

Woolies

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 1, 2000](#) issue

Recently I was in New York to hear the St. Olaf Choir sing, transcendently, at Carnegie Hall. I was there both as a member of the college's board and as a devotee of a cappella music. After the concert an alumna asked whether I would join a little company, including St. Olaf president Mark Edwards and his spouse, for a private showing of "woolies" at the Seamen's Church Institute.

Tell someone you are going to see a display of woolies and you will be greeted with questions. Woolies? The dictionary helps little. You might find, as in the *Oxford English Dictionary Supplement*, "winter woolies: warm underwear (not necessarily of wool)." Nothing to attract Victoria's Secret types. A clue: the woolies on exhibit are distinctive, even in respect to their spelling. And they are made by men.

Even the limousine provided by our hostess had trouble finding its way to the Water Street Gallery of the Institute (241 Water Street: call 212-349-9090 for directions when your cab gets lost; and do find your way there before May 31), but the trip and visit are well worth it. You will learn about the creative role the Seamen's Church Institute plays—today as in the past. And you will see 55 woolies from the collection of Mrs. C. R. [Grace] Allen III, our gracious hostess—woolies that usually hang in her Long Island home. From her we learned that there are complexes and networks and galleries and associations devoted to woolies.

So what are these woolies? They are "sailors' wool embroidered portraits," seascapes and shipscares. They are stunningly, dazzlingly, lovingly detailed pictures. The exhibit catalog describes them as intimate, evocative mementos, votive and grateful offerings to sweethearts back home. While some seamen carved scrimshaw on whalebone, others fought off homesickness or seasickness by long-stitching or chain-stitching these embroideries onto cotton or linen fabric.

You will find that some of the sailors integrated tortoise shells, tintypes of faces, or silk into these "loving testaments [to] their pride in their vessels and their enthusiasm for seafaring," which are "also reminders of the loneliness and danger they faced every day." Most woolies are heirlooms in the homes of the descendants

of their makers. "There have been very few public exhibitions," and only a handful of those produced catalogs or were reviewed. So the Seamen's Church Institute showing beckons urgently.

As always at such showings, my humanistic and theological interests took over. That is, while enjoying the artful products, I thought of their makers: storm-tossed, tempted, often abused, bitterly lonely, missing a beloved sweetheart or distant family, they were candidates for disappointment, doubt and despair. But those "in peril on the sea" often turned for solace to art, and like the St. Olaf choir, they offered signals of transcendence in a world of "restless wave" and "ocean deep."