

Photography and Folk Art at the Art Institute of Chicago: new models for exhibitions and scholarship

Elizabeth McGoey and Elizabeth Siegel

It was 1933, and Walker Evans needed money. The photographer had already begun to gain notice for his dispassionate yet poetic photographs, which had been featured in some key gallery exhibitions and publications; later that year, curator and cultural critic Lincoln Kirstein would arrange for Evans to exhibit his images of Victorian architecture at the newly founded Museum of Modern Art in New York. But at the height of the Depression in New York, there were only a few ways a photographer could ply his skills and get paid. Evans's friend and roommate, the artist Ben Shahn, connected him with Edith Halpert, impresario of the Downtown Gallery, who exhibited Shahn's work along with that of other American painters. Only two years earlier Halpert had expanded her program to open the American Folk Art Gallery with curator and art historian Holger Cahill. She hired Evans to make copy photographs of her growing inventory, which he saw as a banal but not entirely unpleasant way to earn an income behind the camera. He wrote to his friend Hanns Skolle, 'The work I have been doing for cash wouldn't interest you any more than it does me. At the moment, though, there is a lot of 50 copies to be made for the Downtown Gallery of American folk painting and objects, and that job is not so bad...I could support myself copying paintings I think but don't relish the work.'¹

This commercial side job shows up as a mere footnote in Evans's biographies if it shows up at all: indeed, it is typical of the myriad employments artists undertake to make their art while putting food on the table. But this humble copy work underscores a surprising connection between the seemingly disparate disciplines of American photography and folk art in the 1930s—worlds that were, in fact, united by personal and cultural networks with a shared interest in the

The authors wish to thank Lauren Lessing, Director of the University of Iowa Stanley Museum of Art, Sarah Miller, Assistant Adjunct Professor at Mills College, and Kit Shields, Assistant Editor, Art Institute of Chicago, for reading an early draft of this essay and offering critical and insightful feedback that aided the development of the ideas presented here.

¹ Walker Evans to Hanns Skolle, April 20, 1933, in Jerry L. Thompson, *Walker Evans at Work*, New York: Harper and Row, 1982, 95.

American vernacular. Kirstein, for example, had organized back-to-back exhibitions in 1930 at Harvard's Society for Contemporary Art: *American Folk Paintings of Three Centuries* (featuring the collection of Isabel Carleton Wilde) and *Photography* (including work by Evans and Berenice Abbott, among others).² Wilde's renowned folk-art collection would later be displayed in exhibitions organized by Cahill and at the John Becker and Julien Levy galleries (which also showed photographs), and she eventually sold many of her works to Edith Halpert. Cahill, who wrote extensively on American folk art at this time, would come to lead the Federal Art Project, which would oversee both the sprawling Index of American Design and Abbott's extensive *Changing New York* project. The list goes on: of artists, curators, dealers, collectors, writers, and other cultural agents whose work easily straddled these two fields that have since been separated by the academic and museum practices of the past century.

It was not until we looked for links between our areas of study that we—a curator of American decorative arts and a curator of photography, both at the Art Institute of Chicago—found a different set of stories uniting aesthetics, culture, and nationality into new ideas of what an American expression might look like. Our search for connections highlighted the logistical barriers to this kind of research in a museum. Large public institutions like the Art Institute, with deep and historic holdings, can pose a challenge to interdisciplinary curatorial work as collections are often split up, overseen by specialists in different departments, and stored and exhibited in different spaces depending on their conservation requirements. We, for instance, operate in the administratively separated departments of Photography and Media and Arts of the Americas. In joining our efforts, we are part of recent trends among encyclopedic museums to experiment with organizational structures and consciously team staff across departments to foster interdisciplinary installations, exhibitions, and programs.

Our early development of *Photography and Folk Art* revealed intellectual hurdles, as we approached the story from divergent perspectives on chronology, production, and reception; that is, one set of questions concerned the revival and retrospective elevation of folk priorities and aesthetics (American vernacular arts produced primarily in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), while the other focused on the images made within and reflecting upon the moment's 'present' (documentary photography of the 1930s). Recognizing this lacuna in traditional museum thinking and actively working to locate points of connection revealed new insights. We found a cultural network of key institutions that were celebrating both folk art and photography in these years, as exemplified by an astonishing increase in the number of public exhibitions and publications dedicated to the two fields. As

² Through his writing as well as support for nascent institutions, Kirstein played an essential role in uniting not only photography and folk art, but also dance, theater, and Latin American art. See Jodi Hauptman, ed., *Lincoln Kirstein's Modern*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2019.

they brought both photography and American folk art into American museums for the first time, curators and collectors began to assimilate these popular art forms into the rarefied museum canon. We found an aesthetic overlap, as certain formal qualities and values—works that were egalitarian, unpretentious, self-made—emerged as admirable in both fields, elevating the functions and materials of everyday life. And we found a conceptual connection, as New Deal-era projects in both arenas underlined a shared desire to catalogue, index, and survey either an American past or a present.

This thinking resulted in the exhibition *Photography and Folk Art: Looking for America in the 1930s* (September 19, 2019–January 20, 2020). Examined and viewed together for the first time, the works included in the show revealed how the practice of documentary photography and the study of folk art developed along interconnected paths in the early twentieth century. These twin impulses to collect the past and record the present had a lasting impact in the art world, expanding the definition of American art to encompass more makers and types of work. At stake in the cultural production of 1930s America—making, collecting, exhibiting, publishing, and writing about art—was a national identity, informed by a particularly American folk aesthetic and history. Highlighting these points of intersection allowed us to tell a new story of this critical moment in art and history.

Exhibition as exploration



Figure 1 Installation view, exhibition introduction: *Photography and Folk Art*, Sep 21, 2019–Jan 19, 2020, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago.

Photography and Folk Art grew out of collaborative inquiry into the expanding artistic landscape of the early twentieth century (see fig. 1). The exhibition included over one hundred works of photography, decorative arts, painting, sculpture, and

textiles, drawn almost exclusively from the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, that together demonstrated the convergence of a rising interest in American vernacular arts, collectively referred to as folk art, with the major photographic documentation projects of the Great Depression. Organized into four galleries, the presentation showcased cross-disciplinary research and sought to spark connection among objects often siloed by institutional departmental structures. Functional and decorative objects from a wide geographic and socioeconomic range of American homes were lifted up as artworks to behold: the striking and ubiquitous Windsor chair; delicately chip-carved wooden boxes for preserving family treasures; and whimsical hooked rugs depicting flora and fauna. These works, many of which historically had only been on display in the museum's dedicated folk-art gallery, were now positioned in dialogue with photographs made decades and even centuries later. Interior and exterior views of rustic homes, along with close-ups of the people and objects that occupied them, co-mingled with the material culture of the past.

The exercise of looking outside our own curatorial departments and asking cross-media, cross-temporal questions of these works yielded fruitful observations. Working directly with each other's collections was mutually illuminating, and this process instilled a shared vision that both objects and photographs should be featured in each section of exhibition rather than separated into galleries dedicated to one or the other. Interdisciplinary groupings were organized historically and thematically, in the belief that side by side comparison would reveal certain aesthetic ties linking the visual preferences of the photographers with the material qualities prized by collectors of early vernacular arts: an emphasis on humble materials, worn and unvarnished surfaces, and the elevation of the everyday. After sessions in storage, study rooms, and the galleries looking at possible contenders for the exhibition, we kept a running list of emergent themes: What constitutes art, and why? What are the parallels and differences between the reception of folk art and the production of documentary photography? What role has the government played in supporting the arts? How can we think about racial histories and biases through these works? As celebrations of the ordinary, how did vernacular arts and documentary photography expand the canon of American art in the 1930s? Searching for answers to these questions and more required a multivalent approach to our art-historical research. We adopted methodological practices from the fields of material culture and visual culture, approaching objects as images to be read and images as objects to be considered. We also engaged in social history to reveal the contexts of production and reception; network theory to find the key players in each field; institutional history to understand how these works entered the museum's collection; and formal analysis of disparate objects to elucidate shared aesthetics and features.

The key themes that emerged from this process crystallized around a desire for national unity at a tumultuous time in the United States. Photographers and folk-art collectors were among the many people motivated to document and

preserve works of cultural production; to broaden the canon of American art; and to define and celebrate a shared past. We sought to visualize these themes through the juxtaposition of objects and to reinforce comparative looking and analysis through our interpretive plan. Along with the mix of media in each section of the exhibition, in-gallery texts told stories of how these objects intersected in the 1930s; explained who made, collected, sold, and displayed them; and highlighted aesthetic parallels. We invited viewers to consider the picture of America illustrated by these artworks, and prompted them to think about where, outside of what was included in the exhibition, they might find emblems of our ever-changing nation.

Cataloguing America

By considering the arts a critical part of American infrastructure—that is, by recognizing cultural labor as actual labor and thereby as a means of getting Americans back to work—New Deal programs often adopted an archival strategy. These initiatives surveyed and catalogued art, music, folk tales, and daily life in order both to build up the nation’s confidence during the challenging period of the Depression and provide broad access to paid labor. Two such programs—the Index of American Design and the Farm Security Administration’s Historical Section—proved particularly relevant to the exhibition’s aims. Though operating within different artistic and cultural milieus, they approached their subjects in similar ways and with similar goals.

Formed under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Index of American Design (1935–1942) employed artists to produce watercolor illustrations of American decorative arts and crafts, particularly those having ‘special character which distinctly marks them as of American origin.’³ The Index was overseen by curator and head administrator of the WPA’s Federal Art Project, Cahill; artist and librarian Romana Javitz; textile designer Ruth Reeves; and cultural historian Constance Rourke. Under their guidance, approximately four hundred artists produced over eighteen thousand renderings of American folk arts from the colonial period through the 1800s. The objects were found in public institutions, local museums, and private holdings from thirty-four states representing six regions across the country. Besides supplying employment for artists, the Index had two primary goals: to uncover and recognize a distinctly American cultural heritage based in rich and abundant regional folk traditions and to assemble a visual vocabulary for the future development of American design. ‘If this work is carried to full completion’, Rourke argued, ‘the questions “What is American design?” or “Have we an American design?” may answer themselves, possibly with some

³ Federal Art Project. Supplement no. 1 to the Federal Art Project Manual: Instructions for Index of American Design, Washington, D.C. : Works Progress Administration, 1936, 2. Accessed 12 August 2021, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/ien.35556037402641>.

surprises, certainly with a wealth of fresh materials.’⁴ This vast visual archive remains the largest record of everyday objects from early America.

Such a wide-ranging, ambitious project required a robust organizational structure. The artists and administrators arranged the work by material classification, as one would a regional taxonomy of flora and fauna, and developed an elaborate reference system that included material type, location, and number within each series. Medium classifications such as wood carving, ceramics, furniture, and metalwork were further grouped by subject, like domestic and household arts, Pennsylvania Dutch crafts, rugs, and Spanish-American crafts.⁵ Notably, however, Native American art was excluded from the assessment in the name of keeping the Index manageable—but also due to internal prejudices against such work as ‘ethnographic’ and thus covered elsewhere.⁶ In our exhibition, which featured not the Index’s drawings but the kinds of objects they illustrated, we highlighted the original project’s typologies in the installation and called attention to the absences in the accompanying texts (see fig. 2). Carved duck decoys and wooden birds, redware pottery, and metalware were all displayed by classification in a comparative style intended to emphasize their aesthetic rather than their utilitarian qualities. A Shaker swift and a Zoar side chair hung from the wall like paintings, downplaying function to spotlight form.



Figure 2 Installation view, Index of American Design section: *Photography and Folk Art*, Sep 21, 2019–Jan 19, 2020, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago.

⁴ Constance Rourke, ‘The Index of American Design’, *Articles and Reports* circa 1936–1941, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵ For a comprehensive guide to the Index of American Design see Erwin O. Christiansen, *Index of American Design*, New York: The Macmillan Company; Washington DC: The National Gallery of Art, 1950.

⁶ Federal Art Project. Supplement no. 1 to the Federal Art Project Manual.



Figure 3 Installation view, Farm Security Administration section: *Photography and Folk Art*, Sep 21, 2019–Jan 19, 2020, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago.

The Index's taxonomic approach to culture was further underscored in the exhibition by juxtaposing the objects against a cloud of documentary photographs on the opposite wall (see fig. 3). These photographs—all made under the auspices of the Resettlement Administration (RA, 1935–1937), later reorganized as the Farm Security Administration (FSA, 1937–1942)—represented just a fraction of the most comprehensive effort to that date to document American life and culture. Based in the Department of Agriculture, the RA and FSA provided relief and assistance to rural Americans during the Depression. Roy Stryker, a photographer and economist, headed the program's Historical Section, which was founded to record multiple crises of the nation's agricultural economy during the 1930s, and the government's attempts to address them. The photographs found immediate use in a wide range of contemporary publications, exhibitions, and educational settings, but as the name of the program suggests, it was also designed with an eye toward posterity, and indeed evolved into a historical record of everyday American life. At least twenty photographers worked for the program during its run, producing nearly eighty thousand images—an unequaled national image bank of the Great Depression and the American recovery that continues to resonate today.

At the height of the program, Stryker employed eleven photographers and sent each to specific locations with a rough itinerary and detailed lists of topics and subjects to photograph. Over the course of the project his team included Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Gordon Parks, Edwin Rosskam, Arthur

Rothstein, Ben Shahn, and Marion Post Wolcott, among others. Although the artists maintained their own stylistic approaches, as a whole the RA/FSA prioritized quotidian realities, journalistic clarity, and dignified portrayals of suffering and self-sufficiency alike. Stryker explicitly connected photographs to other documents of folk expression, many being similarly collected by government agencies—for instance, ‘a cowboy ballad taken down by a research scholar, a folk story, an old homespun, a primitive wood whittling’—identifying them as artefacts by which the future could judge the character of the times.⁷ As documents, these photographs captured ways of living that were fading as well as new realities of life in a modern age. Just as the Index of American art bridged past and present, the government’s multilayered photographic project added to a catalogue of folk culture that collectively formed a portrait of America.

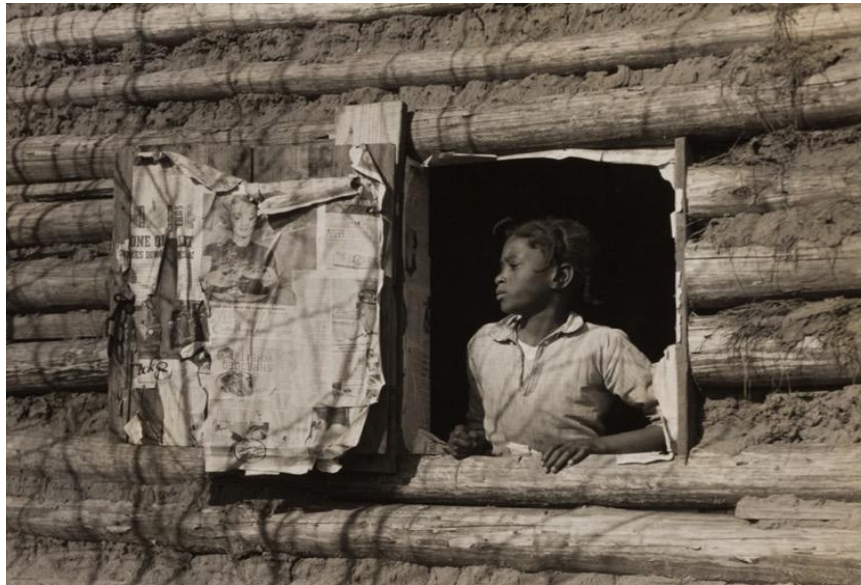


Figure 4 Arthur Rothstein (American, 1915–1985), *Girl at Gee’s Bend, Alabama [Artelia Bendolph]*, April 1937, Gelatin silver print, 18 × 24.4 cm (image); 20.7 × 25.4 cm (paper), The Art Institute of Chicago, through prior gift of Simon and Bonnie Levin, 2018.386.

The program’s photographic negatives and images were kept by the government and considered part of the public domain. As such, authors, journalists, researchers, or simply interested civilians could request, own, or reproduce the images in the agency’s files, and many such images graced the covers of magazines, illustrated articles in newspapers, and reappeared in groundbreaking photobooks, put to new ends by enterprising photo editors. Among the photographs in the exhibition, for example, was Rothstein’s portrait of the young Artelia Bendolph of

⁷ Roy E. Stryker, ‘Plans for Work: Plan to Document the Portrait of Contemporary Americans.’ In *The Likes of Us: America in the Eyes of the Farm Security Administration*, ed. Peter Bacon Hales, Boston: David R. Godine, 2009, 156.

Gee's Bend, Alabama, an isolated community of formerly enslaved people and sharecroppers who maintained unique customs and language (fig. 4). Rothstein was Stryker's first hire for the fledgling Historical Section, and in 1937 he traveled on assignment to Gee's Bend to illustrate the region's conditions before the impact of farm aid and new housing supplied by the government. *Girl at Gee's Bend* portrays Bendolph looking out of a window insulated against the weather by only newspaper advertisements. As Rothstein explained, 'You see the girl—that's effect one. You see the ad—that's effect number two. But the third effect is when you see both images together and recognize the irony.'⁸ In 1940 Richard Wright acquired this print from the FSA while planning his book *12 Million Black Voices*, which united his prose on the experiences of African Americans with powerful images from the archive to reveal the lasting effects of slavery and advocate for racial justice.⁹ This photograph—and, elsewhere in the exhibition, a series of photobooks showing various iterations of Dorothea Lange's *Plantation Owner, Mississippi Delta, Near Clarksdale, Mississippi*, 1936 (fig. 5)—allowed us to explore how images of everyday Americans during the Depression moved from the file to the page, finding new viewers and circulating the ethos and aesthetics of Stryker's program.



Figure 5 Installation view, publications featuring Dorothea Lange's *Plantation Owner, Mississippi Delta: Photography and Folk Art*, Sep 21, 2019–Jan 19, 2020, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago.

⁸ Arthur Rothstein, *Documentary Photography*, Boston: Focal Press, 1986, 39.

⁹ Although this photograph ended up not being included in the book's final edit, its provenance from Wright's collection indicates his interest in the image's themes.

The Index of American Design and the FSA's Historical Section were only two of the most expansive such taxonomic projects mounted under the New Deal. *Photography and Folk Art* also highlighted the parallel effort to catalogue folk music from across the country. The Archive of American Folk Song (later renamed the Archive of Folk Culture) was founded at the Library of Congress in 1928, and throughout the 1930s government employees collected songs. The recordings encompass a remarkably wide range of musical traditions: African American blues and spirituals, Anglo-American ballads and shanties, cowboy tunes from the American West and South, and Native American songs, among others. Working with musician Rhiannon Giddens, who selected a playlist from Library of Congress files, we showcased folk music from a variety of traditions to play in the exhibition. Nor was this archival impulse limited to government agencies. Berenice Abbott, returning to New York after spending the 1920s in Paris, documented the American metropolis's architecture, storefronts, and transportation in a project and book called *Changing New York*. Her intent was not to produce a comprehensive catalogue, but rather to explore the dynamics of change in the built environment. With support from the Federal Art Project, a WPA program run by her friend Cahill, Abbott produced a group of more than three hundred images of historical and contemporary homes and markets, alleys and eateries, harbors and elevated train tracks. Each image was annotated with historical data compiled by a team of researchers. In our exhibition, a selection of works from Abbott's project demonstrated the enduring impact of the cataloguing turn even on independent artists' projects.

Folk aesthetics enter the museum

Every curator has a different approach to exhibition planning—arranging and rearranging images of artworks on the wall, laying out miniature cutouts on a table, or moving digital renderings around with software. Yet one thing inevitably links these different practices: unexpected connections between works that emerge even after careful organization. In *Photography and Folk Art*, one such surprise was the visual resonance between two works positioned across from one another: Walker Evans's 1936 photograph *Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Wife* (fig. 6), and a nineteenth-century maple pitcher (fig. 7). Allie Mae Burroughs, the arresting subject of one of Evans's most iconic photographs, stands against the weather-beaten clapboards of the sharecropper's home she shared with her husband and four children in Alabama. Her direct gaze draws you into the image and its thicket of worn lines—the grooves running across the architecture, the lines on Burroughs's face, and the folds of her thin dress. In the exhibition, her steely eyes stared straight across the gallery at a well-used, mid-nineteenth-century pitcher. Carved from a single piece of maple, the elegant, faceted vessel is covered with signs of its age and use: softened vertical edges, deep horizontal striations across the surface, and overall weathered patina. Displayed in close proximity, the photograph and the

pitcher seemed to enhance in one another the intangible qualities of unadorned authenticity and appealing hardiness prized by collectors, curators, and the public in the 1930s. We imagine Evans would have approved of the pairing, for he later noted, 'You don't want your work to spring from art; you want it to commence from life, and that's in the street now. I...don't want to be "taught" anything, don't want to see "accomplished" art. I'm interested in what's called vernacular.'¹⁰

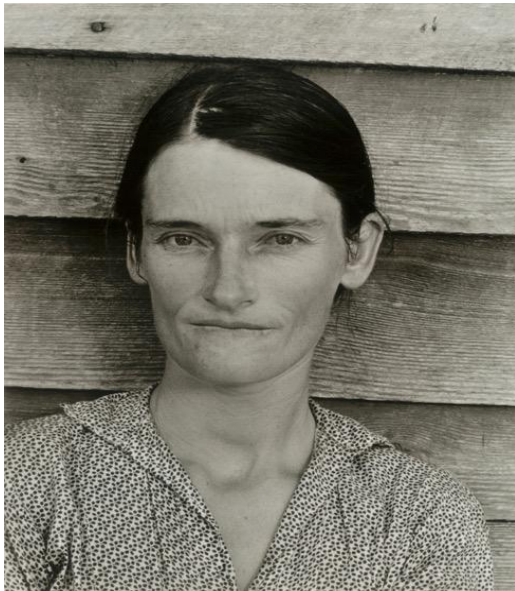


Figure 6 Walker Evans (American, 1903–1975), *Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Wife*, 1936, printed c. 1962, Gelatin silver print, 21 × 17 cm (image/paper); 45.7 × 35.6 cm (mount), The Art Institute of Chicago, purchased with funds provided by Mrs. James Ward Thorne, 1962.158. © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 7 Artist unknown, *Pitcher*, c. 1820–1860, Maple, 21.6 × 18.4 × 12.7 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, Thorne Rooms Exhibition Fund, 1946.760.

Evans was not alone in these interests; indeed, in the process of developing the exhibition we created a network map of the many collectors, critics, curators, and dealers invested in defining, elevating, and circulating American folk art. At the forefront of this widespread effort was Halpert; when she opened the American Folk Art Gallery with Cahill in 1931, it was the first commercial gallery dedicated entirely to this material. Cahill had been immersed in the field longer than Halpert; as she later attested, 'a lot of other people got there before me. I did not invent folk art.'¹¹ She did, however, remove it from the context of antiques, emphasizing its potential to inspire contemporary artists. As she noted in the press release for the

¹⁰ Leslie Katz, 'Interview with Walker Evans', *Art in America* vol. 59, March–April 1971, 84.

¹¹ Oral history interview with Edith Gregor Halpert, 1962–1963. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Accessed 28 April 2022, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-edith-gregor-halpert-12947>.

gallery's opening, 'These paintings and sculptures have been collected over a period of years all over the country. They have been carefully selected, not because of their antiquity, historical association, utilitarian value, or the fame of their makers, but because of their aesthetic quality and their definite relation to American modern art.'¹²



Figures 8a–b Jonas Welch Holman (American, 1805–1873), *Woman with a Book* and *Man with a Pen*, c. 1827–1830, Oil on yellow poplar panel, each 70.8 × 54.6 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Robert Allerton, 1946.392–93.

The American Folk Art Gallery was active through the early 1940s, shaping the emerging field through dynamic exhibitions and cultivating new patrons for early American artifacts. In 1937 Halpert hosted *American Folk Art Sculpture: Index of American Design, Federal Art Project*, which featured watercolors from the Index alongside folk art objects from her own inventory. She excelled at marketing these vernacular artworks to individual collectors and museums, notably Abby Aldridge Rockefeller, who amassed an extensive collection of folk art that was exhibited in 1932 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750–1900*. The Art Institute's collection was also bolstered by her passionate and savvy marketing of American vernacular art. In 1938, for instance, Art Institute trustee Robert Allerton purchased a pair of pendant portraits

¹² Edith Halpert, Press Release, September 14, 1931, Reel 5641, Frames 320: Press releases (1 of 2), 1926–1968, undated, Downtown Gallery records, 1824–1974, bulk 1926–1969, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Accessed 28 April, 2022, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/downtown-gallery-records-6293/subseries-7-1/reel-5641105-frames-287-465>.

by Jonas Welch Holman from Halpert's American Folk Art Gallery, which he later donated to the museum (fig. 8). Holman was a self-taught painter who also worked as a doctor, preacher, and writer. The flatness of the compositions, stiffness of the figures, and starkly delineated features like almond-shaped eyes are hallmarks of folk painting as it came to be defined in the 1930s. Weather vanes, too, were a popular offering at the American Folk Art Gallery (see fig. 9). Halpert began collecting them in the 1920s on road trips throughout the Northeast, stopping to barter with their owners and removing them from rooftops herself. ('I carried slacks with me, and I'd climb into all sorts of dirty joints', she recalled.¹³) *Time* magazine reported that she 'busily stripped the New England skyline of more than a hundred vanes' for sale to collectors and museums, including the Art Institute (see fig. 10).¹⁴



Figure 9 Installation view of the Downtown Gallery, undated folk art exhibition, Archives of American Art.
Figure 10 Artist unknown (American, nineteenth century), *Peacock Weather Vane*, 1800/60, Iron; 131.8 × 71.1 × 2.5 cm,
The Art Institute of Chicago, Elizabeth R. Vaughan Fund, 1952.549.

These objects and images from everyday life inspired new collectors—both individual and institutional—to shape a more expansive vision of American art. *Photography and Folk Art* thus developed into an opportunity to reflect on the Art Institute's collecting histories. In the museum world, exhibitions of folk art did not take place with any regularity before the 1930s, and these pioneering exhibitions were often based on the groundwork laid by individual collectors and dealers.¹⁵ As early as 1924, the Whitney Museum opened *Early American Art*, an exhibition of folk art from the collections of American modern artists; that same year Viola and Elie Nadelman opened the Museum of Folk and Peasant Arts, widely considered the

¹³ Oral history interview with Edith Gregor Halpert.

¹⁴ 'Art: The Useful and the Agreeable', *TIME* vol. LXIV, no. 13 (27 September 1954). Accessed 7 September 2021, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,820352,00.html>.

¹⁵ See Elizabeth Stillinger, *A Kind of Archaeology: Collecting American Folk Art, 1976-1976*, Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011.

first museum dedicated to folk art in the United States, in Riverdale, New York. In the 1930s, however, the displays dedicated to a vast range of functional objects made in America soared exponentially; the year 1932 alone saw *Folk Arts* at the Folk Arts Center in New York; *American Folk Art, Painting and Sculpture* at the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts; the *Centennial Exhibition–American Folk Art* at the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York; *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and many more.



Figure 11 "A Rare Collection of Early American Furniture Now on Exhibit in Gallery L", *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* vol. 39, no. 5 (Sep.–Oct., 1945), 66.

Rather than emphasizing the context of the works' making, *Photography and Folk Art* called attention to the context of collecting, providing information about the patrons and their motivations as a means of understanding our own museum's past. The Art Institute's collection of vernacular arts was formed by enthusiasts who actively acquired everyday objects from America's past during the first half of the twentieth century. In Massachusetts, Bernard and Margaret Behrend amassed an extensive group of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England decorative arts through the 1920s and 1930s. The collection was an homage to, as *The Magazine Antiques* reported, 'those indomitable early colonists who succeeded in building homes in the wilderness and in introducing a measure of comfort into an unfriendly environment'.¹⁶ Many of the Behrends' works, including the aforementioned wooden pitcher, went on view at the Art Institute as part of a 1945 loan exhibition, *The Craft Tradition in American Household Art*, before entering the collection in 1946

¹⁶ 'Antiques in Domestic Settings: An Early Colonial Home in Massachusetts', *Magazine Antiques* vol. XL, no. 5 (November 1941): 288–290.

(fig. 11).¹⁷ Likewise, Elizabeth Vaughan, a collector in Maine, gathered early American furniture, textiles, silhouettes, and other objects during the 1930s and 1940s. After her death in 1949, her brother Russell Tyson, an Art Institute trustee, selected nearly one hundred objects for the museum in her memory. When these works went on view in 1953, the show was hailed as the first exhibition of folk art in the city and celebrated in the *Art Institute of Chicago Quarterly* as ‘the truest and most unself-conscious expression of American character’.¹⁸

While almost none of these exhibitions included contemporary photography, even then there were people who were invested in these two seemingly disparate categories of art. Kirstein, for instance, worked simultaneously to promote both disciplines, helping to foster their increasingly welcome reception in galleries and museums. In 1930, while still a student, he notably organized the aforementioned *American Folk Paintings of Three Centuries* and *Photography*. He then enlisted Walker Evans to aid him on a project close to his heart, photographing American Victorian architecture in New England and New York. The resulting works were mounted in *Nineteenth Century Architecture* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1933. In MoMA’s *Bulletin* that year, Kirstein wrote that Evans’s style was based on ‘on moral virtues of patience, surgical accuracy and self-effacement’, an aesthetic of Puritanical self-restraint that seems to align with the utilitarian ethos of the folk art revival.¹⁹ His push to exhibit photographs in the museum was also in keeping with similar efforts in the 1930s by New York gallerists, such as Becker and Levy, to establish American and European contemporary photography with a modern, ‘straight’ vocabulary that countered earlier painterly movements and sentimental camera-club aesthetics.²⁰ (Becker and Levy also displayed collections of folk art during that period, although not alongside photographs.) Photography was beginning to be

¹⁷ The shared provenance of these works had been lost in the museum record until research for *Photography and Folk Art* was underway. After the 1945 exhibition, most of these works were purchased by the museum and thus have a variety of credit lines. The collection ties were reestablished through archival and curatorial records related to *The Craft Tradition in American Household Art*. See Behrend file, curatorial collector files, department of Arts of the Americas, Art Institute of Chicago.

¹⁸ Sawyer, Alan R. ‘American Folk Art’, *The Art Institute of Chicago Quarterly* vol. 47, no. 1, Feb. 1, 1953, 12.

¹⁹ Lincoln Kirstein, ‘Walker Evans’ Photographs of Victorian Architecture’, *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, vol. 1, no. 4 (December 1933), 4. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/405803>.

²⁰ See Sarah M. Miller, ‘Inventing “Documentary” in American Photography, 1930–1945’, PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2009. Some examples include *American Photography: Retrospective Exhibition*, Julien Levy Gallery, 1931; *Photographs by Three Americans* [Walker Evans, Ralph Steiner, Margaret Bourke-White], John Becker Gallery, 1931; *Photographs of New York by New York Photographers*, Julien Levy Gallery, 1932; and *Documentary and Anti-Graphic Photographs* [Manuel Alvarez-Bravo, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Walker Evans], Julien Levy Gallery, 1935.

understood not as a practice marginal to fine art but one at home in the same institutions and central to visual expressions of modernity.

Photography's arrival in museums was heralded with the greatest fanfare by Walker Evans's 1938 MoMA exhibition, *American Photographs*, the museum's first retrospective dedicated to a photographer—and one that defined modern photography as linked not to the European avant-garde but to a homegrown, vernacular expression. With one hundred photographs made between 1929 and 1936—an astonishingly fruitful period for Evans that included his work for the FSA, much of which was featured—the exhibition helped define a documentary approach in photography. Evans eschewed the painterly, romantic, and fussy in favor of a pared-down, dispassionate aesthetic that found poetry in humble subjects cleanly described. He was captivated by the ways everyday Americans marked their surroundings, turning his camera toward subjects as diverse as hand-painted signs and movie posters, roadside fruit and vegetable stands, storefronts, main streets, gas stations, and cars. Even his interests in photography were utilitarian in origin—he was drawn to 'penny pictures', collected common travel postcards, and looked back to the Civil War photographs of Mathew Brady and the Parisian documents of Eugène Atget.²¹ Kirstein penned the introduction for the exhibition's accompanying catalogue, marking Evans as a chronicler of contemporary American culture. The artist's work, he wrote, 'refers to the continuous fact of an indigenous American expression, whatever its source, whatever form it has taken, whether in sculpture, paint, or architecture: that native accent we find again in Kentucky mountain and cowboy ballads, in the compositions Steven Foster adapted from Irish folk-song and in contemporary swing-music'.²² In our exhibition, a formal grid of twenty of Evans's photographs, including the portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs, greeted selections from the Behrend and Vaughn collections to illustrate the simultaneous entrance of both photography and folk art into museums that had long excluded the visual and material culture of everyday American life.

The canon of American art was being challenged and expanded to include images and objects of everyday life that advocates such as Kirstein saw as bridging the nation's past with its present. The synchronous acceptance of these art forms within institutions was rooted in the desire to present America's creative past as a means to inspire contemporary artistic production as well as inspire national pride in a difficult time for the country. *Photography and Folk Art* visualized these parallels between the introduction of folk art within public collections and the simultaneous institutional embrace of documentary photography: folk art as vibrant and dynamic

²¹ Indeed much recent scholarship has focused on Evans's intersections with vernacular, rather than folk, culture. See Clément Chéroux, ed., *Walker Evans*, Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2017, and Diana Hulick, 'Walker Evans and Folk Art', *History of Photography* vol. 17, no. 2, Summer 1993: 139–146.

²² Lincoln Kirstein, 'Photographs of America: Walker Evans', in *Walker Evans: American Photographs*, Museum of Modern Art, 1938, 198.

examples of American ingenuity and documentary photography as a new art form emblematic of the country's modern character and vitality.

America's 'usable past' and continuing traditions

As we approached the Art Institute's collection in new ways we discovered how Americans mined the nation's past in service of the present, a practice that informed both the production and reception of art in the 1930s. It is hard to overestimate the shock and devastation millions experienced as a result of the October 29, 1929, stock market crash and the economic stagnation that ensued. The struggle to rebuild in the face of national crisis prompted a collective reexamination of American culture and values. In 1918 historian and literary critic Van Wyck Brooks recommended engaging history to prompt literary growth, in the belief that American historical precedents could lay the groundwork for future vibrant writing. 'Discover, invent a usable past we certainly can', he wrote, 'and that is what vital criticism always does.'²³ Collectors, critics, curators, writers, and other cultural agents in the 1930s seized on this idea and applied it to a range of creative endeavors—building folk art collections, exhibiting these artworks in museums and public spaces, and centering America's history rather than Europe's in their interpretation.

Painted furniture, samplers, and photographs of colonial-era gravestones were some of the objects wielded in nostalgic—and highly selective—celebration of early America as an idealized land of simplicity, stability, and patriotism. The careful embroidery of samplers, often made as part of girls' education in the eighteenth century, came to represent colonial-era values of industriousness and creativity. The Windsor chair, a light and comfortable form inspired by English designs and quickly adopted by American craftspeople in the colonial period, evolved in the early twentieth century into a beloved symbol of the country's resourceful past. Windsor chairs were made out of a wide range of native woods and fashioned to suit domestic, commercial, and public spaces alike. As an advertisement from the early twentieth century for this 'quaint' style notes, 'in the early Colonial days, the Windsor chair . . . found its way into the permanent affections of the American people.'²⁴ The basic form with its upright spindles, sculpted seat, and splayed legs was simple, durable, and infinitely adaptable—the object equivalent of a resilient nation.

In *Photography and Folk Art*, these totems of early American creativity and industry were positioned across from photographs of the nation's built environment to show the many, previously neglected, points in American history that were collected, captured on film, and elevated at this time (fig. 12). Photographers active

²³ Van Wyck Brooks, 'On Creating a Usable Past', *The Dial* 64 (11 April 1918), 337–41.

²⁴ Advertisement, Stickley Bros. Company, *Good Furniture Magazine* vol. 23, no. 5 (November, 1923), 11.



Figure 12 Installation view, *Usable Past* section: *Photography and Folk Art*, Sep 21, 2019–Jan 19, 2020, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago.

Figure 13 Walker Evans (American, 1903–1975), *House in Oak Bluff, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts*, c. 1931, Gelatin silver print, 15.9 × 11.3 cm (image/paper/first mount); 19.7 × 14.8 cm (second mount), The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Alan E. Koppel, 1982.1813. © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

in the 1930s turned their cameras on the country's historic architectural landscape, capturing a range of nineteenth-century Victorian building types, from simple wooden churches to the imposing Brooklyn Bridge. Some of these subjects were structures in decay, melancholic portraits of what was left behind in the face of progress, while others were signals of innovation in the American landscape. Clarence John Laughlin built a career photographing antebellum architecture in the American South, while Sherril V. Schell focused on the dramatic lines of early skyscrapers in New York City. We installed their work alongside one of the photographs of Victorian houses captured by Walker Evans for his *Nineteenth Century Architecture* project (fig. 13). For both photographers and folk art enthusiasts, America's history became a wellspring for regeneration, and as they turned to varying historical moments for inspiration, they showed it wasn't just one past being tapped, but many.

As artists, curators, and dealers elevated the American decorative arts of the past through exhibitions, private collections, and publications of folk art, vernacular artistic traditions continued to inform the production of new work. The final gallery of the exhibition explored this continuity through works in several different mediums that engaged directly with daily life. These included Dorothea Lange's intimate photographs of migrant laborers, sharecroppers, and other citizens during the Depression; quilts made from creatively repurposed materials, like fabrics originally used to pack or promote goods such as cigars, flour, sugar, and tobacco; and tramp art, an early twentieth century movement in woodworking where makers notched, whittled, and layered salvaged materials to create domestic objects (fig. 14). Tramp art, in particular, was an artistic practice, born from the detritus of everyday life, that spanned generations but took on greater resonance in a time of material need. Practitioners manipulated wood from common items like cigar boxes

and shipping crates to create rhythmic, three-dimensional surfaces on household objects. This vernacular tradition was transmitted through oral instruction and pamphlets, as well as study of existing works—an artistic practice of making something from nothing. The theme of reuse and recycling was further underlined by the display of photobooks featuring the reprinting—and reinterpreting, through different croppings and contexts—of one of Lange’s photographs (see fig. 5). The humble materials, techniques, and subject matter not only imparted a connection with the past but also impacted artistic practice far beyond the domains of photography and folk art and into modern American art more generally.

Photography and folk art in the twenty-first century

Nearly a century after the 1929 stock market crash, *Photography and Folk Art* resonated with an America that was facing new crises of identity. In the year 2019–20, the question of what authentic American expression should *look like* was not a long-settled matter but an ongoing concern, inflected by debates about national identity as well as aesthetic preference. At a moment of political polarization and increasing wealth inequality when some were attempting to limit who counted as American through ethnicity and national origin, the exhibition’s historical lessons were highly relevant. The show reminded us, for example, of the widespread and vibrant cultural production initiated and supported by the government through numerous Depression-era public programs; just a few weeks after the exhibition closed, a pandemic and a new recession led many to call for another New Deal. The story of formerly marginalized vernacular art entering museums in the 1930s felt fresh to those of us experiencing another wave of democratization at our institutions, which has seen some hierarchies and boundaries—of medium as well as maker—break down as we shake up our acquisitions and exhibitions to produce more compelling and equitable narratives. The almost century between the past we were engaging and our own present threw into relief how far museums have come and highlighted how far they have yet to go. At the heart of *Photography and Folk Art* was the question of whose creative expressions have been considered valuable; this is essentially the same question we ask as we seek to dismantle structural racism within cultural institutions.

With *Photography and Folk Art*, we proposed a collaborative model for future scholarship, exhibitions, and storytelling around the permanent collection. Moving beyond our individual areas of expertise opened us up to new connections—across works of art, institutional histories, and cultural agents—and allowed us to consider alternative narratives of art history. As museums continue to interrogate their own collections with an eye toward incorporating marginalized stories into the mainstream, an exhibition such as this can be a roadmap for similar installations and interpretive programming. And as an apt reminder of how much the past continues to inform present-day debates, such projects encourage us to reflect on our own histories, assumptions, and usable pasts.

Elizabeth McGoey is the Ann S. and Samuel M. Mencoff Associate Curator of Arts of the Americas at the Art Institute of Chicago. McGoey recently organized *Landscape in Light: The Tiffany Window at the Art Institute of Chicago* (2021), highlighting a landmark acquisition, and edited and co-authored *Silver in the Art Institute of Chicago* (2017). She is the co-curator of *Photography and Folk Art: Looking for America in the 1930s*.

emcgoey@artic.edu

Elizabeth Siegel is Curator of Photography and Media at the Art Institute of Chicago. Among her publications are *André Kertész: Postcards from Paris* (2021); *Abelardo Morell: The Universe Next Door* (2013); *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums* (2010); and *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage* (2009). She is the co-curator of *Photography and Folk Art: Looking for America in the 1930s*.

esiegel@artic.edu



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