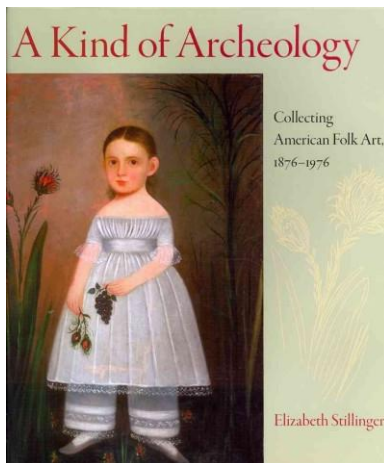


**A Kind of Archeology: Collecting American Folk Art, 1876-1976**, by Elizabeth Stillinger. University of Massachusetts Press, October 2011. 464 p. ill. ISBN 9781558497443 (cl.), \$65.00.



In the first chapter of *A Kind of Archeology*, “The Folk Art Idea,” Elizabeth Stillinger, an independent scholar, maps out American folk art’s complex relationships: to primitivism, vernacular art, nationalism, romanticism, Darwinism, industrialization, the Colonial Revival, the Arts and Crafts movement, and to designers, decorators, dealers and interior decoration. She provides a context in which to situate individual collectors who were active in the years between the American centennial of 1876—when American folk art was not widely appreciated and the market for it was wide open—and the bicentennial of 1976, by which time collectors had snatched up the good stuff and market values excluded all but the well-heeled from buying it.

Although the title of the book stakes out a hundred-year time frame, the content is not presented as a chronology but is divided into four thematic parts: Folk Art; Ethnology, and Antiquarianism; Folk Art and Modern Art; The Decorative and Aesthetic Uses of Folk Art; and Folk Art, Patriotism, and Nationalism. Within each of these divisions, Stillinger tells the story of collecting through the biographies of the collectors, such as Henry Chapman Mercer, whose fascination with the ethnology of old everyday objects was presented in his museum as a hanging display wherein boats, chairs, and implements were suspended from the ceiling, and Isabel Carleton Wilde, whose collection was sold off piecemeal to sustain her and her family through the Great Depression. Some collectors, such as Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Electra Havemeyer Webb, Albert Barnes and Henry Du Pont are well known and documented in other sources, but Stillinger sheds new light and a critical eye on their activities and relationships. Biographical sketches of other collectors, including dealers, curators, researchers, artists, and decorators fill out the volume, each one valuable as a snapshot of individual motivation and passion as well as a component of an overarching and often complex narrative.

Stillinger notes in her preface that “it will be said that this work concentrates on the Northeast and therefore ignores most of the rest of the country.” This statement should be viewed not as a failing on her part but as a challenge to other regional researchers to complement what she has accomplished here. The book is illustrated with over 300 photographs, many in color and many published for the first time, one appendix of important early folk art exhibitions, another appendix on important early folk art auctions, and a substantial selected bibliography. It is a welcome addition to the literature of American folk art and is highly recommended for art libraries.

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