes elaborate trimmings like decorative panels, mirrors, glass crystals, electric lights, and colored glass windows. The music played by the carousel's original organ adds to Loof's idea of the "total carousel experience."

Philadelphia also experienced a boom of recreation activities in the late nineteenth century. Gustav Dentzel, a cabinet maker and immigrant from Germany, arrived in Philadelphia in 1860. Dentzel's father had built a carousel and traveled with around Germany. Dentzel continued this tradition in America. Seven years after arriving in the United States, Dentzel opened his own carousel business. In 1870, Dentzel opened his first full carousel in Philadelphia. While this early work did not display the same elaborate handiwork as his later carousels, it hinted at the style and detail for which he would become famous.

Dentzel became known as the "Father of American Carousel Carving." His work blended beautiful movements, sounds, and colors with graceful animals to create a stylish ride. In making carousel figures an art, Dentzel developed a reputation for two distinct features that set him apart from other carousel makers. First, his figures were very realistic. Dentzel's figures usually featured full coats of fur. Most carvers left this feature off or only hinted at it. Dentzel's approach was so authentic that he would put real antlers on when carving a deer. Second, he moved away from making only horse figures. Dentzel's carousels became known for including many diverse and exotic animals. His favorite types of animals, other than horses, were deer, goats, lions, and tigers. Gustav Dentzel was known for the consistently high quality of his product, and his work became easily recognized.

The Country Fair style of carousels developed because earlier carousels lacked mobility. Allan Herschell and his company developed a variety of carousels that were simple, pretty, and could be transported. These carousels became unexpectedly popular. Herschell was a Scottish immigrant with a background in industrial machinery. He built his first carousel in 1883. This carousel focused less on beauty and more on engineering. After suffering from a period of poor health, Herschell's doctor advised that he live "an open air life." Herschell and his carousel went on the road. The portable carousel became such a hit that by 1891 he had produced and sold more than 100 of these carousels. The horses and other figures of these carousels were relatively simple because they needed to be moved easily.

By the early twentieth century, carousel figures were no longer being completely made of wood. The heads and legs were being mass produced of aluminum. Economic constraints caused by the Great Depression eventually led to entire animal being made this way. As a result, the era of hand crafted American carousels ended.

The “golden age” of American carousels was the height of artistic craftsmanship by Loof, Dentzel, and Herschell. Gerry Holzman and other New York carvers built The Farmers’ Museum’s Empire State Carousel with the same care and artistic craftsmanship. Together they merged the hand crafting techniques used by these masters, and brought characteristics from each of the three main carving traditions into one unique piece of folk art representing New York’s people and places.