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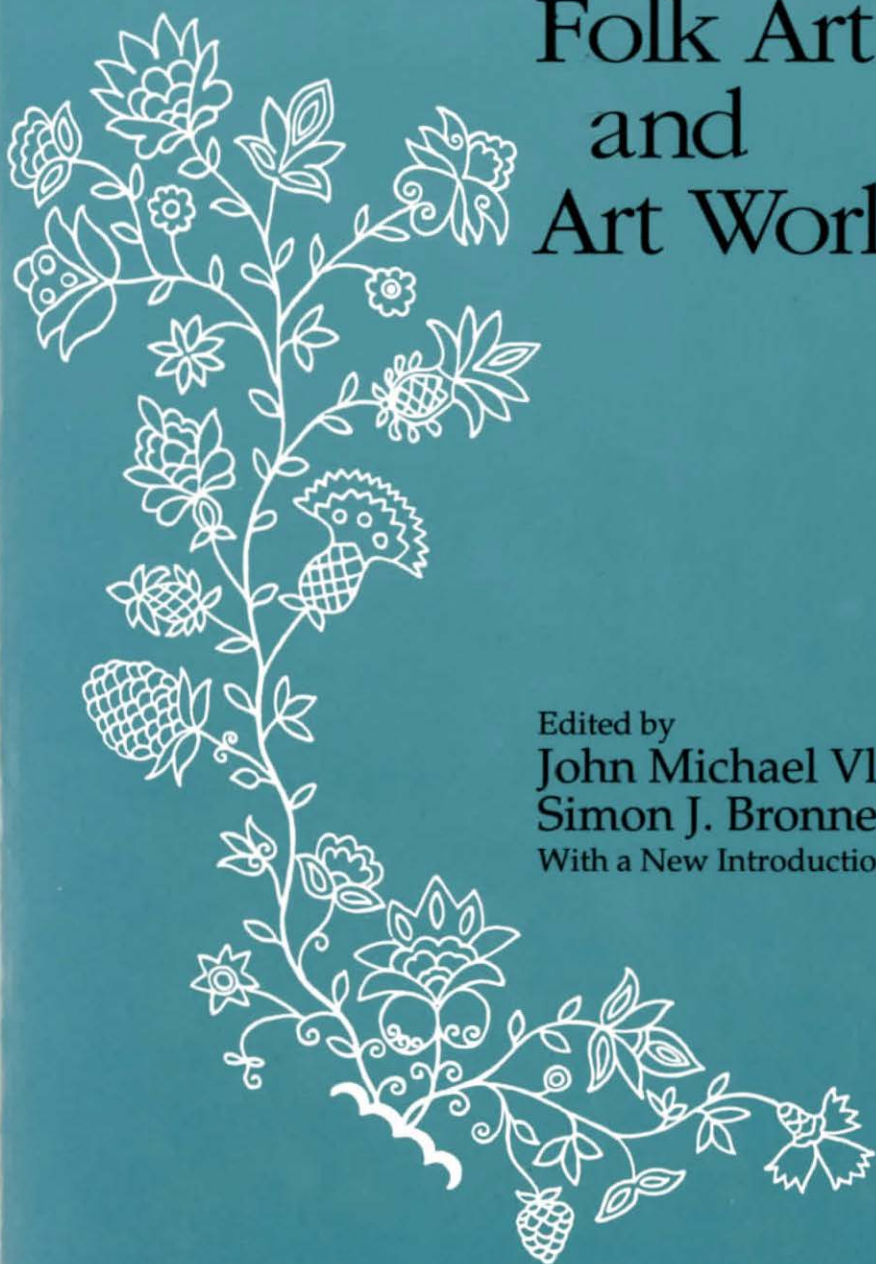
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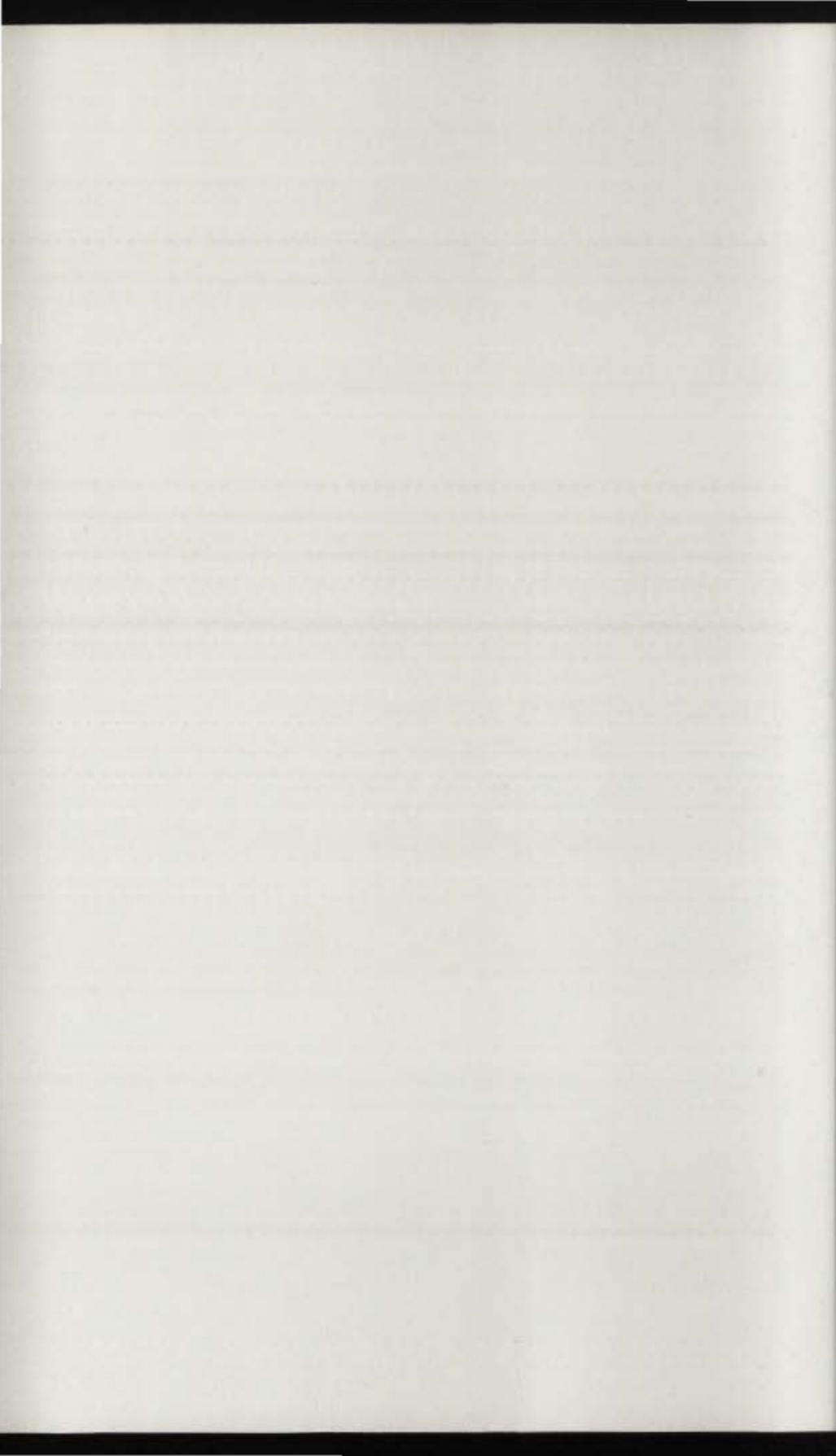
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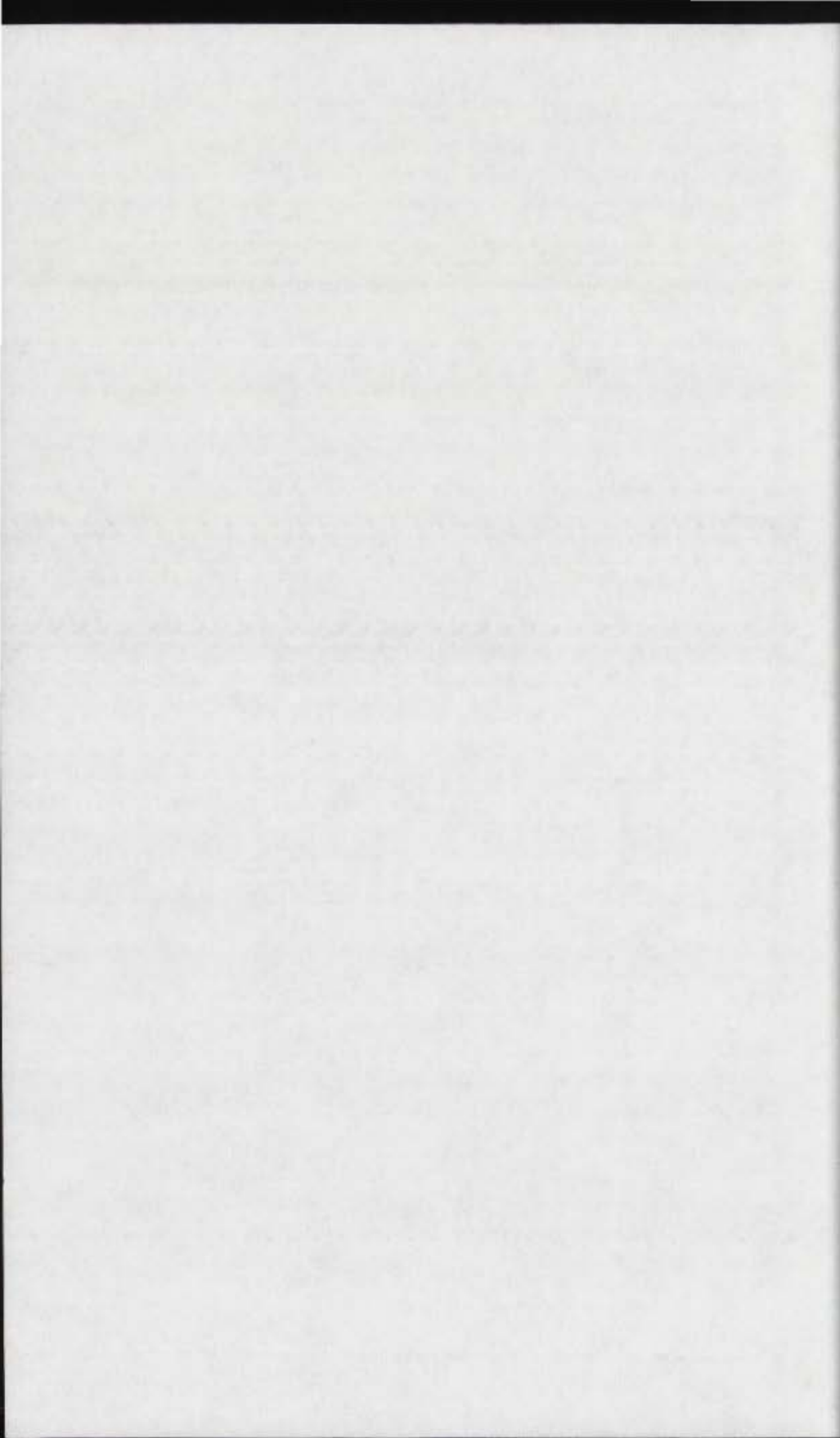
Folk Art and Art Worlds

Edited by
**John Michael Vlach and
Simon J. Bronner**
With a New Introduction





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**Utah State University Press
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For America's folk artists



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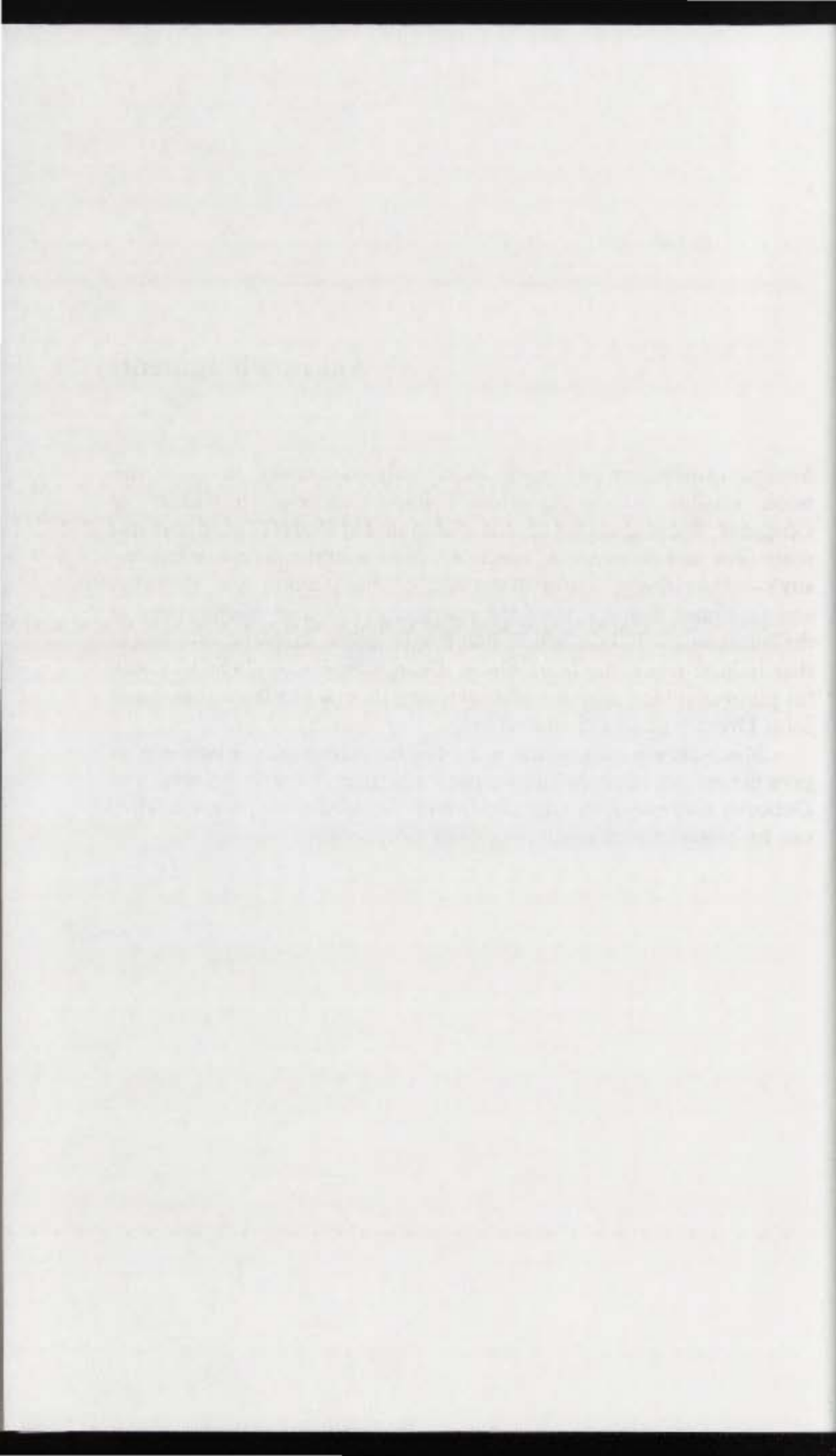
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Many phone calls, visits, and a few basketball games between us gave life to this book. While we put it together, Beverly Brannan and Deborah Bowman gave sage advice and displayed great patience. They can be credited with reminding us of worlds other than art.



Foreword

It is appropriate to begin this book by glancing back at the conference that was the book's progenitor. It took place at the Library of Congress on December 5 and 6, 1983, and we called it "The Washington Meeting on Folk Art." The word "meeting" was carefully chosen to emphasize the need many of us felt for a "meeting of minds" on the subject of folk art. The board of trustees and staff of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress were conscious that different people, both as individuals and as representatives of different networks, were using the phrase "folk art" to mean different things. Not only did scholars in fields such as folklore studies, anthropology, art history, and American studies differ in their views of what constitutes folk art, but museum curators, art dealers, and collectors also seemed at odds in their use of the term.

Nor was the problem simply a lack of communication. In 1977 a conference on the subject of folk art had been hosted by the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum (Delaware), and representatives of the various networks that have a stake in the phrase "folk art" were all there. The result, as Scott Swank reported in his introduction to the subsequent publication *Perspectives on American Folk Art*, was a "highly charged" atmosphere with passionately contending factions and a residue of hard feelings.¹ Clearly the proper use of the term "folk art"—even its custody in a proprietary sense—was a vital issue with important aesthetic, ideological, and financial implications for all concerned.

But what *was* the issue? Were people simply using the same phrase to describe essentially different phenomena? If so, we were faced with a simple though unpalatable problem: trying to decide which group got to use "folk art" to describe the things that interested them, and which groups had to search elsewhere for a suitable term.

But another possibility seemed both more complicated and more intriguing. What if the various folk art networks were like the proverbial blind men with the elephant, each concentrating on a different aspect of an artistic phenomenon with an underlying unity? Whatever the case, six years had passed since the Winterthur conference, and evidence abounded of what diplomats call "movement" in some of the positions on the subject. It was time for a meeting of the minds.

As the American Folklife Center, in cooperation with the Museum of American Folk Art, began laying plans for the Washington Meeting on Folk Art, we were especially concerned that the gathering be structured to emphasize conciliation and cooperation among the many "worlds" (as our editors have felicitously termed them) that buy, sell, display, encourage, or reflect upon folk art. Although there were many conflicting ideas and viewpoints presented on the floor, a resolute tranquility seemed to prevail. At times the ideas presented seemed merely to coexist without directly confronting each other.

Yet beneath the tranquil surface one could detect the beginnings of new connections within and among the groups assembled. For example, the museum curators and collectors seemed concerned with updating their definition of folk art to include living as well as historical artists. Meanwhile, the folklorists were preoccupied with exploring ethical ramifications of working with folk artists. The two issues may have seemed unrelated, but there was an interesting point of intersection: thinking of folk art as present as well as past means dealing with living artists, which requires considering ethical issues.

Everyone remembers his own magic moments from such a conference. My own favorite memory is the moment, during the second day of the conference, when a question-and-answer period evolved into a lively discussion among several members of the audience about ethical considerations in buying, selling, and exhibiting works of living folk arts. As the conversations became lively, audience members forgot about the speakers up front and simply spoke to one another. That was the point at which I was satisfied we had truly created a "meeting."

Of the many topics presented at the conference, Simon Bronner and John Michael Vlach have concentrated on a social theme of "folk art worlds." Highlighting certain conference strands, they have set others aside.² Yet the new fabric woven from these selected threads is tight, and we are confident that it will wear well in the years to come.

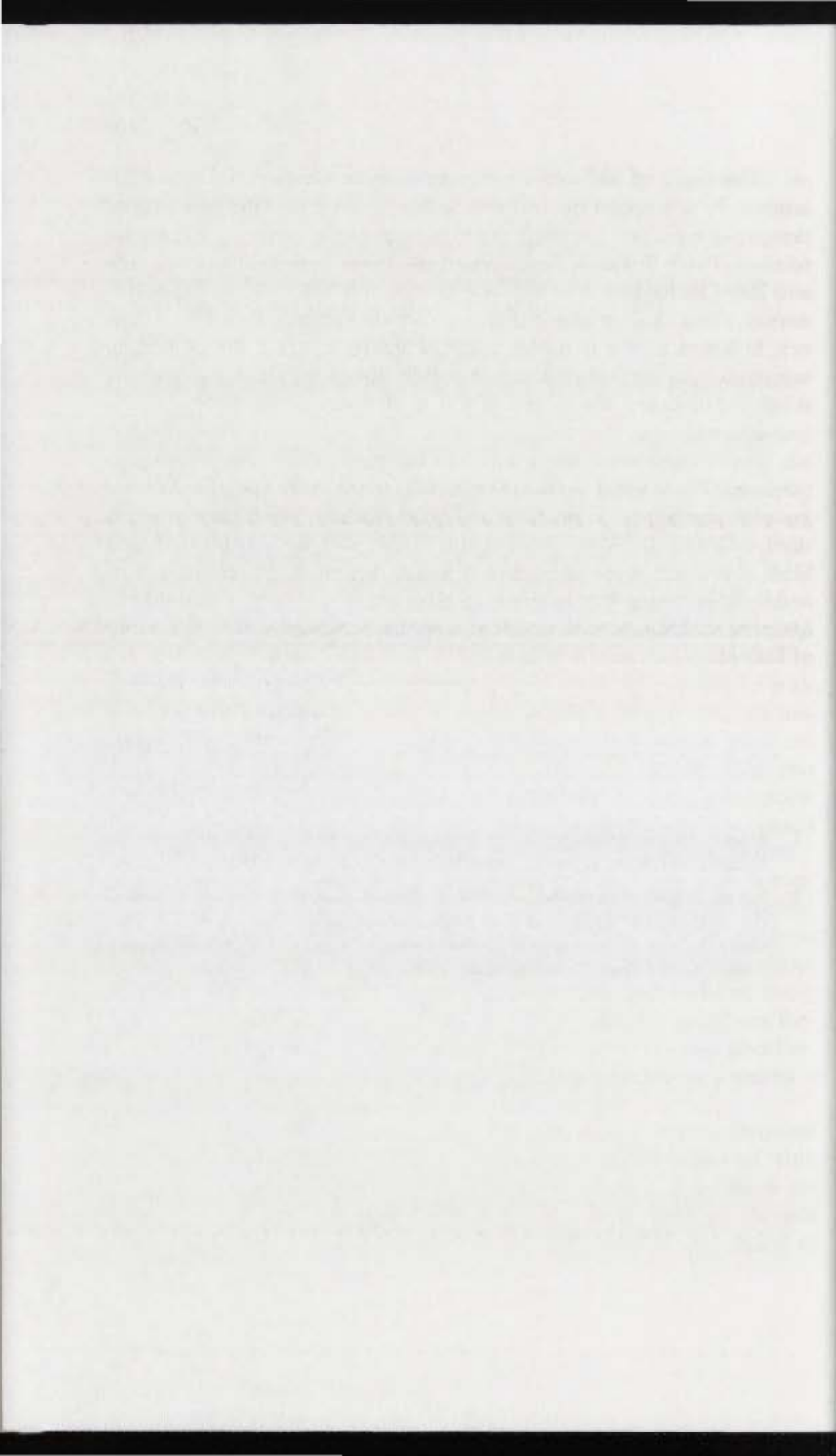
The years of additional perspective from which this foreword is written do not lessen our debt to Robert Bishop and the Museum of American Folk Art for their contributions to the success of the conference. Peter T. Bartis coordinated the event with skill and aplomb, and Ray Dockstader lent his wise perspective throughout. Janet Anderson, then chair of the American Folklife Center's Board of Trustees, believed in the need for such a conference from the beginning and made sure a good idea would not die aborning; and Raye Virginia Allen represented the board at the conference in her splendid, inimitable way.

For a good conference one can fairly thank everyone who participated. For a good book it is possible to be more specific. We are grateful that Simon J. Bronner and John Michael Vlach have devoted their editorial skills to creating this book, and we are pleased that UMI Research Press is issuing it in its American Material Culture and Folklife series. Under these auspices the effects of the Washington Meeting on Folk Art will continue to radiate and resonate in the study of folk art.

*Alan Jabbour, Director
American Folklife Center
The Library of Congress*

Notes for the Preface

1. Scott T. Swank, "Introduction," in *Perspectives on American Folk Art*, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby and Scott T. Swank (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), pp. 1-12.
2. For those who trace the history of ideas through conferences as well as books, the Washington Meeting on Folk Art is usefully chronicled by Gerald E. Parsons, Jr., and Brett Topping in the American Folklife Center's newsletter *Folklife Center News* (January-March 1984), no. 1.



Introduction to the New Edition

The folk art worlds that we identified in the first edition of this book now seem even more real, more entrenched. Reviewing the record of exhibitions and publications over the last few years strengthens our principal claim that one's approach to folk art is contingent upon one's social or intellectual milieu. Works of folk art may seem to elicit either speculation about art objects or concerns for their creators—the art or the folk—but these responses are determined less by the work of art itself than by the particular art world with which one is affiliated. Those who pursue the art belong most often to the world of dealers, collectors, and gallery professionals, while those who concentrate on the folk belong mainly to the world of academe. And by most accounts these two worlds remain at odds (see Hall 1991; Vlach 1991b; Bishop 1983; Jones 1980). We hasten to add, however, that those who focus on folk artists do not necessarily overlook the matter of aesthetics. Indeed, they ardently seek out the aesthetic values and attitudes undergirding works of folk art. They tend to pay considerably more attention to the judgments made by traditional artists and their intended audiences than to the evaluations made by collectors, and therein lies the source of conflicts between gallery and academic perspectives.

That a truce in the ongoing term warfare between these two camps is unlikely to be declared soon was signaled by the symposium organized in 1988 by Frank J. Miele, one of the owners of the Hirschl & Adler Galleries in New York City. Entitled "Folk or Art?" this gathering of commentators was organized in order to elicit support for what might be termed the formalist/aesthetic position of art marketeers. Objecting to the sociological or material culture approach to folk art taken by folklorists and other scholars, Miele wanted to validate the aesthetic qualities that collectors claim to experience in folk art objects. At the conclusion of the event, folklorists were scolded for their anthropological preoccupations and urged to recast their methods (Miele 1989).

Folklorists have usually responded to these sorts of attacks by continuing to argue for the need to locate authentic works rather than those that are merely visually intriguing. They have consistently cited the importance of communal orientation and cultural context as essential criteria for determining the value of a work of art. Probably the most forthright expression of the folkloristic stance

is the National Heritage Fellowship Program of the Folk Arts Division of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Since 1982 nearly 150 highly talented individuals have been recognized as National Heritage Fellows for their abilities in quilting, ironwork, woodcarving, pottery, embroidery, basketry, weaving, and other related traditional arts. Acknowledged as "exemplary master artists," these must pass tests of "authenticity, excellence, and significance within a particular tradition" (NEA Guidelines). It is to such exemplary artists that folklorists turn when asked to identify important examples of folk artistry rather than to the weathervane that sold for over a million dollars at the latest Sotheby's auction. Instead of focusing on treasured objects, folklorists look to these "living national treasures," recently described by Steve Siporin in his book *America's Folk Masters: The National Heritage Fellows* (1992).

Despite the example provided by a notable public agency like the NEA, the popular response to folk art reveals that simplistic stereotypes still dominate public perceptions. The gushy talk commonly heard in galleries about "innocence," "charm," and "virtue" has spilled over even onto the floor of the United States Senate. In the summer of 1989, during the furor provoked by Senator Jesse Helms' (R-North Carolina) reaction to publicly funded exhibitions of controversial photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, several Senators invoked the image of folk art as an example of all that was wholesome and righteous in American life and art. Further, in order to censure the NEA for supporting these objectionable exhibitions, the Senate reassigned monies from the budget of the agency's Visual Arts program (which was responsible for recommending these exhibitions) specifically to the Folk Arts program. In a published reaction to the thinking reflected by this move, folklorist Deborah Kodish points out that because traditional arts serve complex functions in their given communities, they are rarely as open and available to everyone as is generally imagined. Authentic works of folk art, she argues, are quite likely to be incomprehensible or even, at times, offensive to the general public. Kodish concludes that folk art is nowhere near as pleasant, innocent, or safe as the Congress and the general public want to believe (Kodish 1991).

Hoping to inform the public about the cultural values embedded in folk art, folklorists have mounted an impressive number of museum exhibitions. Their efforts have been especially vigorous in the American heartland where books accompanying exhibits have featured folk arts in Iowa (Ohrn 1984), Wisconsin (John Michael Kohler Arts Center 1987), North Dakota (Martin 1989), and Minnesota (Moore 1989). Other states covered by folk art inventories include Idaho (Siporin 1984), Pennsylvania (Staub 1988a), Washington (Lund 1989), and the New England states (Silver 1988). These surveys have typically focused on living traditions and presented folk art as a creative expression that signifies ethnic, regional, religious, familial, or occupational identity (see Teske 1988). Cities have been profiled as well; *A Feeling for Life: Cultural Identity, Community and the Arts*, for example, samples Chicago's ethnic folk arts (McClain 1988). Several other titles have described artistic traditions in specific ethnic communities including *Uses of Tradition: Arts of Italian Americans in Philadelphia* (Noyes 1989), *Remaining Faithful: Amana Folk Art in Transition* (Ohrn 1988),

Folklore! Traditional Crafts from Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico Made in New York (Association of Hispanic Arts 1988), and *Michigan Hmong Arts* (Dewhurst and MacDowell 1984; see also Cubbs 1986).

The last few years have also witnessed the appearance of numerous studies on quilting and pottery. Noteworthy works on quilts and quilters include *Tifaifai and Quilts of Polynesia* (Hammond 1986), *Michigan Quilts: 150 Years of a Textile Tradition* (MacDowell and Fitzgerald 1987), *North Carolina Quilts* (Roberson 1988), *In the Heart of Pennsylvania: 19th and 20th Century Quilting Traditions* (Lasansky 1985), *Who'd a Thought It: Improvisation in African-American Quilting* (Leon 1987), *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women and Quilts on American Society* (Ferrero, Hedges, and Silber 1987), *Native Needlework: Contemporary Indian Textiles from North Dakota* (Martin 1988), and *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South* (Fry 1990). For pottery, we now have *Brothers in Clay: The Story of Georgia Folk Pottery* (Burrison 1983), *Turners and Burners: The Folk Potters of North Carolina* (Zug 1986), *Raised in Clay: The Southern Pottery Tradition* (Sweezy 1984), *Grand Ledge Folk Pottery: Traditions at Work* (Dewhurst 1986), *The Pueblo Storyteller: Development of a Figurative Ceramic Tradition* (Babcock and Monahan 1986), and *Crossroads of Clay: The Southern Alkaline-Glazed Stoneware Tradition* (Horne 1990). Attention to these genres reflects a growing cultural concern for arts emerging from craft traditions within regional, ethnic, occupational, and familial communities.

While the 1980s may be remembered as the decade of the state folk art survey, in the 1990s folklorists have turned increasingly to studies and exhibits that place folk art in the context of everyday life and work, or of folklife and material culture studies (see Bronner 1986a, 1992b; Vlach 1989a; Roberts 1988:145-63; Jones 1987; Staub 1988a; Yoder and Graves 1989). Even the art history-minded editors of the *Art and Architecture Thesaurus* chose to label as "material culture" what had been formerly included in the area of "decorative arts" (Petersen 1990). Exemplary anthologies covering folk art in the context of material culture and folklife are *Arts in Earnest: North Carolina Folklife* (Patterson and Zug 1990), *Michigan Folklife Reader* (Dewhurst and Lockwood 1987), and *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife* (Vlach 1991a; contrast with Livingston and Beardsley 1982). Regional studies that also employ this approach are *The Lore of New Mexico* (Weigle and White 1988), *Southern Arizona Folk Arts* (Griffith 1988; see also Abernethy 1985), and *Decorated Furniture of the Mabantongo Valley* (Reed 1987). A suggestive study that examines folk art emerging from the cultural conditions of old age is *The Grand Generation* (Hufford, Hunt, and Zeitlin 1987; contrast with Kaufman and Barrett 1985). In addition, essays highlighting Michael Owen Jones' influential behavioral perspectives on folk art and material culture research have been made available in *Exploring Folk Art* (1987), and a revision of his classic *The Hand made Object and Its Maker* (1975) has been published as *Craftsman of the Cumberland* (1989; compare with Vlach 1992b and Bronner 1985).

While this folklife approach has gained momentum, the publications of the gallery art world have scarcely abated. Especially evident in the last few years

have been image-laden coffee-table books like *American Primitive: Discoveries in Folk Sculpture* (Ricco and Maresca 1988). One category of these oversized tomes highlights collectors and their prize possessions: *Living With Folk Art* (Barnard 1991) provides a tour of various home interiors bristling with folk objects. Other volumes focus on single collectors: *Little by Little* (Little 1984) recalls the "finds" of Nina Fletcher Little; *An American Sampler* (National Gallery of Art 1987) pays tribute to Electra Havemeyer Webb, and *Treasures of American Folk Art* (Rumford and Weekley 1989) extols Abby Aldrich Rockefeller.

Books on folk art that serve the gallery world share several tendencies. They highlight the primary fine art genres of painting and sculpture, showcase the image rather than the context of the object, and emphasize New England pieces over works with non-Anglo sources. The collectors are honored for their "discerning eye" and their passion for owning decorative objects. Books in which objects are celebrated as precious treasures make constant, albeit often tacit, allusions to visual parallels between works of folk art and modern abstract art, suggesting that if they look the same they may be the same. How this misleading assumption came to be so widely and confidently accepted is chronicled by art historian David Park Curry, who cautions "we have since learned to beware of the fond wish that visual similarities between modern and folk art can be accounted for simply by assuming identical aesthetic values" (1989:60; see also Corn 1988).

Young America: A Folk-Art History (Lipman, Warren, and Bishop 1986) is another offering of the coffee-table variety. While it served initially as a catalog for an exhibition at the Museum of American Folk Art, it was also cited as a pioneering social history of folk art. Actually, it offered little more than a restatement of Jean Lipman's familiar intonation that folk art is equal to the best modern art. What *Young America* attempts is to confirm the position of the Museum of American Folk Art that folk art represents "the unconventional side of American art" and thus consists chiefly of unusual images and objects produced by highly individualistic makers. After nearly two decades of critical debate, this leading institution on the gallery side of the issue has apparently not budged beyond identifying folk art as that which is *not* recognized as fine art (see also Earnest 1984; Rosenak and Rosenak 1990; Garrett 1991).

The polarized views of folklorists and gallery professionals are clearly seen in the contrasting prefatory statements for folk art surveys done in two neighboring New England states. In *Always in Season: Folk Art and Traditional Culture in Vermont*, folklorist Jane Beck asserts, "I take the view that folk art is an artistic expression of a particular traditional culture. Hence the art itself must be seen in terms of this culture" (Beck 1982:18). Her chapters cover Native Americans, farmstead and family life, maritime occupational art, and traditional Anglo-American crafts all practiced by living artisans. Next door in New Hampshire former director of the Currier Gallery of Art Robert Doty declares in the opening pages of *By Good Hands*: "The works of art in this catalogue were chosen primarily for their right to be considered as images and objects endowed with a strong and enduring aesthetic quality. Moreover, they were selected because they are extraordinary examples of art made by creators whose

determination to make something beautiful triumphed over a limited knowledge of their chosen media" (Doty 1989: xi). Stretching over the next 114 pages are eighteenth- and nineteenth-century paintings, drawings, and carvings with only an occasional connection to a regional or ethnic tradition. The term "folk," as Doty uses it (and his use is emblematic of the gallery world), is a vaguely generic designation rather than a usefully delimiting term. The word is appealing because it can cloak with a romantic connotation objects that might be unacceptable as art. It bestows high aesthetic and economic value on the antiquated object (see Bishop, Weissman, McManus, and Niemann 1983). Folklorists take an opposing tack by emphasizing the achievements of living artisans and the way art functions in the artists' home communities (see Vlach 1992a and Bronner 1992a).

While some art dealers over the last two decades have expanded their definition of folk art to take in contemporary creations, they still emphasize unusual rather than commonplace or representative expressions. References to expressions of ethnic and regional diversity are muted in favor of work said to reflect an "American spirit" or a human "freedom of expression" (see Museum of American Folk Art 1983; see also Bronner 1986a:178-210; Benedetti 1987:6-7; Rose 1982; Cate 1990). In recent books devoted to collectors of contemporary "folk" or "naive" artists, such as *American Folk Art of the Twentieth Century* (Johnson and Ketchum 1983), *Made with Passion* (Hartigan 1990), and *Museum of American Folk Art Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century American Folk Art and Artists* (Rosenak and Rosenak 1990), one finds a consistent focus on the attributes of objects. Collectors revere works of folk art for their apparent boldness and usually ennobled artists for their idiosyncrasy. The keywords "naive," "self-taught," and "individualistic" appear often in these books. Following the logic of these works, any lone individual can be identified as a member of a folk group and any act can be seen as equivalent to a work of art sanctioned by local custom.

This view of the "lone individual" as folk artist is evident in a long list of books that includes *John Kane: Modern America's First Folk Painter* (Kallir 1984), *Pioneers in Paradise: Folk and Outsider Artists of the West Coast* (Larsen-Martin and Martin 1984), *Cat and a Ball on a Water Fall: 200 Years of California Folk Painting and Sculpture* (The Oakland Museum 1986), *Baking in the Sun: Visionary Images from the South* (Lowe and Lowe 1987), *Clementine Hunter: American Folk Artist* (Wilson 1988), *The World's Folk Art Church: Reverend Howard Finster and Family* (Viera and Girandot 1986), *Howard Finster, Man of Visions: The Life and Work of a Self-Taught Artist* (Turner 1989), *Clyde Whiteside: Folk Artist* (Western Carolina University 1988), *Karol Kozlowski, 1885-1969: Polish-American Folk Painter* (Sarno 1984), and *Bill Traylor—His Life* (Maresca and Ricco 1991). Of late there has been so much enthusiasm for the work of artists engaging in a seemingly free-form manipulation of paint, mixed media, and found objects—things sometimes termed "trash treasures"—that *Newsweek* gave two pages of its Christmas week issue in 1989 to an article proclaiming "Outsiders Are In" (Kroll 1989). In the wake of this popularity, new labels for self-taught artists appear to be gaining ground over the word folk, including terms such as "outsider," "isolate," and "visionary." But Jules Laffal, editor of the

collectors' newsletter *Folk Art Finder*, claims that no gallery owner is likely to relinquish the use of the term folk. The adjective, Laffal observes, is "just too juicy" (Benedetti 1987:6).

In the introduction to *Signs and Wonders: Outsider Art Inside North Carolina* (Manley 1989), the director of the North Carolina Museum of Art remarks that outsider artists "often have an inner compulsion to create, and the act is usually personal and extremely intense" (Manley 1989:vii). This formulation seems to have been carefully phrased in order to make clear the ways in which outsider art differs from folk art. Nevertheless, the use of the word outsider still raises issues regarding social stereotyping, especially when ethnic and regional artists with culturally derived aesthetics are depicted as eccentric or even lunatic. These questions come up in exhibit catalogs such as *Black History/Black Vision: The Visionary Image in Texas* (Adele 1989) and *Fine Folk: Art 'n' Facts from the Rural South* (Smith 1989). Further, Roger Manley, who organized *Signs and Wonders* has more recently questioned the appropriateness of imposed outsider status when, as he says, "a visit to any one of the 20 or 30 'name' Outsiders these days is more likely to resemble a tour of a sweatshop than an audience with a prophet" (Manley 1991:25). He continues:

perhaps the best thing for everyone else to do would be to drop altogether the terminology that takes a scattered, unrelated number of people and creates a group called "outsider," "unique," "isolate," etc. It sets up an imaginary we/they dichotomy that has made it possible to segregate and then exploit many people who have always been, and seek to remain, full participants in their communities and contributors to the culture in which we all share (Manley 1991:28; see also Hall 1991).

Some voices of compromise suggest that "idiosyncratic art" is preferable to the outsider label (see Marshall 1983; Benedetti 1987:7), and yet this phrase too suggests standards of difference set by arbiters of taste. Inspired by Michael Owen Jones' writings, Willard Moore in his exhibition of Minnesota folk art presents a wide sample of creative expression, ranging from communal traditions to personal expressions, and suggests "circles of tradition" as a concept that transcends the limitations of the folk art world (Moore 1989). He identifies "integrated traditions" as those that are interwoven with community life at the center; "perceived traditions" lie within a second circle that comprises activities considered traditional by some individuals; and outermost are the "celebrated traditions" of artists who for personal reasons choose to create objects not necessarily related to their own heritage or social roles. This continuum of artistic experience is implicit as well in *Missouri Artist Jesse Howard* (Marshall 1983), *Religious Folk Art in America* (Dewhurst, MacDowell, and MacDowell 1983; see also Dewhurst and MacDowell 1978), and *The Ties That Bind* (Metcalfe and Hall 1986; see also Bustin 1988). An effective merger of divergent art worlds is evident in *Fait A La Main* (Made by Hand) (Bergeron 1988), a guide to crafts work of all sorts—folk and studio based—published by the Louisiana Crafts Program. Within this directory, prospective customers can locate all manner of handmade items ranging from a Cajun cypress pirogue to jewelry made by

university-trained artisans. Identified as folk, contemporary, or revivalist, three art worlds are presented here as distinct but coequal.

From this discussion of works published since *Folk Art and Art Worlds* first appeared in 1986, it is clear that the issues and themes the book set forth then remain vital. Their persistence at the core of the debate over folk art is also apparent in subsequent work produced by the essayists represented in *Folk Art and Art Worlds*. In the opening set of essays, John Vlach pursued the "need for plain talk about folk art. He continues to take issue with the gallery view of folk art in "The Wrong Stuff" (1991b) published in the *New Art Examiner*. In "The Politics of the Past in American Folk Art History," Eugene Metcalf examined the social and political implications of the rhetoric used in the folk art debate. He further pursues the topic in "Modernism, Edith Halpert, Holger Cahill, and the Fine Art Meaning of American Folk Art" (Metcalf and Weatherford 1988), "The Problem of American Folk Art" (Metcalf 1986; see also Waldorf 1986), and "Artifacts and Cultural Meaning: The Ritual of Collecting American Folk Art" (Metcalf 1991; see also Bronner 1986a:178-210, 1986b, 1988; Ardery 1991). These treatments of art worlds can be compared with Bronner's analysis of folkloristic rhetoric in "Art, Performance, and Praxis" (1988; see also Bronner 1986b).

Folk painting, the subject of the book's second set of essays, remains at the center of controversy in folk art research. Vlach has entered the fray with *Plain Painters* (1988; see also Vlach 1989b), and Claudine Weatherford has contributed an extensive biography of Queena Stovall, a largely self-taught genre painter from Virginia (Weatherford 1986). David Jaffe has carried his study of nineteenth-century painters further in an article devoted to artisans he calls "peddlers of progress" (1991). These efforts run counter to the gallery view of folk art found in *American Folk Painters of Three Centuries* (Lipman and Armstrong 1980), *Folk Painters of America* (Bishop 1979), and *American Folk Paintings* (Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center 1988; see also Rumford 1981; D'Ambrosio and Emans 1987).

"Tradition" and "creativity" as related concepts figure prominently in the third group of essays dealing with folk art in context. Michael Owen Jones' *Craftsman of the Cumberland: Tradition and Creativity* (1989) and Bronner's *Creativity and Tradition: New Directions* (1992a) provide additional perspectives on the topic. The festive and environmental contexts examined in Jack Santino's study can be further explored in his "Halloween in America" (Santino 1983; see also Bannatyne 1990); for more discussion of yardscapes and yard art, consult *Personal Places* (Ward 1984) and *Circles of Tradition* (see Sheehy 1989), as well as articles by Elaine Thatcher (1987) and Helen Bradley Griebel (1986). For a collector's view of Halloween materials, see "Spirited by Halloweens Past: People Who Haunt the Houses of Antiques for Jack-O'-Lanterns" (Berry 1991).

Creativity and festivity on the street, covered in essays on the *Giglio* by Sheldon Posen and the "house on Penn Street" by Bronner, suggest additional dimensions to the notion of context. In their article in *Folklife Annual 1985*, Sheldon Posen and Daniel Franklin Ward have made a connection between the *Giglio* towers of Brooklyn and the famed Watts Towers built by Simon Rodia in Los Angeles (Posen and Ward 1985:143-57). "Cal" and his house decorations no

longer grace Penn Street. As predicted, Cal continued to box himself in with his constructions and eventually turned his art completely away from the street (see Bronner 1986a:63-88). His house was condemned by the city and later reclaimed by professional renovators who made it conform to the yuppie look up the block. Cal moved a few blocks away with two buddies from the old neighborhood, and while he doesn't adorn the facade of his new building with art, he now works on creating artistic environments from recycled materials (see also Read 1986; Greenfield 1986).

Matters of marketing and exhibiting folk art, and the ethical treatment of folk artists and their communities addressed in the section on the "consequences of collection" have recently received thoughtful attention in folk art scholarship. Rosemary Joyce has edited a set of insightful essays for *New York Folklore* (1986; see also Graves 1988) on the marketing of folk art. She has also published an engaging craftsman biography entitled *A Bearer of Tradition: Dwight Stump, Basketmaker* (1989). The special case of the Southwest art market discussed by Charles Briggs is further explored in *Objects and Others* (Wade 1985) and *Hosts and Guests* (Deitch 1989). Briggs' further research in the mountains of northern New Mexico can be found in *Competence in Performance: The Creativity of Tradition in Mexicano Verbal Art* (1988). Issues revolving around cross-cultural collecting and folk art presentation are considered in *Folklife and Museums* (Young 1987; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1987), "Folk Arts in Education" (Mundell 1987), and *The Conservation of Culture* (Staub 1988b; see also Waldorf 1986). Finally, Henry Glassie's magisterial *The Spirit of Folk Art* (1989) extends the themes he first proposed here in "The Idea of Folk Art." The epigraph for Glassie's new book, taken from an essay by Willaim Butler Yeats, reminds us that "Folk art is . . . the soil where all great art is rooted." These inspirational words penned in the first year of this century should inspire meaningful reflection on folk art worlds well into the next.

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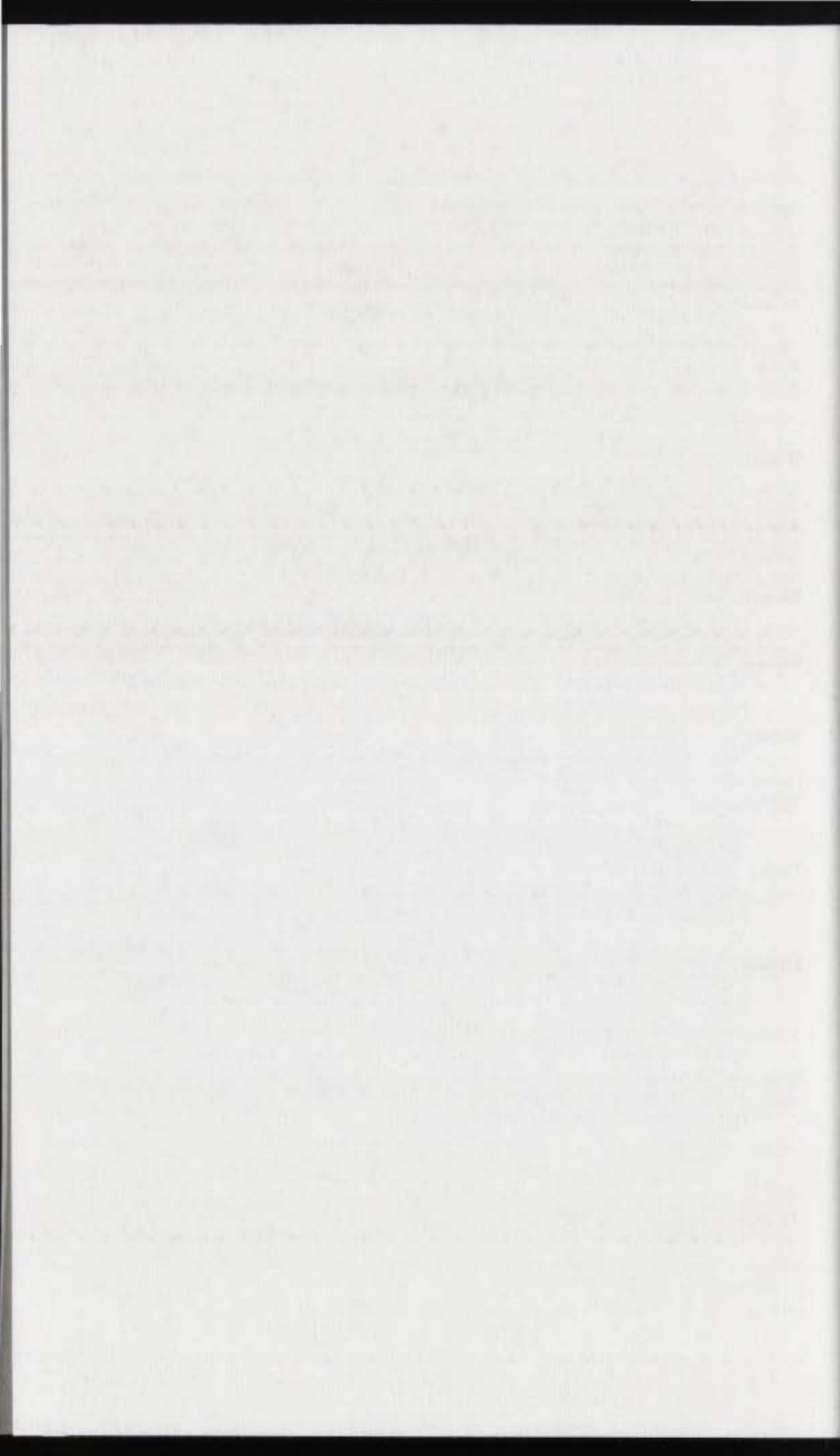
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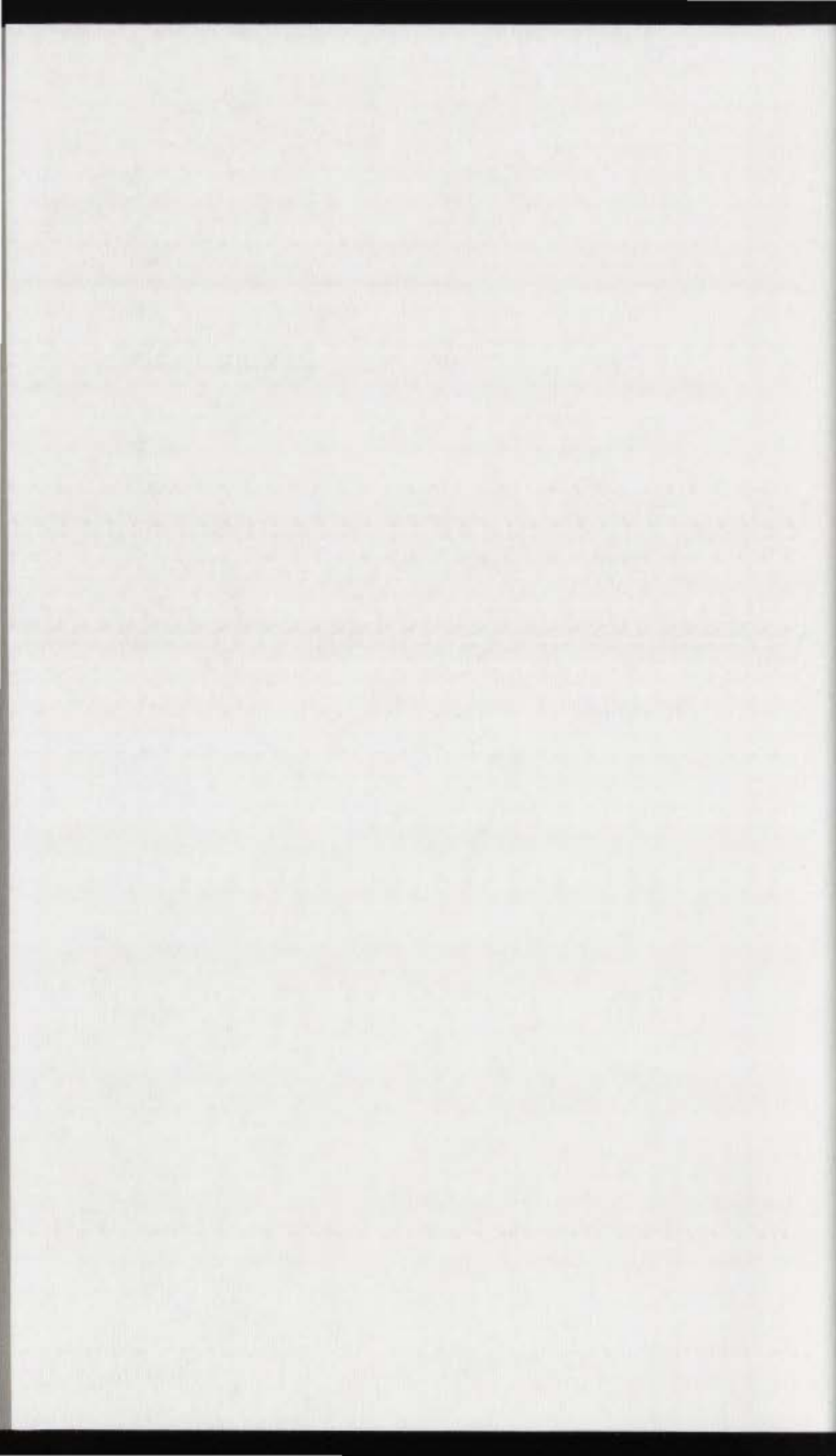
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Taking Issues



"Properly Speaking": The Need for Plain Talk about Folk Art

John Michael Vlach

The lead title of this essay is taken from Alice Winchester's comment in her introduction to the catalogue for the Whitney Museum's exhibition "The Flowering of American Folk Art." She writes: "Properly speaking, folk art is a traditional, often ethnic expression, which is not affected by the stylistic trends of academic art. In that sense much American folk art is not folk art at all."¹ Such a statement provides us with astounding and confusing perplexities. If the art presented in "The Flowering of American Folk Art" was "properly speaking" not folk art, why then was it so labeled? If folk art is art derived from the aesthetic values of distinct folk groups who create more-or-less independently of mainstream art movements, why were such works not shown in that exhibition? Apparently some other kind of art was knowingly substituted for what must be "proper" folk art. We should then ask not only what art took the place of authentic folk art, but more importantly, why was such a replacement maneuver considered necessary? And further, how could such a circumstance have arisen in the first place? Why is it allowable to say that folk art is "not really folk art at all"? Apparently, despite the best intentions of all who are concerned with folk art, not enough effort has been directed at speaking "properly" or, more crucially, at thinking "properly" about this topic.

Because the issue of the definition of folk art is adequately addressed by several scholars, I will concentrate my remarks here primarily on problems associated with the strategies used to claim importance and significance for folk art.² For the moment let us re-

view the litany of adjectives which are generally used to qualify and identify what folk art is. Consider the collective connotations of the following terms: primitive, naive, amateur, grass-roots, outsider, country, popular, backyard, spontaneous, unsophisticated, innocent, provincial, anonymous, visionary, homemade, vernacular, isolate, ethnic, non-academic.³ The list could be longer but this sample will suggest the range of terminology that is currently attached to folk art. Some of these terms refer to the destination of a creation, others to the level of skill employed in either design or rendering, others to the identity (or lack of one) of the artist, and others to the sources and origins of an artist's aesthetic. While a few of these terms suggest a positive image, most of them are at best ambivalent and at worst insulting. It is not difficult then to appreciate one of the main causes of confusion in folk art study and appreciation; its vocabulary is compiled of contradictions. Common sense should quickly inform the ordinary citizen faced with the nomenclature of folk art that something is seriously amiss. It is not unlikely that the novice folk art appreciator might enter a gallery or shop and be encouraged in upbeat tones to value a particular object because it was fashioned by a "naive," "unsophisticated," "amateur," a "visionary" working "spontaneously" in his own "backyard" where he was rumored to have been moved by a "mysterious" force. The work would no doubt be praised as a piece of "non-academic," "outsider," "isolate," or "primitive" art manifesting "innocence," "charm," "guile," "whimsy," and other "country" virtues. The merits of the work itself notwithstanding, our gallery goer is bound to find himself in a quandary. So much of what he might hear offered in praise of folk art would in other contexts convey a left-handed compliment if not a put-down. But for folk art, it seems, one is to believe that the put-downs are no longer tinged with negative intent. The stings encountered in this language of condescension are assumed to be somehow soothed by good will and that is assumed to be good enough even if the result is a semantic muddle. Plain talk would seem to be in order to replace the circumlocutions and contradictions with which we are currently saddled.

Many well-intentioned early writers, when armed with the vocabulary of folk art talk, more often than not produced a type of "double-speak." John I. Baur of the Brooklyn Museum could in the same paragraph write that folk art was both "unsophisticated" and "skilled." Erwin O. Christensen, former Curator of the Index of

American Design, concluded that folk art represented a "regression to childhood" and hence was "child art on an adult level." Even Holger Cahill, well known as an advocate for the art of the common man, would suggest that folk art was only a "second-rate" kind of art even though it was the "oldest and most pervasive art expression we know about." This pattern of alternate denigration and praise—almost in the same breath—continues to characterize evaluations of American folk art.⁴ As recently as 1983, Jay Johnson and William C. Ketchum, Jr. noted that one reputed folk artist's work possessed "a sophistication . . . lacking in most folk art." Another they said was "unlike almost all other folk artists . . . not driven to her craft by a compulsion to paint."⁵ It would seem that the more folk art is cherished, the more it is simultaneously damned as a flawed product. Certainly the writers mentioned here are not the only ones who share some of the blame. Indeed, the responsibility falls on all who consider condescending language appropriate for describing folk art and artists.

Simple villainy or hypocrisy, however, is not enough to explain the wrenched use of adjectives encountered in discussions of folk art.⁶ Rather it seems that an attitude of intellectual *laissez-faire* or intellectual laziness provides a better explanation. Scholars, writers, collectors, critics, and commentators have on the whole been too friendly, too congratulatory of each others' appraisals of folk art. The desire to make common cause, to defend the place of folk art in the fine art world, has overridden the need to develop defensible standards, so that weak criteria have not been challenged. Hence works of art are called folk on the basis of place of origin alone, or social class alone, or one feature (or failure) of style alone. The cluster of works presented to the public as folk art is then a higgledy-piggledy assemblage of diverse items held together by the wish for connection. Folk art for public consumption is generally folk art by fiat; declared to be so, it is so. Anything then can be folk art, as Alice Winchester noted, even if it is "not folk art at all." Thinking and reasoning are suspended so that items as distinctly different as quilts from Alabama, cast iron stove panels from Philadelphia, samplers from young women's seminaries in Massachusetts, furniture made by Shakers from New York, and yard art made by recluses at the end of the country lanes are all asserted to be the same thing and consequently are considered to be closely equivalent to one another.

On the surface all these works might be seen as related because

none of them would be acknowledged as works of fine art. But defining something by what it is not is no way to proceed towards a workable definition. The lack of fit between supposed works of folk art and the supposed standards of studio-based artistic expressions has served in the past as the principal rationale for assigning folk status. But thinly disguised by that designation is the notion that the artists, like their works, also do not fit into the world of fine artists.⁷ The folk artists are even branded, perhaps silently, as misfits and it follows, then, that their number probably includes outsiders, isolates, loners, itinerants, the mentally disturbed, and the certifiably insane. When biographies of so-called folk artists are provided, such labels may indeed apply. "Creek Charlie" Field of Lebanon, Virginia, for example, lived alone and covered every surface of his house, inside and out from top to bottom, with polka dots. It was a compulsive decorative scheme unique in his community and in his state, and in the entire southern region.⁸ Eddie Arning of Austin, Texas, spent sixty years in a mental institution where he apparently learned to draw and color with crayons.⁹ Other similar artists could be cited but the point should be clear that to regard such individuals as typical of folk groups is to foster a very bizarre view of folk society. It is one in which traditional communities are made up of scores of woebegone, lonely deviants. While misfortunes may strike the bearers of traditions, it is not their calamities that make them folk but the kind of society in which they live. That society is typically a small community in which expressive traditions taught informally by word of mouth and by example are perpetuated from generation to generation with some accommodation to the changes that arise from either personal desires or the influence of externally introduced fashions.¹⁰ The representative art of such societies is not created by its deviants and misfits (although certainly such people do make art) but by normal, intelligent, well-adjusted citizens who care deeply about their history and identity. Folk art comes mostly from the central values of a society rather than its fringe elements, as is usually suggested by the imprecise and shallow criteria so commonly employed in gallery chat and catalogue annotation. Failure to speak plainly or "properly" allows individuals from the far ends of the social spectrum to be mistaken for each other.

The anything-can-be-folk-art approach that engenders the cavalier and indiscriminate lumping of artists and artworks cannot be al-

lowed to persist. While it provides scholars and collectors with a convenient rhetorical solution, since their choice of label is probably not totally wrong, vague categorization also prevents them from ever being exactly right. Further, as more is heaped onto the folk art pile, the more meaningless the term "folk art" becomes. While it has been common practice for the last fifty years in the folk art business to use the term folk art as a broad, all-encompassing category, I for one do not think it too late to change.¹¹ The repeated basic error of judgment that this approach fosters, namely the suggestion that artifacts from different social contexts based on different intentions are interchangeable, can no longer be tolerated.

At one time it may have been useful to label the whole mass of collectibles from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries as folk art. Indeed, in the first phases of discovery it is usually prudent to define a subject matter simply by enumerating its features or by summarizing its content. But enumeration should be followed by explanation, an explanation in this case that accounts not only for the artistic product but for the artistic process as well. Here is where the need for thinking "properly" as well as speaking "properly" is most apparent. The challenge lays before us to suggest how it is that folk art is conceived, designed, and executed by its artists and appreciated and used by its originally intended audiences rather than wondering what new items can be squeezed in under the vast protective folk art "umbrella." We need to get to work at studying how art works in traditional societies and folk groups of all types both past and present.¹² What is bound to happen if we accept this challenge is that first we will recognize that folk art is not really a "great circus tent" sheltering many acts or a large umbrella designation.¹³ Rather, American folk art is considerably more restricted in content than is usually suggested, and more importantly, there is not a single American tradition but several co-equal traditions. Next, it will be discovered that the things that can be defended as folk will be reduced not only in number but in kind as the expressions of folk culture are distinguished from the products of popular culture. Finally, the direction in museum exhibitions, gallery shows, and publications might be able to take a new tack toward evaluation and away from simple description. These are changes of no little consequence.

I am not about to propose here a new definition of folk art. There is no need for a new definition; there is instead a need for a

return to definitions which have already been "properly" spoken. I would only urge that we accept the responsibility for speaking plainly and precisely. We should not shy away from the problematic nuances of adjectives. To dismiss the descriptive power of words in the search for a value-free set of labels will only reduce us to studying people making objects.¹⁴ While there is some utility in viewing the whole human vista of artifact making as a single achievement, our task in the study of American folk art needs, at this time, to be considerably more focused.¹⁵ All people are not the same; they neither make the same objects nor are they motivated by the same values. We must employ a vocabulary that can indicate in straightforward terms how individuals in distinct communities employ discrete formulas as they use particular techniques to fashion specific genres of art. The life history or biographical case study would best reach these goals since it allows opportunity for investigation of all manner of communal issues without losing its specific focus on the career of a particular artist.¹⁶ Moreover, since both art history and the social sciences employ this form of inquiry and presentation, it would provide a format to unite two perspectives on art that are frequently at odds.

Further, we need to be more careful about allowing terminological ambiguities to stand without clarification. For example, the term "folk" itself can be used to mean an Everyman or a single member of a chairmaking family from Kentucky. It can be an inclusive term as in "just plain folks," where it means ordinary citizens of modest means, or it can be an exclusive term, when it separates the carver of wooden chain puzzles from the carver of carousel animals. Therefore we must take pains to say what we mean and not allow nuances to go unexplained. The next decades of folk art study might come to be known as the "era of the footnote" as we attempt to amend even our most seemingly obvious statements in an effort to be clear. As cumbersome, and maybe distracting, as superscript numbers might be, any move toward clarity is surely to be applauded.

In the 1920s and 1930s a broad and inclusive definition of folk art was useful and appropriate even if it conveyed a measure of semantic vagueness. New fields of study commonly defend their right to exist by boasting of a vast *terra incognita* awaiting investigation. Who would gainsay the significance of a subject like folk art when it was defined in such a way that it embraced art and craft, the domestic and the commercial, the sacred and the secular, the traditional and

fashionable—in short, the whole scope of American aesthetic and technological history? But the 1980s are not the 1930s. Half a century after its “discovery,” folk art should no longer depend on a prideful drum beat to assert its importance. It is to be hoped that the field is now mature enough to explain and demonstrate the excellence and relevance of folk art in a series of documentary studies, such as the biographies described above, instead of simply proclaiming its virtues more and more loudly. The early appraisals of folk art are clearly the product of their times, a period when the United States was flexing its military and economic muscles as a newly arrived modern power.¹⁷ In the heady times of the late 1920s the arts, too, were seen as symbols of American modernism and folk art came eventually to be claimed as one of the native sources of this progressive spirit since its minimal forms and primary colors seemed to anticipate such modern artistic idioms as cubism or abstract expressionism.¹⁸ A gleeful, buoyant spirit thus accompanies the first folk art commentaries as writers brag, and even gloat, about what they take to be American folk art's natural predisposition to modern greatness. Today we might be inclined to filter out the chauvinism and read folk art for its intrinsic qualities rather than its supposed or attributed intentions. The rigorous standards of the “new social history” require a deliberate revision of the rosy mythology that once served as informed opinion concerning folk art in America of the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁹ We must now sort out fact from fantasy. If we cannot convince others of the validity of our subject with precise reasoned argument, we cannot really convince them at all.

There is also much intellectual housekeeping to which we must attend. There are glaring inconsistencies that need to be set right in folk art talk and thinking. For example, how can folk art logically be called the art of a group and at the same time be labeled as the art of the self-taught?²⁰ The concept of group art implies, indeed requires, that artists acquire their abilities, both manual and intellectual, at least in part from communication with others. The community has something, usually a great deal, to say about what passes for acceptable folk art. Blacksmith and ornamental ironworker Philip Simmons confirmed this point when he observed of his customers: “I owe all my career to the people of Charleston [S.C.]. Without them giving me the chance, I couldn't have anything. I can't make a gate if they don't want 'em.”²¹ It may happen that someone presents a work derived

mostly from his own imagination, a form with no local precedents. But given the usual dynamics and codes of action in small groups, the chances are slim to none that a radically new form will be embraced by the community as *their* art. No genuine folk artist can ever be completely self-taught. Certainly folk artists may work alone, even in seclusion, but they will work within a socially sanctioned set of rules for artistic production which they expect will insure the acceptability of their completed pieces. Thus they are mentally connected even if physically isolated. Moreover, they are often allowed to introduce some degree of personal variation into a piece. Returning to the experience of Philip Simmons, he says of the process of design: "I got to play a part in there too. I will always keep that in front of the customer."²² The key to acceptable change is modesty. Slight variations attempted with this virtue in mind are generally judged as appropriate because they allow standard forms to remain stable. The new work, then, despite its novel features, reinforces the familiar local tradition. In folk society it is usually the case that artists are honored more for the roles they play rather than for their personal inventiveness.

Another of the riddles posed by American folk art rhetoric is the notion that the American tradition is one of remarkable individualism; hence the work of each folk artist is very different from that of his or her fellows.²³ Many commentators believe they can demonstrate the traditional quality of folk art by presenting items with no relationship to each other except for the fact that they were created on American soil. The claim that each work of folk art is unique probably rings true after considering the items presented by most catalogues, but clanks thuddingly on the ear of anyone who has experienced traditional communities firsthand. While traditional society does not erase ego, it does focus and direct the choices that a person can acceptably make.²⁴ Some individuals might be rankled by limitations, but the well-socialized person will find the limits not inhibiting but helpful. He or she will accept the local rules of art as an invitation to search the deep wellsprings of traditional artistic conventions. Where traditions are healthy the works of different artists are more similar than they are different; they are more uniform than personal. We can observe, for example, the formal linkages that run through three generations of woodcarvers from Cordova, New Mexico. As Charles L. Briggs has noted, the iconography of the *santo* figures remains today faithful to eighteenth-century precedents.²⁵ Some quilt blocks such

as the "log cabin" or "grandmother's flower garden" are repeated not only from generation to generation but many times by the same quilter.²⁶ Works of folk art resonate with the richness of cultural profundity even if they might be the same quilts or carvings known for the past two centuries. They are good even if they are familiar. Indeed, they are excellent in part because they are familiar.

It seems that the confusion over whether folk art should be seen as unique, individualistic, and singular or ordinary, communal, and unexceptional stems fundamentally from the expressed objectives of collection and scholarship. Collectors employ the methods of connoisseurship in the pursuit of masterpiece-quality works while folklorists and social scientists look for the representative pieces of art that permit the accurate description of a genre, a period, or a career. The collector wants first to find greatness, the scholar wants first to understand the norm. Of course neither quality can be fully determined without the other since outstanding work cannot be accurately assessed without knowing what it is that a particular work stands out from, and similarly normative trends are necessarily shaped and characterized by periodic monumental achievements.²⁷ It is time to recognize that neither extreme view is correct, that proponents of both approaches have much in common. Ultimately we need a compassionate version of social science that allows artists the free will to break with the inherited forms of time and place if they so choose. We need to realize that folk art includes simultaneously both ordinary and extraordinary moments and that while this situation is complex, it does not have to be overly confusing.

Developments in the field of so-called primitive art may be instructive in signaling what future developments might be anticipated in the field of American folk art. Earlier in this century the art of three-fourths of the world's population was lumped together as one phenomenon, as "primitive art." Now we not only recognize different continental distinctions but regional styles, ethnic patterns, sociological hierarchies, systems of patronage, characteristics of particular art guilds, and the hands, if not the names, of individual artists.²⁸ In sum, we now have a rich and complex history of "primitive" or "tribal" art, one which allows us to interpret it in the most meaningful of terms rather than only the most general of terms. The days of captions for carvings that read "Figure, wood, nineteenth century, Africa" are happily over. Unhappily, many captions for American folk art objects still

read like this. Generalities, though they need not be overturned, are only the starting point along the path to understanding, not the final destination.

The approach to folk art that I am advocating is one which recognizes artists' intentions first and the qualities of their works second. This is a view which some might distinguish as sociological rather than humanistic, but I see no profound disadvantage or disservice to art in grounding the study of art in the lives of the people who create and use it. Alice Winchester and many others have already recognized that the folk artist, when one speaks "properly," is an artist working in an alternative system to that found in the academy. If that alternative system is what is crucial in determining the nature of the art created, then that system is where our attentions should be focused first. While Robert Bishop has recently argued that to study the folk is to ignore art, such an argument puts forward a false premise.²⁹ To study what people do means that if they make art, their art will necessarily be studied and in a way that involves the student directly with this art and its creation. The attention paid to art is then not lessened but heightened as art is considered within its original generative contexts. Those contexts are unavoidably social systems, composed of people acting collectively upon their self-willed thoughts and emotions. While not all contemporary social groups are so self-sufficient that they can still generate their own art, such communities are nonetheless still fairly numerous even if they are not always immediately at hand. These communities are where we will find the answers to our most basic questions about folk art. However, we should not overlook historical communities either, although we should remember that answering profound questions about people who are deceased often proves to be more difficult if not impossible.

The study of American folk art needs to find its center—its center of meaning—so that it may grow and develop in an orderly and productive fashion. That center is, I believe, where it has always been, in its folk artists. Generally folk art has been pursued as a set of things, important things to be sure, but the current generation of scholars and collectors now find themselves pondering much folk art that has no folk attached to it. The data of folk art have evolved into a random assortment of collectibles, usually old, valued not so much for their intrinsic meaning as for their resemblances to the fine and popular art of the period in which they were obtained. Those who

would claim that such an exercise honors and validates folk art must necessarily engage in a confusing, contradictory pattern of talk, since they are saying that folk art is good because it looks a lot like other art that they value more highly. Moreover, as these collectibles have been gathered in a helter-skelter manner from sources that often remain obscure if not unknown, they cannot be trusted as reliable evidence to justify any decision of consequence. Evidence collected randomly and sporadically cannot even logically serve as evidence and is no basis for a discipline of art study. Yet this is our inheritance from the last half century of folk art collection.

Connected to this received set of data is a climate of opinion which eschews social concerns, so that expertise in folk art is commonly reduced to nitpicking over the minor details of a work such as the manner of a brush stroke or the placement of a floral motif. Such formalist analyses lead us only around and through a maze of content and have little chance of showing us the path to the cultural significance and the deeper meaning of folk art. The situation, however, need not remain hopelessly non-productive. The study of folk art can be reoriented so that our efforts center on the people who create this art. But first we must commit ourselves to speaking and thinking "properly" about folk art.

Notes for Chapter 1

1. *The Flowering of American Folk Art, 1776-1876* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), p. 9.
2. See Mamie Harmon, "Primitive and Folk Art," in *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, ed. Maria Leach (New York: Funk and Wagnall, 1949), pp. 886-901 and "Folk Art," *Encyclopedia of World Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), vol. 5, pp. 451-455, 466-477; Henry Glassie, "Folk Art," in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 253-280 and "Folk Art," *Encyclopedia Americana* (Danbury, Conn.: Grolier, 1983), vol. 11, pp. 482-492; Michael Owen Jones, "The Study of Folk Art Study: Reflections on Images," in *Folklore Today*, ed. Linda Dégh, Henry Glassie, and Felix J. Oinas (Bloomington, Ind.: Center for Language and Semiotic Studies, 1976), pp. 291-304; and Kenneth L. Ames, *Beyond Necessity: Art in the Folk Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977).
3. For works that highlight the use of these problematic terms see Jean Lipman, *American Primitive Painting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942); The Walker Art Center, *Naives and Visionaries* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974);

Gregg N. Blasdel, "The Grass-Roots Artists," *Art in America* (October, 1968), pp. 24-41; Roger Cardinal, *Outsider Art* (New York: Praeger, 1972); Ronald G. Carraher, *Artists in Spite of Art* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1970); David Larkin, ed., *Innocent Art* (New York: Ballantine, 1974); Michael Hall, *American Folk Sculpture: The Personal and the Eccentric* (Bloomfield Hills, Mich.: Cranbrook Academy of Art Galleries, 1977); Oto Bilhalhji-Merin, *Masters of Naive Art: A History and World Wide Survey* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971); Nina Fletcher Little, *Country Art in New England, 1790-1840* (Sturbridge, Mass.: Old Sturbridge Village, 1960) and *New England Provincial Artists, 1775-1800* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1976); Museum of Modern Art, *Masters of Popular Painting* (New York: Arno, 1938).

4. For the full comments of Baur, Christensen, and Cahill see "What Is American Folk Art?: A Symposium," *Antiques* 57 (1950), reprinted in *Folk Art in America: Painting and Sculpture*, ed. Jack T. Ericson (New York: Mayflower Books, 1979), pp. 14-15. See also Holger Cahill, "Folk Art: Its Place in the American Tradition," *Parnassus* 4 (1932): pp. 1-4, especially p. 4. For further information on Cahill, see my article, "Holger Cahill as Folklorist," *Journal of American Folklore* 98 (1985), pp. 148-162.
5. *American Folk Art of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), pp. 274, 283.
6. Some may feel that folk artists should have no privileges in the marketplace and that they should simply take what they can get from the free enterprise system. Nevertheless, the buying of folk art often has exploitive results since artists commonly need cash so badly that they will accept ridiculously small sums for their work. In such circumstances the conscience of the buyer will be somewhat soothed by the negative dimensions of the folk art rhetoric; why pay top dollar for something that is referred to as "crude," "primitive" and "simple" made by someone who is "naive" or "unsophisticated?" Ironically, once safely in hand the same work becomes "charming" and "attractive," while the artist becomes "clever" and "witty." This sort of double standard does indeed result from villainy and is probably motivated by greed among other base human desires for conquest and one-upmanship. The high financial stakes that bankroll the continued mistreatment of folk artists are described by Marshall L. Stone in "The Truth about Folk Art," *Berkshire Eagle* (November 15, 1983). Stone recounts how a weather vane he made as a weekend project in 1976 came to be sold for more than \$5,000 as a reputed nineteenth-century piece. For a more extensive discussion of the economic exploitation of folk artists see Robert Teske, "'Crafts Assistance Programs' and Traditional Crafts" *New York Folklore* 12 (1986), in press.
7. The social delineation of realms of art production is suggested by Howard Becker in *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), chap. 8.
8. Elinor Lander Horwitz, *Contemporary American Folk Artists* (Philadelphia: Lipincott, 1975), pp. 118-126.

9. Herbert W. Hemphill, Jr. and Julia Weissman, *Twentieth-Century American Folk Art and Artists* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974), pp. 200–201.
10. The publications of Robert Redfield are particularly helpful for establishing the nature of folk communities. See especially "The Folk Society," *American Journal of Sociology* 52 (1947): pp. 292–311 and *The Little Community and Peasant Society and Culture*, 1953, 1956 (reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).
11. The opposite view is held by Louis C. Jones, "The Triumph of American Folk Art," *Three Eyes on the Past: Exploring New York Folk Life* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), pp. 147–166.
12. The cultural view of art considers the perspective from inside of the culture looking out, the sensate view, to be the most trustworthy. See Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence: An Essay in Humanistic Anthropology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 5–6. On folk groups see Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), chap. 3.
13. Louis C. Jones, "Introduction," in *How to Know American Folk Art*, ed. Ruth Andrews (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), p. 2.
14. Michael Owen Jones, *The Hand Made Object and Its Maker* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 241.
15. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), pp. 14–16.
16. Some good examples of folkloristically sensitive biographies are provided by Warren E. Roberts, "Turpin Chairs and the Turpin Family: Chairmaking in Southern Indiana," *Midwestern Journal of Language and Folklore* 7 (1981): pp. 57–106, and "Ananias Hensel and His Furniture: Cabinetmaking in Southern Indiana," *Midwestern Journal of Language and Folklore* 9 (1983): pp. 69–122; Howard Wight Marshall, "Mr. Westfall's Baskets: Traditional Craftsmanship in Northcentral Missouri," *Mid-South Folklore* 11 (1974): pp. 43–50; and Simon J. Bronner, "An Experiential Portrait of a Woodcarver," *Indiana Folklore* 13 (1980): pp. 30–45. An outstanding book-length study is John A. Burrison, *Brothers in Clay: The Story of Georgia Folk Pottery* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983).
17. On the art and culture history of the 1920s to the 1940s see Alan Gowans, *Images of American Living: Four Centuries of Architecture and Furniture as Cultural Expression* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 435–444. For an art gallery owner's expression of the chauvinistic sentiments inspired by the optimism of the period of folk art "discovery" see John Gordon, "Introduction" to *Masterpieces of American Folk Art* (Lincroft, N.J.: Monmouth Museum, 1975), n.p.
18. Jean Lipman, "From Print to Primitive," *Antiques* 53 (1946), reprinted in *Folk Art in America*, ed. Ericson, pp. 24–26. This same trend of tenuous compar-

- ative appraisal was more recently perpetuated by the same author in *Provocative Parallels* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975).
19. Brook Hindle, "How Much is a Piece of the True Cross Worth?" in *Material Culture and the Study of American Life*, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), pp. 3-20.
 20. For an example see Sidney Janis, *They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Dial Press, 1942).
 21. John Michael Vlach, *Charleston Blacksmith: The Work of Philip Simmons* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981), p. 119.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
 23. See Lipman's comments in "What Is American Folk Art?: A Symposium," *Antiques* 57 (1950), reprinted in *Folk Art in America*, ed. Ericson, pp. 18-19.
 24. Redfield, "The Folk Society," p. 300.
 25. *The Wood Carvers of Cordova, New Mexico: Social Dimensions of an Artistic "Revival"* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980), pp. 184-185.
 26. Jonathan Holstein, *The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition* (New York: Galahad Books, 1973), compare plates 49, 69, and 83. See also Geraldine N. Johnson, "Plain and Fancy: The Socioeconomics of Blue Ridge Quilts," *Appalachian Journal* 10 (1982): pp. 12-35.
 27. The excesses of either "aesthetisizing" or "sociologizing" are examined by Johannes Fabian and Ilona Szombati-Fabian in "Folk Art from the Anthropological Perspective," in *Perspectives on American Folk Art*, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby and Scott T. Swank (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), p. 253. On the differences between the humanistic and social scientific approaches to art see Robert Redfield, "Art and Icon," reprinted in *Anthropology and Art: Readings in Cross-Cultural Aesthetics*, ed. Charlotte M. Otten (Garden City, N.Y.: Natural History Press, 1971), pp. 39-65.
 28. On the history of "primitive" art scholarship see Daniel P. Biebuyck, ed., *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). See especially the essay by Robert Farris Thompson, "Abatan: A Master Potter of the Egbado Yoruba," pp. 120-182, and Robert Goldwater, "Judgments of Primitive Art, 1905-1965," pp. 24-41.
 29. "Introduction" to Johnson and Ketchum, *American Folk Art of the Twentieth Century*, p. xi.

The Politics of the Past in American Folk Art History

Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr.

A people . . . which is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and to act . . . than one that has been able to situate itself in history. This is why . . . the entire art of the past has now become a political issue.

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

History is not discovered in the past. It is created in the present. Rather than uncovering a past waiting to be recognized, historians construct relations between a present and its past which explain and justify current preoccupations. The task of a historian is not simply to recognize the past for what it is, but to make history by distilling from the past those elements that can be understood in terms of present conditions. In culling from the past, historians are guided by culturally learned assumptions about the nature and purpose of their enterprise, and, as art critic John Berger has suggested, these assumptions affect the character and value of history. If the assumptions accurately reflect the present and are responsive to significant human values and needs, they may prompt historical inquiry which makes the past more accessible and useful to the present. On the other hand, if instead of attempting to honestly confront the world as it is, these assumptions help avoid it, if they function to restrict the possibility for human growth and confrontation with the present, they will mystify and obscure the past, making life in the present, and development into the future, more difficult.¹

Like other forms of history, art history makes available to the present a usable past. To the extent that man-made objects reflect the beliefs of the individuals and societies who fashion and use them, art history, as the record of the making of artifacts, offers important, firsthand evidence of the existence and development of the values and attitudes of past times. According to art historian Jules Prown, "objects created in the past are the only historical occurrences that continue to exist in the present." Their existence in sequence allows us to "encounter the past at first hand; we have direct sensory experience of surviving historical events."² Yet art is a particular kind of artifact. Considered a sophisticated and complex form of human expression, it is often thought to be an unusually valuable indicator of ideas, and it confers prestige on those who make, use, and appreciate it. The possession by a group of a significant artistic heritage not only provides that group a heightened historical sense, but bestows on them social repute and power.

Questions of the meaning and value of art history are particularly important now in the study of American folk art. Historically treasured as an indicator of values such as individualism and freedom, and thought to dignify the activities and life of the common man, American folk art has long been prized for what it is believed to say about the nature of American life and the significance of the American past. Yet in the past decade the accepted views about what American folk art is and represents have been challenged. Today a significant number of folk art scholars are suggesting that the concepts which support the study and collecting of American folk art are outdated, that these concepts are inadequate to interpret the objects or to deal with the social issues of contemporary American life and art. Thus has begun a re-examination of the nature and meaning of American folk art, and the culture and values which it is said to represent. Such an examination can be understood in historical context, for the significance of American folk art as it is popularly understood today is related to the history of folk art writing and collecting, and to the social assumptions on which this writing and collecting are based.

In her influential history of the field of American folk art, "Uncommon Art of the Common People: A Review of Trends in the Collecting and Exhibiting of American Folk Art," Beatrix Rumford suggests that although early twentieth-century modern artists first re-discovered American folk art, "Edith Halpert and Holger Cahill must

be credited with initiating the widespread appreciation and collecting of American folk art as a proper artistic expression." Halpert, a folk art dealer and gallery owner, was an important promoter who established the first gallery devoted entirely to American folk art and who brought folk art to the attention of many wealthy and influential people, such as Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. But it is from Cahill's work that the assumptions which guide American folk art study, and its history, have come. A museum curator, Holger Cahill first discovered American folk art in 1926. Summering with Edith Halpert and her husband at the Ogunquit artist colony in Maine, Cahill was struck with the contemporary look of the weather vanes, decoys, and primitive paintings that had been used to decorate the cabins of the compound. Although these objects had already captured the attention of many of the artists who worked at Ogunquit, and a number of early exhibitions of folk objects had previously occurred, little had been written about folk art, and it was in this area that Cahill made a particular contribution. In 1930, as a member of the staff of the Newark Museum, Cahill organized an important exhibition of American "primitive paintings," and in 1931 a show of folk sculpture. Both of these shows included catalogues in which folk art was discussed. In 1932, as director of exhibitions for the Museum of Modern Art, Cahill mounted one of the most important folk art exhibitions ever presented, "American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900," a show which established folk art as a major presence in the art world. In a lengthy introduction to the catalogue, Cahill further developed his earlier thinking to present a concept of folk art which has been so influential that it has largely determined the nature and direction of folk art collecting ever since. This introduction, says Beatrix Rumford, was "remarkably perceptive." According to Alice Winchester, an organizer of "The Flowering of American Folk Art," a popular exhibition in 1974 often credited with rekindling current interest in folk art, the catalogue for Cahill's 1932 exhibition "still stands as an indispensable reference on American folk art."³

Despite the fact that in his 1932 catalogue Cahill primarily defined American folk art in terms of how it differed from high art, calling it "the expression of the common people . . . not the expression of professional artists made for a small cultured class," his sense of the nature and value of folk art was substantially affected by the studio-based values of high art. Viewing folk art as "the simple, un-

affected and childlike expression of men and women who had no school training in art," Cahill insisted on understanding, categorizing, and evaluating the artifacts made by these people in terms of the high art forms of painting and sculpture. In his 1931 exhibition on folk sculpture Cahill had stated this approach clearly. "In selecting exhibits," he wrote in the catalogue, "we have stressed aesthetic qualities rather than technical proficiency. We have tried to find objects which illustrate not only excellence in craftsmanship, but particularly those which have value as sculpture." According to this approach, in 1932 Cahill chose the objects for his exhibition on the basis of their sculptural and painterly qualities. Presenting them in the categories of painting and sculpture, he discussed them in the catalogue in terms of properties like modeling, color, and line. Further, in the exhibition these objects were displayed as objects of high art, in gallery settings that accentuated their aesthetic value while downplaying their utilitarian function. Thus the social or cultural meanings of these objects were overlooked. Fracturs were viewed as paintings, not as social or secular announcements, and cigarstore figures were considered sculpture, devoid of commercial or social significance. In part this aesthetic approach was popular because, as Cahill admitted in the introduction, little was known of the actual circumstances in which these pieces were made, or who made them. The de-emphasis of context also sprang from a bias inherited from the study of high art which placed art in an ennobled realm above history and beyond mundane human life and work.⁴

Connected to this high art bias, Cahill also suggested in his 1932 catalogue that the public interest in folk art began in America only when its aesthetic qualities were first perceived by early twentieth-century modern artists. Returning from France about 1910, in revolt against the naturalist and impressionist tendencies of the nineteenth-century art, these artists discovered primitive American art, said Cahill, because it seemed similar in feeling and form to that which they were producing. According to Cahill, these artists had turned first to the productions of "American aborigines" which they found in natural history museums, only to discover that most of these works could be viewed and valued not as art, but only for their "relations to local history." Turning next to the objects which were the focus of the popular "cult of Americana," the artists found these items to be likewise primarily craft objects, such as pottery and furniture, and thus

not of significant artistic merit. About 1920, however, "rummaging through antique shops and farmers' attics," the artists came across objects that were of more use to them, quaint pictures by untrained artists which had what was considered a remarkable similarity to modern art. Interest in these kinds of things spread and soon folk art collecting and display began.⁵

"The Art of the Common Man" was well received by the public and widely mentioned in the press, but, more important, it codified a notion of folk art that is still influential. As Rumford's history shows, Cahill's vision has largely established the character of American folk art collecting even until today. Working with Edith Halpert, Cahill guided and assisted Abby Aldrich Rockefeller in developing her collection, and he wrote the manual for the guides when Mrs. Rockefeller moved her collection to Colonial Williamsburg. Appointed national director of the Federal Art Project in 1935 and supervisor of the Index of American Design, he helped create a program of civic art education that influenced millions of Americans as well as generating an immense pictorial record of American material culture. By the time new collectors and dealers entered into the folk art market in the 1940s, the profound legacy of Holger Cahill was already being passed on to a new generation.

Indeed, Rumford's history is testimony to the continued power of Cahill's vision; for in her work Rumford focuses attention on the collecting of the kind of objects defined and promoted by Cahill and chronicles the development of interest in these objects from the time of their discovery by American modern artists. Largely utilizing Cahill's assumptions about the historical background of American folk art, Rumford elaborates on Cahill's early discussion of the history of folk art collecting to chart its development into the 1970s. At the same time, in much the same way Cahill dissociated the objects he viewed from their cultural context, Rumford's history of the collecting and exhibiting of these objects omits any significant mention of the cultural setting in which this history occurred. Rumford tells what was collected and exhibited, by whom and when, but seldom examines the larger cultural significance of this activity. Like the folk art presented by Cahill, the history of folk art collecting is viewed in a gallery setting, disconnected from the cultural forces that contributed to its creation or the society to which it responds.

The presentation of Rumford's history in 1977 marked a signif-

icant step in the development of American folk art study, for it was the first lengthy contemporary attempt to trace the development of American folk art collecting, and it represents the now commonly accepted vision of folk art history. Yet Rumford's work also demonstrates the inadequacy of the field's exclusive reliance on Holger Cahill's primarily aesthetic approach for the purposes of historical analysis. Using the perspective of the prevailing folk art ideology, Rumford's historical chronicle overlooks facts and ideas that do not comfortably fit Cahill's model and creates a static vision of folk art history which effectively ignores both the possibilities and discontinuity or change and their relationship to social and cultural issues.

American folk art history needs to be approached from a new perspective, and in his book *Politics, Language and Time*, historian and political scientist J. G. A. Pocock proposes one that may be remarkably appropriate. Recognizing that his field, the history of political thought, is experiencing a time of transformation, a period in which fundamental concepts are being reexamined as they are now in the study of American folk art, Pocock concludes that the direction of his field can only be understood by examining it in the light of the beginnings of the development of a new historical methodology. For, he says, since it is now necessary to understand the relationship between the old way of approaching the field and the new approaches and ideas that are being presented, history, which is about "things happening in a context which defines the kinds of events they were," should illuminate the problem if an appropriate historical methodology can be found. Fortunately, says Pocock, the most valuable contribution to the establishment of this method has already been made by the historian of science Thomas Kuhn, and although Pocock is primarily concerned with the application of Kuhn's ideas to the development and history of political language, his use of Kuhn can be applied to the development and history of folk art study as well.⁶

Kuhn's well-known book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, suggests a way of thinking of the history of science as essentially a history of the development and communication of a body of knowledge. According to Kuhn, scientific knowledge is structured into concepts called "paradigms." These paradigms organize and integrate what is known about a topic into a sensible whole and, says Pocock, in normal times they explain the world so well that they are used not only to solve problems but to suggest the kinds of problems that need

solutions. As new knowledge is discovered, it is integrated into a paradigm, continually altering the system. Yet because the central paradigmatic vision defines not only how knowledge will be interpreted, but what facts and ideas are available to be considered for the creation of knowledge, such alterations generally function to support and extend the paradigm. Nevertheless, the paradigm exists as a charged process of continued confrontation between the persistence of the paradigmatic view and the potential change involved with the integration of each new bit of knowledge.⁷

Yet this process has cultural and social as well as intellectual implications. Paradigms exist in all areas of knowledge and, as political theorist Isaac Kramnick has noted, paradigms help establish the fundamental norms and values which determine the way people experience the world. They constitute the world view of a people and thus changes in these norms threaten the very way individuals perceive and experience reality. Moreover, as Pocock says, by organizing and integrating knowledge, paradigms also suggest which individuals within any system have the most appropriate or useful approach to examining what is needed to know, and thus who has the most authority or power within a field. Hence social and cultural issues flow from, and are implied by, intellectual ones. Because of this, paradigm shifts are also social and cultural phenomena. With a new paradigm comes an alteration of the world view and a new distribution of authority among those within a field. Consequently, the period of transition from one paradigm to another is seldom a placid one. Many people have built their power and self-concept on the old paradigm, and in defining their view of the world the old paradigm has foreclosed their ability to recognize new possibilities. Thus the proponents of the new paradigm, and the validity of the questions they propose, are vigorously resisted as illegitimate.⁸

Pocock's application of Kuhn's theory suggests the development of a historical methodology which encompasses both persistence and change in history as well as their intellectual and social implications. History can be viewed as a process driven by the conflicting impulses of stasis and transformation, each containing within itself the seeds of the other. Furthermore, this theory defines historical process both in terms of its operation as an arena in which paradigmatic views define, confront, and attempt to integrate knowledge of the past, as well as the intellectual and political authority this process distributes between

human actors in the system. It is a model well suited to examine the historical, social, and intellectual forces that have contributed to the development of American folk art collecting and the writing of its history.

The paradigm that controls American folk art knowledge was developed in the 1920s and 1930s and codified in the writings of Holger Cahill. Its best known and most influential historical formulation is to be found in the work of Beatrix Rumford. Yet, for the purposes of understanding the present situation and future direction of American folk art study, the most intriguing aspect of Rumford's history lies not in the fact that it exemplifies the folk art paradigm, but in its relationship to Kuhn's theory of paradigm change.

In much the fashion Kuhn describes, in the years prior to the formulation of Rumford's chronicle, a number of folk art scholars, drawing on a developing history of discontent with Cahill's approach, suggested that the old questions and answers supplied by the folk art paradigm of Holger Cahill were no longer adequate. Coming particularly from students of folklore, who were at that time turning from the study of verbal and musical traditions to take in material ones, these suggestions called into question the very basis of popular folk art collecting and study. In 1968, in one of the first systematic studies of material culture by an American folklorist, Henry Glassie dismissed both the definitions and objects utilized by folk art collectors and writers.

The usual statement of "folk art" takes into account only two kinds of American art, academic and "folk." Most of the antiquarians who employ the term do worry about their use of it and they have proposed a number of alternatives—naive, provincial, unself-conscious, primitive, anonymous, pioneer, and nonacademic (this last being perhaps the only term which can happily encompass the hodgepodge of objects normally displayed in "folk art" galleries).

Four years later, in 1972, Glassie continued his examination of the basic tenets of the folk art paradigm and suggested that rather than applying to the amount of training an artist had undergone, the adjective "folk" related to a conservative or traditional attitude in the artist's mind. This conservative attitude, together with popular and elite attitudes, exists simultaneously in the mind of every individual, he said, and the combination and relationship of these attitudes determines the particular orientation of individuals and the things they

make. In 1977 art historian Kenneth Ames pressed the attack further by arguing that not only was the word "folk" misused by folk art collectors, but so was the word "art" misused. Relying on work of George Kubler, Ames examined the high-art based definition of art used by folk art collectors and suggested that the concept of art should be expanded to include all man-made objects, thus eradicating entirely the distinction between art and non-art.¹⁰

These suggestions, and others, irked folk art aficionados, for they called into question the basic assumptions on which their folk art paradigm rested. As such they represented a social as well as an intellectual threat. Viewed in Pocock's terms, ideas like those of Glassie and Ames had as much to do with politics as with art, as much with economics as with language. What was at stake was the ability to define the system of knowledge within the field of folk art, and thus to define the social hierarchy and power of those who controlled the definitions of the collectors' folk art world. Moreover, a redefinition of the field threatened the value of objects defined as folk art which had long ago become economic as well as artistic commodities, and it menaced the substantial financial investment in these objects made by individuals and institutions alike.

Rumford's history of folk art collecting was produced the same year Ames's work was published, and her chronicle was first presented at a three-day conference on American folk art held at the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, a conference where concern over folk art definitions and approaches was so intense that Scott Swank, an organizer of the conference and an editor of the conference proceedings, wondered whether the meeting was a political rally or a symposium on folk art. According to Swank, the meeting at Winterthur was "a thinly veiled struggle for preeminence" which "challenged fundamental presuppositions and raised major issues of philosophy."¹¹ Rumford's chronicle must be understood for its social and political, as well as intellectual and historical, significance. By building a vision of the past in terms of the threatened folk art paradigm, Rumford's comments, whether intended or not, implied not only that the paradigm was supported by the weight of history, but also that the proponents of paradigmatic change were historically isolated and their arguments illegitimate and baseless from the perspective of time-tested, fundamental norms.

As Kuhn's theory suggests, what is at stake in a change from one

paradigm to another is the very conceptual scheme by which knowledge is admitted and organized into a system. Consequently, from the perspective of the established paradigm, fundamental and new conceptions appear necessarily unnatural, illegitimate, and groundless. That does not mean they do not have a ground in another system, though. With this in mind, in order to better understand the historical issues separating proponents of the old paradigm and those attacking it, it may prove helpful to reexamine the history of folk art collecting from a new perspective. Despite the inclination of proponents of the folk art paradigm to ignore social and cultural issues in the formulation of folk art history, these issues illuminate the development of interest in American folk art, for the discovery and definition of American folk art in the early years of the twentieth century were closely tied to a number of cultural trends.

As proponents of the folk art paradigm have pointed out, the beginnings of interest in what is now called American folk art and the development of American modern art are very much connected; yet the reasons for this connection, and their influence on the spread of interest in folk art, have yet to be fully examined. To be sure, as Holger Cahill and Beatrix Rumford suggest, much of this interest on the part of American artists sprang from their enthusiasm for European modernism and primitivism, whether encountered on European travels or in the studio of Robert Laurent. In addition, particularly following the furor raised by the Armory Show in 1913, American modernists were interested in discovering American roots for their new art and in demonstrating that their works were more than mere copies of European originals. Such factors undoubtedly contributed to the fascination with the curious objects American artists first encountered in the studios and cabins at Hamilton Easter Field's Ogunquit Colony (established the same year as the Armory Show). Yet in addition to these influences, others were also at work, and these would become increasingly important as folk art became better known and collected by the public at large.

To begin with, folk art was discovered in America during years of rapid demographic and industrial change. According to historian William E. Leuchtenburg, in 1910 over 54% of the American population lived in small towns of less than 2,500 people. By 1920 this was true of only 48%. In roughly the same period the city of Los Angeles expanded from 319,000 people to more than one million.

America was making the transition from a rural nation to one dominated by cities. During these years, many Americans experienced doubts about what was left of rural values, and this was nowhere more evident than in American literature. Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*, written in 1915, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), and Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920) were but a few books to portray the sterility and waste of small town life. In this period *The New Yorker* magazine was founded and came to represent a witty, urban alternative to what was read in the hinterlands, and H. L. Mencken was heard to question whether the American farmer was a human being.¹²

Nevertheless, as much as Americans seemed to disdain rural life, they also feared encroaching urbanization. To a nation raised on Jeffersonian ideals, the city still represented sin and decay. It was a place of debauchery and crowding, a haven for crime, Negroes, and unwashed aliens. "New York," said the *Denver Post* in 1930, "has been a cesspool into which immigrant trash has been dumped for so long that it can scarcely be considered American any more."¹³ Such conflicting hopes and fears were not new to America, but in the opening years of the twentieth century they were deeply felt, and they represented an ambivalence that operated with regard to other issues.

In addition to demographic changes, America was also feeling the full impact of mechanization and industrialization, for in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries American productive capacity increased at a rate greater than that of the Industrial Revolution. Following World War I America achieved the highest standard of living ever known, and earnings increased as work hours were cut. Revolutionary technological innovations, such as the moving assembly line and the widespread use of the electrical motor, were largely responsible, and with these innovations came new, or radically altered, industries such as those producing automobiles, light metals, chemicals, and synthetics. Yet as fervently as Americans welcomed new consumer goods, they were also uneasy with the technology that made them possible. According to Frederick Hoffman, in his book *The 20s*, fear of dehumanization and standardization was part of the general reaction to the machine's effect on modern life in America. In 1923, writing in the *New Republic*, Lewis Mumford warned that assembly line techniques were destroying the values of artisanship and confidence in the craftsman. "We flounder before the machine and [we]

are features . . . of its external life," said Waldo Frank in 1925. The same year the third edition of John B. Watson's book, *Behaviorism*, was printed. First published in 1914, it now became a best seller as Americans rushed to read about how man was nothing but a machine, a "robot," to use the word coined in the same era by Karel Čapek's play, *R.U.R.*¹⁴

Demographic and technological changes exacerbated other trends in American life such as the changing roles of women, and alterations in religious practices, family structure, and patterns of immigration, to create a postwar society which, despite prosperity, felt deeply threatened. Says Leuchtenburg:

In a world of Bolshevik revolutions and Bela Kuns, of general strikes and Mussolini's march on Rome, there was a danger that America too might be infected by the social diseases of the Old World. Yet the threat of foreign contagion was not as terrifying as the fear of change from within. In part the danger seemed to come from enclaves of the foreign born . . . in part from the new intellectual currents of moral relativism and cosmopolitanism. Not a little of the anxiety arose from the disturbing knowledge that Americans themselves no longer had their former confidence in democracy or religion. "They have," observed Andre Siegfried, "a vague uneasy fear of being overwhelmed from within, and of suddenly finding one day that they are no longer themselves."¹⁵

Battered by the forces of change, many Americans retreated in the early decades of the twentieth century by erecting conservative ideologies and institutions which functioned to combat cultural transformation by attempting to avoid and deny it. Of this process, the discovery and definition of American folk art is a good example.

In her book *American Art since 1900*, art historian Barbara Rose has suggested that the situation of American modern artists following the First World War was, in many ways, affected by the generally conservative posture of American society.

The moment at which American art attempted to assimilate European modernism coincided with the moment that the American nation was confronted with assimilating 13 million new immigrants. The threat posed by this invasion of foreigners was often expressed in contempt for foreign art. Such a defensive position, ending in a political chauvinism as well as cultural isolationism, forced the artist to "Americanize" European art.¹⁶

This pressure, as well as the cultural ambivalence toward rapid cultural changes, combined to create an artistic and social need which was

partially satisfied by the discovery of American folk art. By this discovery American artists were involved in a cultural withdrawal similar to that going on in other areas of American experience.

One of the prominent responses to change in the early years of the twentieth century was the cult of Americanism. Attempting to deny the obvious, fundamental, and growing divisions in American society, as well as to ignore the newly articulated horror of class conflict, some Americans retreated to a combative, coercive sense of oneness. Not only was the country often hostile to all things foreign—a fear which made itself manifest in political isolationism, immigration restrictions, and the persecution of foreign-born minorities—but America and its founders and institutions were glorified. Admiration for American history approached an almost religious fervor, as Americans lauded the virtues of democracy, freedom, and the American (Anglo-Saxon) common man who was said to be the bulwark of American society.

Such self-conscious chauvinism expressed itself also in the newly developed definition of American folk art. Said by Holger Cahill to give "a living quality to the story of American beginnings," folk art was glorified as representative of the intuitive, indigenous, artistic heritage of a great democratic nation. This uniquely American art was considered testimony to the fact that American life and activity were instinctively artistic and beautiful, not in the contrived, artificial sense that informed European high art and its imitations, but in the simple and unpretentious way commonplace objects dignified the life of the American common man. Thus, according to Cahill, American folk art represented the essence of America because it stood for real American life. It was "the expression of the common people, made by them and intended for their use and enjoyment."¹⁷

A second response to the rapid changes in American society at this time was a retreat into the past. In these years, the more uncomfortable the present became, the more Americans seemed to value the past, but the past they valued was often substantially refashioned and romanticized. Prominent among the refabricators of the past were American writers who, for the most part—particularly in the 1920s—were concerned with making the past serve their own ends. According to Howard Mumford Jones, "The new movement [of writers] sought to create literary history in its own image . . . that is, it deliberately sought to rewrite the story of American letters in values known only

to the twentieth century. Every age, of course, remakes history in its own image, but the special mark of these iconoclasts was a refusal of historical importance as a canon of judgment."¹⁸ Yet it was not only writers who refashioned the past, pushing culture and history into the background. T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were no more selective in their historical fabrications than were Dewey or the surrealists, and in discovering and defining American folk art American modern artists were involved in their own rewriting of history.

Responding to the prevalent discomfort with the present, American artists placed the creation of American folk art in a romantic past. Fed by pre-industrial craft traditions, it was said to have flourished in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. After the Civil War, however, with the advent of industrialization and urbanization, this art began to languish, and by the end of the century it was thought that its production had ceased. Modern industrialism had drawn men away from the farm and from home industries into the factories, said Holger Cahill. In a comment that made it clear how he felt about modern civilization, he continued, "Railroads . . . accelerated the urban concentration . . . Machine industry was enthroned. Business enterprise made use of the limitless reproductive power of the machine to fill the land with machine made copies of objects designed by craftsmen whom the machine was destroying."¹⁹

A final way in which Americans sought to avoid the full implications of their changing, modern world was through their fascination with primitivism. As has been mentioned, American artists were partially drawn to objects they identified as folk because their interest in primitive forms had already been piqued by European modernism. Yet these artists were not the only ones interested in primitivism. Shortly after the First World War, primitivism became a fad throughout the Western world. Earlier in the century, spurred by the development of modern techniques in anthropology, European intellectuals and artists had "discovered" primitive, or folk, societies. This development recognized in these societies a sophistication and complexity not ascribed to them before, and soon intellectuals were involved in studying and celebrating the folk. Yet such study and popularity sprang not only from scientific and artistic interests, but also from the pressures of modern civilization.

From the perspective of contemporary, technological, urban life, primitive groups seemed to represent ideal societies unaffected by the ravages of modern life. Says Frederick Hoffman,

The primitivism of the 20s was in many respects a reaction against the standardization caused by modern science in all its social applications. The noble savage in Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) was but one of the many rebels against this standardization. Writers referred often to more primitive societies, pointed out their customs, rites, and habits, and suggested by invidious contrast that the modern, sophisticated, and civilized white man was losing out in strength and happiness.²⁰

Thus primitivism was an attempt to escape the deadening pace of modern life, and its popularity resulted in the romanticizing of groups often distinguished by their non-European backgrounds or lower class status. Such was the case with black Americans. Suddenly, in the 1920s, black Harlem was all the rage as whites attempted to cast off the shackles of their overcivilized heritage by making nightly safaris to the black section of New York to seek liberation in hot jazz, illicit booze, and dark fantasies.²¹

From the beginning, primitivism played an important role in the discovery and definition of American folk art. In much the fashion that black Americans were romanticized as uncomplicated, spontaneous people whose lives and culture evidenced a simplicity and vibrancy not found in modern civilization, so too, was the work of the artists and artisans discovered by American modernists considered to be "primitive in the sense that it is the simple, unaffected and childlike expression of men and women who had little or no school training in art, and who did not even know that they were producing art."²² These noble savages were said to be the epitome of the American common man, gloriously unaware of the constraints of higher civilization, and acting out their lives in harmony with the natural American landscape.

The discovery and definition of American folk art as they occurred in the early years of the century, and were codified in the work of Holger Cahill, were but a part of a larger cultural process of adjustment to a variety of social and historical forces, and the folk art paradigm that resulted is as much a statement of culture as aesthetics. What must be recognized, however, is that this statement was fundamentally a conservative one and functioned to help some Americans avoid the full implications of consuming social issues. As such, this folk art formulation served not to help people openly confront and deal with the important concerns of their lives and society, but to escape them. Yet the irony of this retreat is that it was formulated and

adopted during a period in which another, less escapist, approach to American folk art was also current.

Although it is not recorded in Rumford's folk art history, or mentioned in any of the myriad of books on folk art written by collectors and dealers, another important event occurred in 1932, in addition to the staging of Holger Cahill's exhibition. This event was the publication of Allen Eaton's book, *Immigrant Gifts to American Life*.²³ A description of a number of folk art exhibitions that had occurred in America between 1919 and 1932, the book presented an impressive record of an approach to American folk art that is quite different from that taken by Holger Cahill. Emphasizing the social as well as aesthetic importance of folk objects, the book sought to confront many of the issues Cahill's folk art paradigm functioned to avoid.

To begin with, Eaton's book set itself squarely against the reactionary cult of Americanism. Concerned about, but not immobilized by, many of the changes taking place in America, Eaton refused to retreat to the combative chauvinism which romanticized American character and attacked anything that smacked of social change or foreign influence. Indeed, Eaton's book, and the exhibitions it described, celebrated the art and life of American immigrants and argued for the benefits America sustained from their presence. By limiting immigration, Eaton argued, "we have lost one of our oldest and most precious traditions, [but] perhaps we can find a substitute for our loss, a kind of compensating principle by consciously setting about to discover and conserve the best qualities which our immigrants have brought and are bringing from their homelands." Thus, Eaton continued, rather than taking the shortsighted approach of denigrating and fearing the immigrant, "this book is concerned with efforts to bring out the immigrant's contributions to the cultural life of America, and to make him feel that by his very origin he has something to give . . . which his new country could not have without him." In short, the purposes of the exhibitions mentioned in Eaton's book were social as well as artistic. "In the foregoing experiments in appreciation of the arts and crafts of the homelands, or the folk arts as they are often called, these exhibitions have been used as a means to social ends," said Eaton. "They have helped bring about better understanding; they have stimulated social and civic cooperation; . . . they have given immigrants a sense of validity through expressed esteem for their qualities and achievements. . . . In these and other ways they have given a new meaning to the word Americanization."²⁴

Eaton's sense of the purpose of these exhibitions was connected to his conception of the nature of the art they presented. Rather than focusing only on the objects themselves to determine their artistic qualities, Eaton looked to their cultural and social context. "It is not the thing which is done that makes a work of art," he said. "It is the manner of doing it." In 1937 Eaton elaborated. Presenting, as he commonly did, a folk art exhibition which included not only objects that could be appreciated as painting and sculpture, but those that were utilitarian and undecorated as well, he admitted that there were many people who would not be so all inclusive in their definition of the arts.

To those of us who may think of art as pretty much limited to pictures, especially paintings, it may require a little stretch of the imagination to make a place for these country things in our catalogue of arts. But if the arts are to belong to all of us, if we are all to have their help, their solace, and their inspiration they cannot, it seems to me, be limited to a few forms of expression in two or three media. We must include many things which people do day by day, as well as they know how . . . The painter is [but] one of the large group of artists who have recorded their reactions to our . . . environment . . . he would like us all to think of him as part of that happy company of spinners, weavers, potters, joiners, whittlers, workers in wood, leather, metal, stone, and others.²⁵

Finally, Eaton did not attempt to escape the forces of the present by viewing American folk art as a primarily historical phenomenon. Technology was indeed changing the world, he said, and increasing standardization was altering American attitudes and values. But "it is not with the wish to discourage modern processes that these conditions are mentioned here, rather in the hope that realization of them will incline more people to do their part to control them." Thus, unlike Cahill and many others in American society, Eaton refused to pretend that studying folk art entailed dallying in an idyllic and romantic past. In his 1937 catalogue Eaton made this clear.

It is not the purpose of this exhibition to urge a return to the handicraft culture, but a part of its purpose is to suggest that our handicraft culture is being supplanted by another form, and that some of the values which are being lost in transition may well be recaptured if we face the problem realistically.²⁶

Consequently, Eaton consistently argued that American folk art was as much a contemporary as an historical phenomenon. It was being

produced currently, he said, some of it within a few hours of the opening of the exhibitions in which it was presented.

The vision of folk art promoted by Allen Eaton found expression in scores of exhibitions in the early years of the twentieth century. *Immigrant Gifts to American Life* mentions at least twenty-five, a number of which were organized by Eaton himself. These exhibitions were staged across the country, from New York to Cleveland, from Connecticut to Michigan. And they were very popular. The "Arts and Crafts of the Homelands," mounted in Buffalo in 1919, provoked both local and national attention. Held at the Albright Gallery, it attracted over 43,000 people, breaking all previous records for attendance at that institution. The "America's Making Festival," held in New York City two years later, was even more popular. Headquartered in the 71st Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue, it supported a number of pageants which were conducted in the New York City schools. In three weeks 2,265 pageants were given, and the festival was seen by over 1,465,000 people.

This approach to American folk art did not begin with Allen Eaton. Springing from ethnological and anthropological interests in the nineteenth century, it grew out of the work of scholars like Stewart Culin, an early president of the American Folklore Society and curator of ethnology at the Brooklyn Institute Museum from 1903 to 1929. Having been involved with the University of Pennsylvania Museum before he joined the Brooklyn Institute, Culin mounted many exhibitions of folk objects throughout his career and was interested in both the aesthetic and social significance of these objects.²⁷ Thus, not only was the folk art approach codified by Holger Cahill in 1932 not the only approach to folk art in these early years, but it was not the first. Contrary to what Beatrix Rumford has suggested, the earliest public showing of American folk art took place long before 1924 when the painter Henry Schnackenberg arranged a showing of folk objects at Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's elite salon.

However, the existence and popularity of the kind of folk art promoted by Allen Eaton raises profound questions for students of folk art history. Why did Eaton's approach not form the basis for the folk art paradigm instead of Cahill's, and what has happened to the interest in the kind of objects described and promoted by Eaton? Answers to these questions must await future historical research, but a few tentative suggestions can be proposed.

One possible reason why the vision of Holger Cahill is still so powerful may be that it continues to provide a useful escape from the pressures of a modern, changing world. Although America is now undeniably a technological and urban culture, there is scarcely more comfort with the implications of this than existed a half century ago. Indeed, the existence of nuclear weapons and other thoroughly modern horrors makes the present a much less comfortable place than it was in the 1920s and 1930s.

In addition, despite its democratic pretensions, by adopting a high art aesthetic the folk art paradigm developed by Cahill promotes the values and supports the perquisites of the elite group that continues to dominate American society. According to John Berger,

The visual arts have always existed within a certain preserve; originally this preserve was magical or sacred. But it was also physical; it was the place, the cave, the building, in which, or for which, the work was made. The experience of art, which at first was the experience of ritual, was set apart from the rest of life—precisely in order to exercise power over it. Later the preserve of art became a social one. It entered the culture of the ruling class, whilst physically it was set apart and isolated in their palaces and houses. During all this history the authority of art was inseparable from the particular authority of the preserve.²⁸

Identified with the elevated authority and status of its preserve, this high art has become emblematic of the elite culture which sanctions and protects it. It symbolizes the status and control of the elite, and its value is gauged by its rarity. Such value is now affirmed by market price. Yet, says Berger, because art still carries vestiges of its sacred connotation, it is also thought to be greater than commerce, and "its market price is said to be a reflection of its spiritual value. [But since] the spiritual value of an object can only be explained in terms of magic or religion, and since in modern society neither of these is a living force, the art object . . . is enveloped in an atmosphere of entirely bogus religiosity. Works of art are discussed and presented as though they were holy relics . . ." and placed in museums, cathedrals to the rich, where objects of art and the wealth and power they represent can be worshipped and glorified.²⁹

According to art historian Ernst Fischer, "in the dawn of humanity art had little to do with 'beauty' and nothing at all to do with any aesthetic desire; it was a magic tool." But, as hierarchical society evolved

and art entered the preserve of the elite, the aesthetic function of art came to predominate. This shift was connected to the development of what sociologist Thorstein Veblen called the leisure class. In his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen argued that as classes developed in modern society the status of the dominant group came to be derived from the fact that it was exempted from necessary social labor.³⁰ Able to rely on others to perform socially required work, this class involved itself primarily in a display of conspicuous leisure and consumption as status indicators that it did not need to work and could afford to consume objects not necessary to basic subsistence. Art is an important symbol of such status since, as an artifact isolated within the preserve of the elite, it does not perform a function fundamental to economic survival. Consequently, collecting and connoisseurship are symbols of leisured distinction, and art is valued for its purely aesthetic qualities—its beauty—and thus its lack of social utility. Other kinds of artifacts which cannot be interpreted purely in terms of their formal qualities, whose nature is too clearly tied to the lower status activity of work, are not included in the category of art and are denigrated to the lower level of craft. These standards are established by the leisure class, the only social class that can actually afford to live in a conspicuously wasteful manner. But the standards it sets are aspired to by all members of society, for the framework of the existing system is fixed by the ideology of the elite. By establishing definitions by which human activity is categorized and the products of that activity valued, the elite affects the thought and behavior of all other groups, who conform to its values in order to live up to social norms and achieve social distinction.

Yet ironically, if one accepts the ideology of Cahill's folk art paradigm, the collecting and promotion of folk art can confer an even higher status than fine art—traditionally the symbol of the position and standing of the elite. Such status cannot attach to the producers of folk art, for they belong, generally, to the lower classes, and many of the objects they make, like weather vanes and shop signs, are produced for obviously utilitarian and socially useful ends; but it can apply to the promoters and collectors of the objects if they are treated in a nonutilitarian way. Thus, as with fine art, the possession of folk art is an honorific sign of conspicuous consumption, and spending one's time collecting it serves as a symbol of conspicuous leisure. Moreover, since much folk art was originally created for utilitarian

ends, the elevation of these objects to the status of nonutilitarian art and the concomitantly high prices paid for the originally inexpensive "common" articles raise the value of folk art above that of high art for the purposes of conspicuous display. Those who have been able to redefine—and thus revalue—these objects enjoy increased social power; for they have turned these low status objects into high status art and have rescued them from their primitive makers, who were reputedly too childlike and too naive to realize the aesthetic value of their productions.

Allen Eaton's approach to folk art and artists is very different. His remarkably democratic definition of art considers it in the context and from the purposes of the people who create it. Consequently Eaton's view avoids both the unfortunate tendency to view the makers of folk objects as primitive and childlike and the coercive belief that the objects these people make can be known and appreciated as art only from his perspective. This view concedes the right for determining aesthetic definitions to the people who make and use folk objects, thus limiting both the artistic and social power of the elite. It is not surprising, then, that little art historical notice has been paid to Allen Eaton. The objects he promoted were often too functional and too plain to be considered art. To glorify them would be to value the dignity of labor and of those who do it. Thus Eaton's artifacts have been relegated to the category of craft and are found at county fairs, not in art museums.

The example of Allen Eaton points forcefully to the fact that American folk art history as it has been commonly understood does not provide an approach which can be of assistance in understanding the nature and direction of the study of folk art. Thoroughly committed to the romantic, chauvinist, and elitist view of the old paradigm of folk art knowledge, this approach to folk art history resists the incorporation of facts and interpretations which challenge the fundamental tenets of the old view. Yet the old view is being fundamentally challenged, and, since it is now necessary to try to understand the relationship between the old paradigm and the new approaches that are presented, a new historical methodology must be developed. For despite the picturesque, harmonic, and romantic vision of American art and society presented by its collectors and curators, the very existence of American folk art and the thoroughly political responses to it by various elites demonstrate that America has always been a

society more marked by multiplicity, diversity, and conflict than by unity and harmony. As the product of a generally non-ruling, relatively unaffluent social class or subcultural group, American folk art is testimony to the class differences that exist between this art and its makers and the high art of the elite class, which establishes the hierarchical system in which folk art is often judged. Arguments about the validity and ethicality of such a system and such judgments are at the center of the current folk art debate, and they point out the fact that folk art history can no longer ignore issues of class, politics, and power.

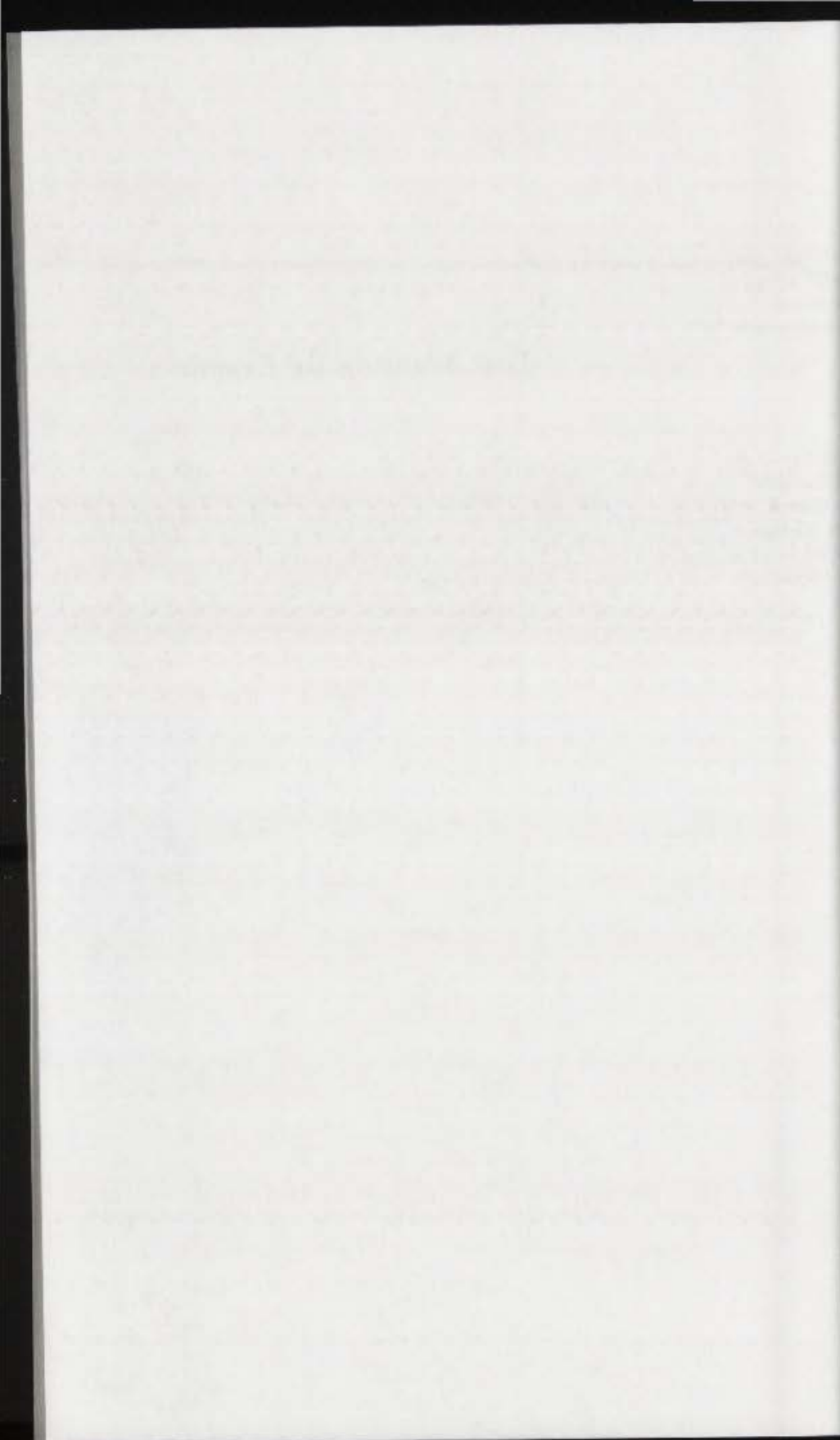
Notes for Chapter 2

1. The view of the nature and function of history developed in this paragraph is based on ideas presented by John Berger in the first chapter of his book, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972).
2. Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Methods," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17 (1982): p. 3.
3. Beatrix T. Rumford, "Uncommon Art of the Common People: A Review of Trends in the Collecting and Exhibiting of American Folk Art," in *Perspectives on American Folk Art*, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby and Scott T. Swank (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), pp. 23, 36. Alice Winchester, "Introduction" to Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester, *The Flowering of American Folk Art, 1776-1876* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), p. 11. See also John Michael Vlach, "Holger Cahill as Folklorist," *Journal of American Folklore* 98 (1985): pp. 148-162.
4. Holger Cahill, "American Folk Art," in *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932), pp. 6, 5. Holger Cahill, "American Folk Sculpture," in *American Folk Sculpture: The Work of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Craftsmen* (Newark, N.J.: Newark Museum, 1931), p. 13.
5. Cahill, "American Folk Art," p. 27.
6. J. G. A. Pocock, "Languages and Their Implications: The Transformation of the Study of Political Thought," in *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 11. I have relied on Pocock's perceptive analysis of Kuhn's ideas throughout this essay and I am grateful to Leonard Hochberg for calling this reference to my attention.
7. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Pocock, "Languages and Their Implications," p. 13.

8. Isaac Kramnick, "Reflections on Revolution: Definition and Explanation in Recent Scholarship," *History and Theory* 11 (1972): p. 31. Pocock, "Languages and Their Implications," p. 13.
9. Henry Glassie, *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), pp. 28-29.
10. Henry Glassie, "Folk Art," in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 258. Kenneth Ames, *Beyond Necessity: Art in the Folk Tradition* (Winterthur, Del.: Winterthur Museum, 1977), p. 16. Complaints about the folk art paradigm began as early as the late 1930s and emanated partially from students of Pennsylvania-German folklore. See particularly Simon Bronner's "Introduction" to *American Folk Art: A Guide to Sources* (New York: Garland, 1984) and the last chapter of his *Grasping Things* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1986).
11. Scott T. Swank, "Introduction," in *Perspectives on American Folk Art*, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby and Scott T. Swank (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), p. 3.
12. William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 225-226. I have used Leuchtenburg's history to comment in the next paragraphs about the political, economic, demographic, social, and cultural changes that transformed America in the early decades of the twentieth century.
13. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity*, p. 226.
14. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity*, pp. 178-179. Frederick J. Hoffman, *The 20s: American Writing in the Postwar Decade* (1949; reprint ed., New York: Free Press, 1965), pp. 299-301.
15. Hoffman, *The 20s*, p. 205.
16. Barbara Rose, *American Art since 1900: A Critical History* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), p. 77.
17. Cahill, "American Folk Art," pp. 3, 6.
18. Howard Mumford Jones, quoted in Hoffman, *The 20s*, p. 146.
19. Cahill, "American Folk Art," pp. 7-8.
20. Hoffman, *The 20s*, p. 307.
21. For the relationship between primitivism, black American folk art, and race relations, see my article "Black Art, Folk Art and Social Control," *Winterthur Portfolio* 18 (1984): pp. 271-289.
22. Cahill, "American Folk Art," p. 5.
23. Allen Eaton, *Immigrant Gifts to American Life: Some Experiments in Appreciation of the Contributions of Our Foreign Born Citizens to American Culture* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1932).
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 27, 36.

25. Ibid., pp. 156, 7.
26. Ibid., pp. 155, 8.
27. For commentary on and analysis of early folk art writing and activity, and the work of Stewart Culin, see the writing of Simon Brner, especially his "The Hidden Past of Material Culture Studies in America Folkloristics," *New York Folklore* 8 (1982): pp. 1-10; "Stewart Culin, Museum Magician," *Pennsylvania Heritage* 11 (1985): pp. 4-11; *Grasping Things*, pp. 179-210.
28. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 32.
29. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 21.
30. Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach* (1959; reprinted and translated, New York: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 3. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899; reprint ed., New York: New American Library, 1953). The remainder of this paragraph and the next paragraph are taken, with some alterations, from my article, "Black Art, Folk Art and Social Control." I am grateful to the University of Chicago Press for permission to use this material.

Folk Painting Re-Examined



"A Correct Likeness":
Culture and Commerce in Nineteenth-Century
Rural America

David Jaffee

I heard with pleasure that you had made some very clever attempts in portraits where you are and which had given much satisfaction. . . . Were I to begin life again, I should not hesitate to follow this plan, that is, to paint portraits cheap and slight, for the mass of folks can't judge of the merits of a well finished picture. . . . Indeed, moving about through the country . . . must be an agreeable way of passing one's time . . . it would besides be the means of introducing a young man to the best society and if he was wise might be the means of establishing himself advantageously in the world.

John Vanderlyn, Letter to John Vanderlyn, Jr., 1825

In 1825 John Vanderlyn, an academic artist, wrote to his nephew in upstate New York, encouraging him to join the ranks of itinerant portrait-makers such as Ammi Phillips, "moving through the country," who were providing "cheap and slight" images for the "mass of folks." Images of the "primitive sort" of portrait-makers abound in the collective American consciousness. Academics and antiquers agree upon a vision of self-sufficient farmers and isolated country craftsmen. Instead John Vanderlyn offers us a vision of the steady commercialization of the northeastern countryside.¹

A "correct likeness" of the rural North in the several decades after the War for Independence portrays the lives of rural Americans in the context of their changing agrarian society. Culture and commerce changed together during these years when itinerant artisans and their enthusiastic customers abounded in the villages of the northern United States. Careers in commerce were followed by changes in domestic decor when both rural producer and consumer aspired to bring "elegance" into the ordinary farmhouse. The lives and works of rural portrait makers provide a perspective on the process of commercialization in the countryside, for in their careers they followed the path of numerous other village artisans who emerged from a rural economy, and in their likenesses they offered striking images of the stencilled chairs and colorful shelf clocks with which farmers filled their households when they aspired to urbane gentility in a rural idiom.²

Artisan-entrepreneurs were crucial in transforming the rural North during these years. The absence of a rigid artisan system in the countryside, together with a growing population increasingly interested in consumer goods, enabled displaced farm boys to pick up a variety of trades and travel along a myriad of roads in search of what John Vanderlyn called "the means of establishing [oneself] in the world." They reworked production in numerous crafts and promoted consumption in a dynamic village scene. By drawing on their training as artisans, and by using the power sources and labor organization already at hand to develop simple, time-saving inventions, country craftsmen facilitated the manufacture of mass consumer goods for a widening circle of customers. They began to manufacture chairs, clocks, carpets, and books, as well as portraits, and to introduce rural denizens to products previously accessible only to urban dwellers and the local gentry. These rural artisans moved gradually but steadily toward the status of artisan-entrepreneurs: market-oriented purveyors of "cultural" commodities who both anticipated and helped pave the way for the backcountry's industrial revolution.³

A few provincial limners like Reuben Moulthrop were able to satisfy the limited demand of those at the top of village society for "correct" portraiture at the close of the eighteenth century. In the new century the numbers of these rural artists with their popular priced offerings dramatically increased when peddlers such as Chester Harding and James Guild took to the road and brought together

producer and consumer in distant villages in an era of developing tastes. Obtaining their artistic training from the pages of design books or from brief encounters with portraitists "of the primitive sort," portrait makers like Rufus Porter traversed the countryside, creating countless images ranging from stark black and white silhouettes to colorful full-length oil paintings. Critics like John Neal shared in the euphoria which greeted an inexperienced audience's desire for colorful commodities of all sorts—chairs, clocks, and carpets, too—previously only available to urbanites or aristocrats. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, itinerants like Erastus Salisbury Field became innovators in a village vernacular to meet the demand (and lower the price) for their offerings. These artisan-entrepreneurs experimented with the rapid (sometimes mechanically-aided) manufacture of likenesses with stylized designs which standardized their products, but they distinguished their subjects by the inclusion of personal items. They traveled the backroads of the rural North to cultivate a ready market for their services among "middling" craftsmen, innkeepers, and improving farmers who sought symbols of middle-class identity.

The experience was not without its ironies. Enterprising portrait makers seemed to welcome the new opportunities presented by the intensification of craft production. Some even embraced the daguerreotype after its invention in 1839. Few could have imagined that the very innovations they helped advance would eventually make their calling obsolete. Yet, in the meantime, along with their audience, they helped forge a new and commercialized rural art world. In a modern nostalgia for a vanished time and place—peopled with Yankee peddlers and primitive painters—the moderns have overlooked some puzzling questions about this golden age of homespun. When and how did a world of scarcity suddenly give way to a new world of abundance? Why and how did an industrial order, ruled by manufacturers and filled with consumers, so dramatically replace a vast region populated with agriculturalists? Finally, the most vexing question of all remains, how was the War for Independence followed by an equally revolutionary cultural revolution, a Village Enlightenment, which transformed rural America from a region resistant to change into one eager to embrace it?⁴

A handful of limners were evidently sufficient to satisfy the demands for portrait making in eighteenth-century New England society. The village gentry, eager to satisfy their social designs, drew upon

the outlines of the academic art of the period. In the closing years of the eighteenth century figures like Winthrop Chandler and Ralph Earl found the wealthy country set in New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont eager to have their family portraits painted. Winthrop Chandler translated for his neighbors the available forms of "correct" portraiture into their own idiom. He profiled the severe New Englanders with bold line and colorful design—the stock devices of the provincial artisan—and added individualizing details such as books, furniture, and clothes (fig. 3-1). The next generation of artisan-entrepreneurs would continue Chandler's quest to satisfy rural tastes with an artisan's training.⁵

The provincial elite wanted a family record, similar in purpose to, but grander in style than, the genealogies bound into treasured bibles or hung on bare household walls. When the younger Reverend Mr. Robbins of East Haven, Connecticut, first commissioned limner Reuben Moulthrop to paint his parents' portraits in 1801, he had no idea that such an ostensibly simple undertaking would involve substantial delays or details. Moulthrop needed more than a decade to complete a series of seven portraits, for which he received \$30. He was continually coming in and out of the Robbins household. "My study was resigned up and looked like a painters' shop," the elder Reverend Mr. Robbins impatiently wrote to his son, "he is constantly in the hall with all his apparatus & c," but his work is "much admired." Completion of the portraits restored the sanctity of the Robbins home only temporarily; the popularity of the portraits brought a steady stream of curious visitors, "day after day as into a Museum—all agree are admirably drawn."⁶

Those able to afford the services of Chandler or a Moulthrop were the magistrates and ministers: the established gentry in village society who found in such family icons the means to display their personal possessions and family status while decorating their home in one of the few permissible modes in this still intensely Puritan culture. Just as the steady sequence of generations of Robbinses called to the pulpit provided vocational continuity, so the portraits (the Reverend Thomas Robbins hoped) would yield visual evidence of family traditions. A "gallery" of notable Robbinses introduced into rural society the cosmopolitan images heretofore available only to the urban elite, and provided the village population with a model to emulate. Still, the rural portraitist remained on the periphery of a metropolitan



Figure 3-1. Winthrop Chandler, *Rev. Ebenezer Devotion*
(Courtesy Brookline Historical Society,
Brookline, Mass.)

culture in which the urban elite looked abroad and the local townspeople busied themselves with their everyday concerns. Aspiring eighteenth-century limners, few in number and limited in influence, were the forerunners of later generations of portrait makers.

In the opening decades of the nineteenth century the limner of the previous century gave way to artisan-entrepreneurs like Rufus Porter, who, by their geographic and social mobility, banished local isolation and conservatism in the rural North and promoted consumption. In 1825, as part of this Village Enlightenment, an anonymous rural encyclopedia came off the presses in Concord, New Hampshire. Entitled *A Select Collection of Valuable and Curious Arts, and Interesting Experiments Which are Well Explained, and Warranted Genuine, and May be Prepared, Safely and at Little Expense*, this work covered various topics in the arts, manufactures, and science of interest to "improving" country craftsmen. The author Rufus Porter, painter and promoter, represents in his far-reaching travels and speculations an example of the artisan-entrepreneur's critical role in the change penetrating the countryside during this period.⁷

As a publicist for ideas of rural design, Rufus Porter transmitted the rules necessary to paint landscapes on walls or to change the color of animals. These were no idle speculations of academicians but specific recipes garnered from Porter's experience and reading. In his work—both writing and painting—Porter placed repetition and rule at the very heart of the country vernacular. He made sure-footed suggestions for introducing into every American home the "embellishments" that John Neal, America's first art critic, thought would eventually improve American art. Porter emphasized color and line both accessible to precise measurement in careful proportions. The farm house frescoes he envisioned had no room for the romantic shadowing or sublime scenery of the cosmopolitan set.

Indeed, "improving" villagers wanted working farms and practical details on their walls. Just as some rural artisans used machines (such as lathes) to produce ever-greater quantities of chairs and clocks, enterprising artists like Porter experimented with new machines and techniques (such as stencils) to mass produce images. It was the same basic process of accelerating the manufacture of consumer goods. There existed "a decided disposition for painting in this Country," John Neal, an early American art critic, wrote in 1829, "you can hardly open the door of a best room anywhere, without surprizing c

being surprized by the picture of somebody plastered to the wall, and staring at you with both eyes and a bunch of flowers." Such portraits, "wretched as they are," flourished "in every village of our country," not as luxuries for the rich but as familiar household furniture, embellishing the homes of ordinary people.⁸

Rufus Porter offered the readers of his *Select Collection*, both recreation and "improvement in useful knowledge" (fig. 3-2). A section of "Landscape Painting on Walls of Rooms" starts, not with a discussion of the beauties of the natural scene, but with the direction to "dissolve half a pound of glue in a gallon of water." Porter's book derived from earlier instructors such as Hezekiah Reynolds' *Directions for House and Ship Painting*, where Reynolds wrote for "the Cabinet and Chair Maker, the Wheelwright, the House and Ship Joiner," but recognized others whose taste and genius might make them interested in the practice of "this useful and ornamental Art." These art instruction books were itinerant instructors in print. Porter's popular *Curious Arts* (which went through five reprintings) taught the arts founded on craft techniques and practiced by laymen. For Rufus Porter, like his readers, "the arts," "experiments," and "expense" were not odd words incongruously collected into an eye-catching title. This artist-inventor was the rural counterpart to Robert Fulton, promoter of the steamboat, and Samuel F. B. Morse, creator of the telegraph. These individuals moved easily between the worlds of art and science, finding their spatial and mechanical imaginations to be thoroughly compatible with their creative and entrepreneurial efforts. By his early twenties Rufus Porter had demonstrated expertise as author, artist, and inventor. He counted a "camera obscura" among his innovations. Other inventions were more fanciful—for example, a "horseless carriage" and an "airship."⁹

Porter found his greatest success on the road. Accompanied by a young relative named Joe, he strolled into villages with his brightly decorated camera box and hawked his handbill of reasonably priced portraits (fig. 3-3). The artisan-entrepreneur sketched his subjects with the aid of his invention, the camera obscura—a dark box fitted with a lens and mirror to throw the sitters' image onto a sheet of paper and mounted on a handcart festooned with flags. Porter and Joe traveled from village to village, offering the public a full range of "correct likenesses," produced with Porter's mechanical aids and guaranteed to provide satisfaction. A typical Porter announcement of 1821 promised:

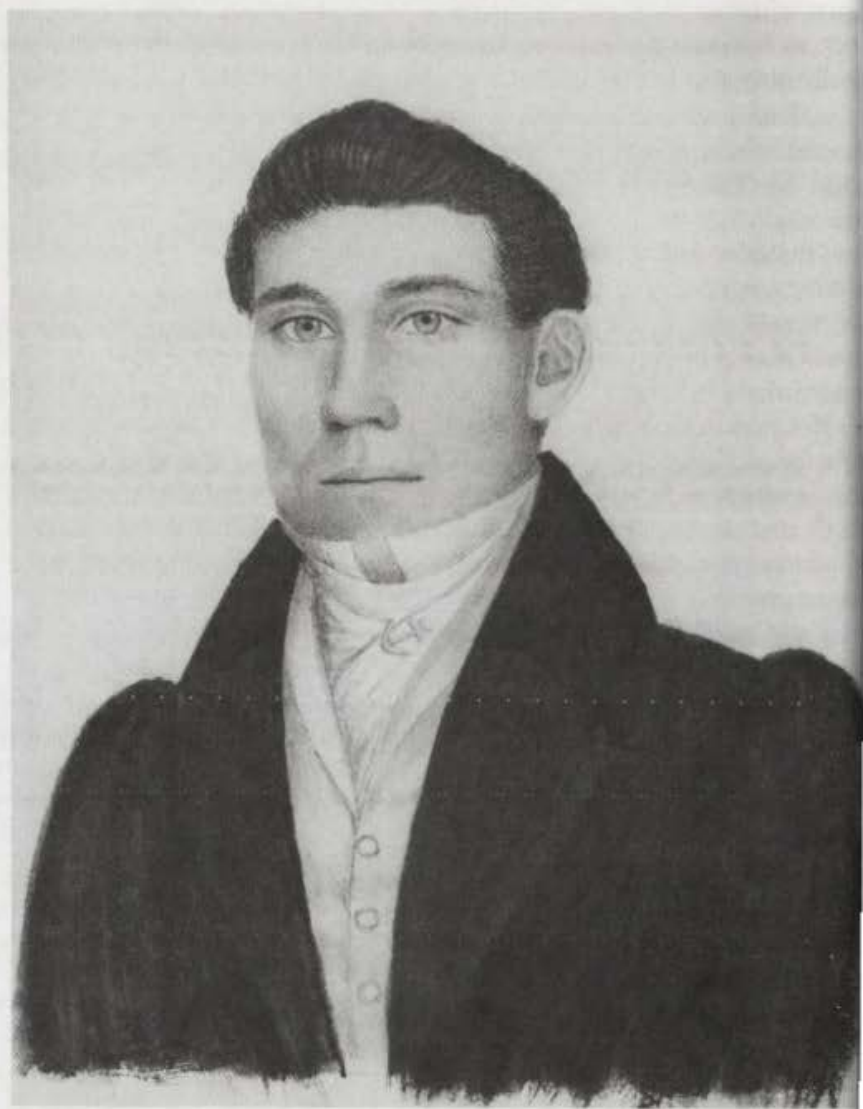


Figure 3-2. Rufus Porter, *Portrait of a Man*
(Courtesy Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art
Center, Williamsburg, Va.)



CORRECT LIKENESSES.

TAKEN WITH ELEGANCE AND DESPATCH BY
RUFUS PORTER.

Prices as follows—

Common Profile's cut double, - - -	\$3.00	20
Side views painted in full colours, - - -	3	00
Front views, - - - - -	3	00
Ministures painted on Ivory, - - - -	8	00

*Those who request it will be waited on, at
their respective places of residence.*

Figure 3-3. Handbill for Rufus Porter
(Courtesy American Antiquarian Society,
Worcester, Mass.)

The Subscriber respectfully informs the Ladies and Gentlemen of Haverhill and its vicinity, that he continues to paint correct Likenesses in full Colours for two Dollars at his room at Mr. Brown's tavern, where he will remain two or three Days longer.

(No Likeness, No Pay.)

Those who request it will be waited on at their respected places of abode.

He advertised his profiles at 20 cents apiece, producing perhaps twenty silhouettes in an evening by the use of a profile machine for the features; or the popular side view in which "full colours" were added to the stark profile (although the construction of the ears and clothes was skimpy); or his most detailed full view in which the camera obscura reduced his artistic labors to a mere fifteen minutes. These last images cost three times as much as the side view, but still showed the subject's ears in full profile, a short cut preserved from his side views. Copies came cheap. Porter's *Select Collection* gave instructions for "the construction and use of a copying machine" or pantograph, which reduced, enlarged, or copied images. The client could choose an affordable original along with as many copies as desired. Porter created a standardized product with the aid of his mechanical inventions and labor-saving techniques. Rural clients got just as much "art" as they were willing to pay for.¹⁰

As the demand for embellishment diffused through the countryside and through various social strata in the second quarter of the nineteenth century a new look appeared in rural design. Itinerants were encouraged to seek further schooling and assume a more professional bearing. Country tastes became more sophisticated and village residents demanded more polished products from their local vendors. When Fitchburg, Massachusetts, was visited in 1832 by a practitioner of "the noble art of painting," there was great cause for rejoicing among its citizenry. An entire generation had grown up admiring portraits and venerating the vocation of painting likenesses. The anonymous author in *The Fitchburg Gazette* noted in his article on "Painting" the uplifting effects of popular portraiture on the rural folk. The mysteries of painting no longer involved the mere copying of features but went well beyond to "transferring to canvas . . . the feelings of

the heart." The appearance of gentility was available to all from this "gentleman now stopping in our village." Paintings that could produce such results were created in a standardized manner. By the 1830s, the visitor to the painter's studio remarked that "some half dozen or more" likenesses resting along the walls of the rural salon, "tho' unfinished," would clearly in their final form become the distinguished visages of their intended patrons. Families were invited to the painter's village salon to obtain "a valuable picture" as well as "a correct likeness" for there would rarely be such an opportunity "in a village like ours" to participate in the "craze" for household decorations.¹¹

Decorative display predominated over geometric perspective in rural portraiture. Whereas the academic artist valued profound psychological insight and varieties of shadows and shading, the rural portrait-maker aimed at a plain style in which simplicity and even stark linearity accompanied broad expanses of color and texture. Porter's artisan training in house and sign painting lingered in his reliance upon repetition and two-dimensionality. But an individual such as Erastus Salisbury Field was able to achieve enormous success within the confines of such rural rules of design. In 1839 Field combined aesthetic and economic motifs in his masterpiece, *Joseph Moore and his Family* (fig. 3-4). In the year this portrait was made Field had moved with his family to the home of his wife's parents in the village of Ware, Massachusetts. Living across the street with his wife and children (two of which were the orphans of his wife's sister) was Joseph Moore from Windham, Maine, hatmaker in winter, itinerant dentist in summer, and professor of religion all year round. No one figure or piece dominates; the viewer's eye jumps from the black-and-white-clad subjects to the numerous, profusely painted possessions. The Moores' furnishings arrest attention with their exuberant colors and prominent position; Field carefully balanced children around the adults. The tilted perspective and bright colors of the carpet draw the eye downward from the symmetrical windows at the top of the picture. Field successfully juggles all these items around the stenciled furniture—chairs, stands, and mirror—that completes his study of the Moores' decor. But in 1839, when Field recorded his celebration of the itinerant artisan's achievement—his striking portrait of rural craftsman Moore and his family—a new era was beginning. It was also in 1839 that Samuel Morse returned from Paris with Daguerre's invention¹²

Figure 3-4. Erastus Salisbury Field, *Joseph Moore and His Family*
(*Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*)



In 1839 the daguerreotypist's art replaced the "correct likeness" with "perfect likenesses." When T. S. Arthur, author of the best-selling temperance tract *Ten Nights in a Barroom*, considered the enthusiasm for photography in 1850, he observed,

If our children and children's children to the third & fourth generation are not in possession of portraits of their ancestors, it will be no fault of the Daguerreotypists of the present day; for verily, they are limning faces at such a rate that promises to make every man's house a Daguerrean Gallery. From little Bess, the baby, up to great-grandpa!, all must now have their likenesses; and even the sober Friend, who heretofore rejected all the vanities of portrait-taking, is tempted to sit in the operator's chair, and quick as thought, his features are caught and fixed by a sunbeam. In our great cities a Daguerreotypist is to be found in almost every square; and there is scarce a county in any state that has not one or more of those industrious individuals busy at work catching "the shadoe" ere the "substance fade." A few years ago it was not every man who could afford a likeness of himself, his wife, or his children; those were luxuries known to those only who had money to spare; now it is hard to find a man who has not gone through the "operator's" hands from once to a half-a-dozen times, or who has not the shadowy faces of his wife & children done up in purple morocco and velvet, together or singly, among his household treasures. Truly the sunbeam art is a most wonderful one, and the public feel it a great benefit.¹³

The "Hall of Portraits," formerly the exclusive province of kings and nobility, was now priced to suit every pocketbook and fit comfortably in any room. Daguerreotypes appeared in every corner of the cluttered Victorian household. Although their diverse subjects assumed poses that paralleled the homogeneity of the new national culture, their owners—especially the members of the new elites emerging in village society—were members of a generation that expected continual change and returned to the "operator's" chair several times over their lifetime for up-to-date "perfect likenesses" (fig. 3-5). The speed of the photographic process, "quick as thought," matched their desire to record a vanishing set of individuals, places, and modes of life.¹⁴

The unabated rage for portraits led several painters into attempts to incorporate the new technology. Others, like Erastus Field, at first tried to copy the photograph's appeal and attempted a more realistic likeness. But the photograph's cheaper price and greater verisimilitude put the ordinary portrait maker at a severe disadvantage. A daguerreotypist's broadside from western Massachusetts in 1841 argued that



Figure 3-5. T.S. Arthur, *The Daguerreotypist*
(Courtesy Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)

"the value of a portrait depends upon its accuracy, and when taken by this process it must be accurate from necessity, for it is produced by the unerring operation of physical laws—human judgment and skill have no connection with the perfection of the picture . . . it is evident that the expressions of the face may be fixed in the picture which are too fleeting to be caught by the painter." As the availability and portability of the photograph fueled the "craze" for portrait-making sweeping the North, other changes occurred in the rural world.¹⁵

Village entrepreneurs often found the urban scene to be a more favorable venue for their promotions by the middle of the nineteenth century. The flow of information changed direction and itinerant Yankees were founders of many of the mass market publications of the urban press. Rufus Porter founded *Scientific American* in 1845 with one hundred dollars in cash while working as an electroplater in New York. The weekly, originally printed as a quarto with a circulation of two hundred, had a circulation of ten thousand by 1848. Porter announced that besides reporting the progress of science and industry his paper would include "useful information and instruction in various Arts and Trades; Curious Philosophical Experiments; Miscellaneous Intelligence, Music and Poetry." The journal served as an important source book for inventors with its up-to-the-minute lists of patents, its lucid illustrations and diagrams, and its bombastic articles about innovations. Porter issued a clarion call to action which saw the American mechanic as the savior of the republic. "The independent American mechanic" who wisely divided his time "between his professional duties and the maintenance of his family" could find in the pages of Porter's journal the useful knowledge necessary for this progressive and mechanical age in articles on "the Effects of the Introduction of Mechanical Improvements" or "A Prospectus for an American Inventors' Institute" along with general reflections on "Politeness and Good Manners" or "Rational Toys." Porter looked forward to an era when the noble mechanic, backbone of the republic, would assume his rightful place in a new middle class society and so offered hints on genteel behavior for the aspiring artisan.¹⁶

Yet Porter pictured this new society as residing in the rural villages of the New England of his itinerant days "under the new and improved system of combination of interests." In that time and place existed an independent citizenry, instructed in a wide range of arts and sciences under the union of agricultural and manufacturing interests, and cemented by education and temperance." He wrote:

They are not like many towns in other parts of the country, in which a herd of people from various nations huddle together, without any other apparent occasion but to live on the breath of society, neither are they constituted by the proud mansions of retired aristocrats, but they are supported by cheerful and liberal industry, being constituted by the union of agriculture and manufacturing interests, concentrated by facilities of transportation, and cemented by education and temperance.

Porter's scientific journals—*Scientific American* was only one in a series of mechanics' magazines that Porter edited in the 1840s—recognized the power of an increasingly centralized industry, publishing, which could bring about the mechanical millennium.

Men of thought! be up and stirring
 Night and day;
 Sow the seed—withdraw the curtain,
 Clear the Way!
 Men of action, aid and cheer them,
 As ye may.
 Aid the dawning, tongue and pen,
 Aid it, hopes of honest men;
 Aid it, paper—aid it type—
 Aid it, for the hour is ripe,
 And our earnest must not slacken into play.
 Men of thought, and men of action!
 Clear the way!¹⁷

Born into a village society where the local gentry owned the few visible signs of display, Rufus Porter, by his own efforts in commerce and art, bridged the agrarian world of provincial New England and the emerging urban society of industrial America. But this great transformation began in the village scene peopled with its painters and promoters.

James Guild, for example, "Peddler, Tinkerer, Schoolmaster Portrait Painter," describes the beginning of his painting career:

Now I went to Canadagua. Here I went into a painter's shop, one who painted likenesses, and my profiles looked so mean when I saw them I asked him what he would show me one day for, how to distinguish the coulers & he said \$5, and I consented to it and then I went to Bloomfield and took a picture of Mr. Goodwins painting for a sample on my way. I put up at a tavern and told a Young Lady if she would wash my shirt, I would draw her likeness. Now than I was to exert my skill in painting. I operated once on her but

looked so like a rech I throwed it away and tried again. The poor girl sat niped up so prim and look so smileing it makes me smill when I think of while I was daubing on paint on a piece of paper it could not be caled painting, for it looked more like a strangle cat than it did like her. Howeye I told her it looked like her and she believed it.¹⁸

The commercial art world of the nineteenth-century countryside grew out of a pioneer soil. The transformation of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century countryside accelerated with the rapid entry of village residents into commercial enterprise. Pioneers of this era began to clear forests to make way for family farms. Crafts had always supplemented a farmer's livelihood and a sizable number of artisans made their living in new frontier towns. One Vermont observer noted how these migrants exchanged their humble "necessaries": "The manufactures carried on in Vermont were, for many years, such only as the immediate wants of the people rendered indispensable, and in general each family were their own manufacturers. . . . The only trades which were deemed indispensable, were those of the blacksmith, and the shoemaker, and these were for the most part carried on by persons who labored a portion of their time upon their farms."¹⁹

The shift toward a more elaborate consumerism which had taken several generations in the eighteenth century, advanced more rapidly on the nineteenth-century frontiers: "As by the condition of the people improved, they by degrees, extended their desires beyond the mere necessities of life; first to its conveniences, and then to its elegancies. This produced new wants, and to supply them, mechanics more numerous and more skillful were required, till at length, the cabinet maker, the tailor, the jeweller, the milliner, and a host of others came to be regarded as indispensable."²⁰ Even likenesses became a familiar sight on the frontier.

Enterprising farm boys of this generation drew upon their inexperienced audience's amazement at seeing their image appear at the farmhouse door while artisan-entrepreneurs used their wide range of skills in crafts and commerce to promote painting in rural America. James Guill offers an unusually detailed description of one farm boy's progress in the countryside in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. His *Journal* begins with his first merchandising venture in 1818 when he departed from rural Vermont. By 1824 he was an artist working in a London studio. While his rapid rise in his profession from peddler to profile maker to professor of penmanship to profes-

sional artist was certainly not the common experience of every individual who strapped on a peddler's pack to try his luck on the backroads of the rural North in these years, James Guild's early adventures probably bear a close resemblance to those of many itinerants in this period and place. He fled the family farm for the West and pursued several trades during his travels in Ohio as a peddler. In encounters with more experienced practitioners of rural arts he picked up instruction in profile making and penmanship and immediately offered his services to the next available and inexperienced soul.²¹

The early nineteenth-century countryside offered many other opportunities besides farming for those venturesome enough, or for those forced by circumstances to leave the family farmstead. An itinerant life, peddling rural arts and crafts, was a stage in the life cycle as well as a method of social mobility for many young villagers. Farm boys with limited formal education found the roads of the North to be their open-air schoolhouse. Guild relates that when he was freed from his "confined situation," or apprenticeship, in 1817 he sought "some happier situation." Since his disposition precluded "work on a farm" he sank his entire fortune, a note of seventy dollars, for a "trunk of goods" and took to the road:

I began my peddling. You must know it was awkward for a farmer boy who had been confined to the hoe or ax to put on a pedler's face, but I believe I was as apt as any one. I got my things in rotation pedler form, so when I went into a house, do you wish to buy some harecombs, needles, buttons, button molds, sewing silk, beads? If they wished to purchase, they would want to banter untill they could get it for nothing.

The custom of the country put both parties in a transaction to the test and Guild found few customers in his first few days among the "poor set of inhabitants." Guild persevered and the humble pilgrim ventured into the "great City" of Troy, New York, to spend his last few dollars for more goods and sample a dinner with the local "nobilities," as he called them. The haste with which he ate the parsnips set before him drew the attention of his fellow diners and he realized that to them "I looked more like a hog . . . than I did like a Gentlemen." The unappealing thought of returning to the farm kept Guild from abandoning his journey, and a stint as an itinerant tinkerer kept him afloat for a while. The opportunity to buy some cheap scissors arose and Guild displayed the cunning of a more experienced merchant. Whe

his sale of the scissors at a reasonable price found no takers he decided to offer some of them at a higher price. Quickly he made a sale of his more expensive—and identical—utensil when a farmer's daughter demanded that her mother purchase the more expensive one.²²

The desire of rural folks to enlighten their minds and embellish their homes encouraged itinerant instructors. Guild's first success at deception encouraged him in further efforts. At a museum in Albany he claimed to have had musical training and his imposture paid off with a month-long offer to join a band and also receive instruction in cutting profile likenesses. Soon he was able to call himself "a profile cutter." Still unsatisfied in his desire to advance his stature and enlarge his pocketbook, Guild sought to rise further in the painting profession. Guild relates how his entry into "a painters shop, one who painted likenesses" convinced him that by comparison "his profiles looked so mean" that he offered immediately five dollars for instruction in "how to distinguish the coulers." Equipped with his new-found skills and one of "Mr. Goodwins paintings for a sample" he set off "to exert his skill in painting." When he encountered a young lady who would wash his shirt, Guild reciprocated by "daubing on paint on a piece of paper." While his initial foray into painting portraits could not be called painting," Guild later recalled, for it looked more "like a strangle cat," he informed his patron that "it looked like her and she believed it." James Guild had joined the painting profession and he continued on his way, drawing likenesses and teaching school, touting himself as a professor of penmanship. He served, in short, as an itinerant instructor in the useful and elegant arts for a new rural clientele that did not yet demand from retailers of culture either specialized knowledge or fixed residences. Quickly picking up what training they needed, Guild and others capitalized on both rural folk's passion for self-culture and their lack of sophistication.²³

Artist and audience shared in their "discovery of a new sense." Encouraged by a receptive public, some of these venturesome portraitists undertook more advanced training and gradually assumed the mantle and calling of the professional artist. Other country artisans sought further instruction from academic artists in the cities and returned to the rural regions to ply their trade. Yet rural portrait-makers often entered the revered world of art without the rigorous apprenticeship of their provincial predecessors or the solemnity of their academic peers. Chester Harding, for example, soon to be among

America's most celebrated portrait painters, moved with his family from New England to western New York in 1806, "then an unbroken wilderness." When he reached nineteen he thought that "there must be an easier way of getting living" than clearing the "heavily timbered forest." First he looked to chair turning with his brother. When a local mechanic invented a spinning head and offered Harding the rights to sell the patent in Connecticut, opportunity seemed to present itself and Chester "jumped into my wagon, whipped up my horse, and was soon out of sight of what, at that moment, seemed all the world to me." For the next few years Harding supported himself by plying a wide range of rural crafts and commerce along the country backroads. He peddled clocks, established a chair manufactory, and tried tavern keeping. Harding did a stint as a house painter in Pittsburgh and in slow seasons painted signs, a skill allied with gilding, which he had picked up during his days as a chair maker. Next he fell in with a portrait painter named Nelson, one of "the Primitive sort."²⁴

Wonder and a sense of mystery came over these "farmers' boys" when they encountered works of art. Harding's mentor Nelson used a copy of the "Infant Artists" of Sir Joshua Reynolds for his signs incongruously inscribed with "Sign, Ornamental and Portrait Painting executed on the shortest notice, with neatness and despatch." Harding wrote that "painting heads" was the real marvel. After seeing the painter's work, Harding commissioned likenesses of himself and his wife, "and thought the pictures perfections." Taking home what was in fact a rather crude representation, he pondered by day how it was possible for a man to produce "such wonders of art" and dreamed by night of commencing such a project. Finally, "I got a board; and with such colors as I had for use in my trade, I began a portrait of my wife. I made a thing that looked like her. The moment I saw the likeness I became frantic with delight; it was like the discovery of a new sense. I could think of nothing else. From that time, sign-painting became odious, and was much neglected." Chester Harding had found his calling. Higher commissions and growing confidence accompanied him on each stage of his journey.²⁵

Harding never received any formal art instruction. He attained his increasing proficiency in portraiture by admiring and copying the works of art available in the hinterlands to an itinerant craftsman: first those of his mentor in Pittsburgh, "one of the primitive sort" then the Kentucky native, Matthew Jouett, who had spent four months

in Gilbert Stuart's Boston studio, and finally by going himself to Philadelphia, drawing at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and "studying the best pictures, practising at the same time with the brush." Harding advanced in the painting profession by drawing upon his patron's desire for cultural commodities and the frontiersmen's desire to emulate eastern traditions.²⁶

Chester Harding was drawn to the frontier by a letter from his brother, a chair maker in Paris, Kentucky, who informed him that a portrait maker there was receiving "fifty dollars a head." This price seemed "fabulous" to Harding, but he decided to seek his fortune in the West. He set up a studio, painted his first portrait, and made "a decided hit." Soon he was receiving commissions from the leading citizens in the towns of Paris and Versailles, whose very names indicate the aspirations of the inhabitants. In the next six months, he reported painting nearly a hundred portraits at twenty-five dollars a head. Harding's mounting ambitions outstripped his abilities, as seen in his first large full-length group portrait (fig. 3-6). So he interrupted his travels to study in Philadelphia. The villagers—producers and consumers—were never loathe to take advantage of outside opportunities. They grafted their urban experiences and some cosmopolitan products onto the solid trunk of village culture.²⁷

Once in Philadelphia a chastened Chester Harding quickly found out his proper station in the art world: "I had thought . . . that my pictures were far ahead of Mr. Jewitt's [sic], the painter my brother had written me about, who received such unheard-of-prices, and who really was a good artist." Harding's estimation rose of Jouett's work, for "their excellence had been beyond my capacity of appreciation." When he returned to Paris in 1821 he found the state of Kentucky in a financial crisis. He set off for Cincinnati, Ohio, where he found no sitters. Harding moved on to St. Louis, Missouri, where a letter of introduction to William Clark, Indian Agent and Governor of the Territory, secured him an "auspicious . . . beginning" and for fifteen months Harding was kept constantly at work. Chester Harding, a pioneer in rural painting, interrupted his success to make a pilgrimage to paint America's most famous backwoodsman, Daniel Boone (fig. 3-7).²⁸

Harding found the elderly Boone "living, some miles from the main road, in one of the cabins of an old-block-house . . . lying in his bunk." He explained the purpose of the visit to the old frontiersman



Figure 3-6. Chester Harding, *The John Speed Smith Family*
(Courtesy J.B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Ky.)

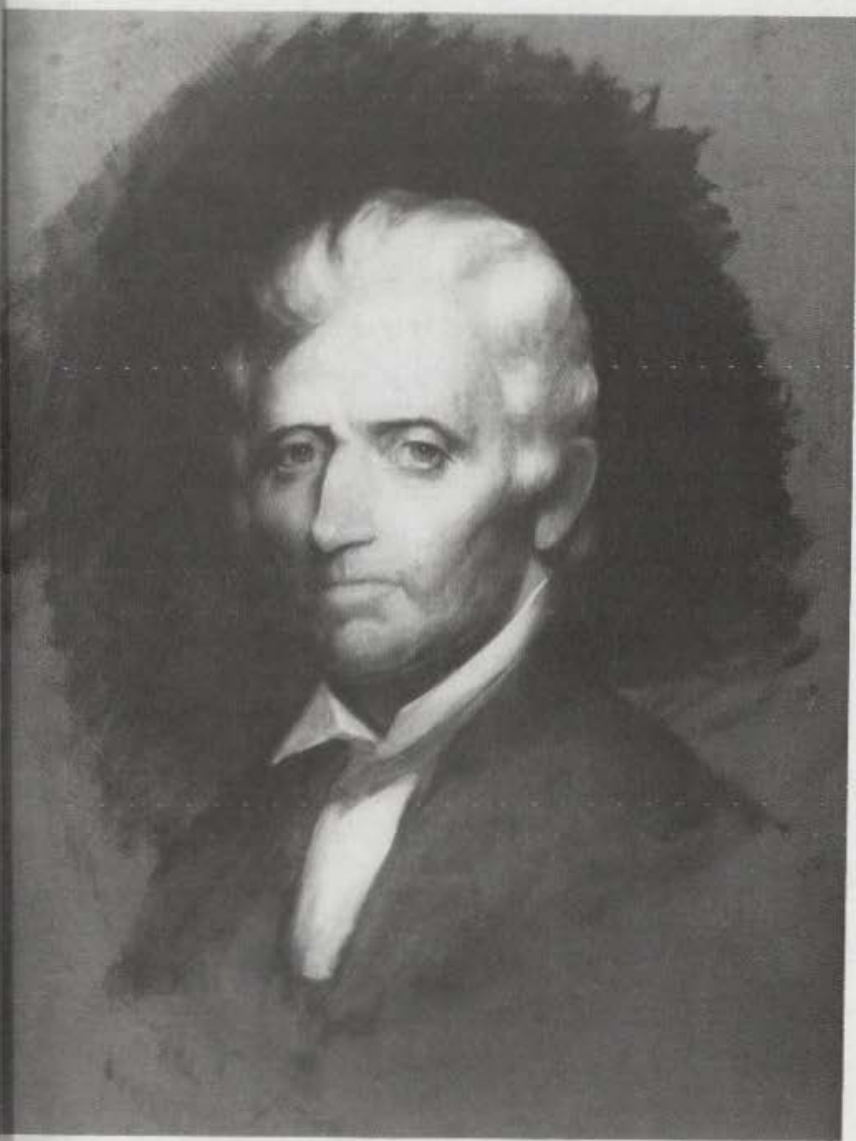


Figure 3-7. Chester Harding, *Daniel Boone*
(Courtesy Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston)

and made a pencil sketch and a small oil study on canvas. "He was much astonished at seeing the likeness. He had a very large progeny; one granddaughter had eighteen children, all at home near the old man's cabin; *they* were even more astonished at the picture than the old man himself." Harding set off for a temporary studio in Franklin, Missouri, where he produced at least two portraits of Boone; one was a half-length figure wearing a bearskin jacket, and the other a life-sized full-length standing figure holding a rifle, with a dog at his feet. This last image he painted on a table oilcloth, perhaps because it was the only available material large enough for his purpose. Harding was witnessed in his rural salon by George Caleb Bingham, who wrote many years later after he himself had attained great fame as an artist of the momentous appearance in this frontier town of a renowned artist and of "the wonder and delight with which his words filled my mind impressed them indelibly upon my then unburdened memory."²

While astonishment at seeing works of art and euphoria over owning their own likeness greeted this pioneer generation of patrons and promoters of rural portraiture, the early successes of these peddlers and the continued enthusiasm of their audiences only fortified their pursuit of professional status and artistic progress in the countryside. When Chester Harding returned to St. Louis, the enterprising artist's first order of business was the production and marketing of an engraving of the full-length version (fig. 3-8). Chester Harding may have learned his craft along the rural roads of America but he had quickly realized the value of combining cosmopolitan training with a rural venue. He advanced his personal fortunes by drawing upon his inexperienced audience's aspirations for emblems of status and a nation's desire for symbols of stature. One of Harding's notices for "an engraving of the venerable Daniel Boone" in *The Missouri Gazette and Public Advertiser* in 1820 reads, for example:

To transmit to the posterity of a county the actions and features of those who fought and bled in her cause is a duty too sacred and useful to neglect. While the memory of the heroic deeds of the early adventurers is passing away, this work will be the means of rescuing from oblivion the features of one who took the most active part in sustaining the early settlements of the Western country.³⁰

During the course of their business and artistic travels, some rural portrait-makers moved farther and farther away from tradition



Figure 3-8. James Otto Lewis, *Col. Daniel Boone*
Stipple engraving after Chester Harding.
(Courtesy St. Louis Art Museum)

village institutions and familiar roles during this era when older village institutions were found unsatisfactory and newer paths were not yet routine. A confusing tangle of opportunities awaited the enterprising farmboy. James Guild closed his journal with the words, "he Commences his Profession as an Artist," and described his entry into a circle of London artists, where he sketched nude models and learned "the human figure"—a far cry from his earlier painting of a country maiden in rural New York. Later, antebellum Americans had a plethora of local and national institutions to guide their way.³¹

Yet, despite their middle-class aspirations and achievements, the country origins of village painters were still detectable in their likenesses. In his self-portrait, for example, Jonathan Adams Bartlett, a farmer and house carpenter in Rumford, Maine, wore his Sunday best and proudly displayed the colors of his palette, but the painting exhibits the same flat perspective with which he served his rural clients. Chester Harding recalled that his ambition began to take a "higher flight" and he resolved to make a European pilgrimage. But before he was off he managed to exhibit his work in the "Mechanical Arts" section of the Springfield, Massachusetts, Agricultural Fair and he was received with great acclaim in Boston as "a back woodsman, newly caught." Others returned to rural areas to pursue their trade.³²

There they found the results of a generation of artistic progress and aspiration by rural Americans. In 1835, in the hinterlands of New York, country editor William Stoddard reflected in his newspaper, the *Rural Repository*, on the state of the arts in America and the countryside's progress toward a national culture. In the traditional hierarchy of the fine arts of portrait, landscape, and history painting, Stoddard viewed "portrait painting [as] . . . the pioneer of the most exalted arts," the forerunner of "an elevated taste." The *Rural Repository*, a mix of craft traditions and elite aspirations representing a unique document of American culture, closed with a ringing appeal for a new national canon based on the most traditional form of ancestor worship. "Need I say more for the art," wrote Stoddard, that "permits posterity to stand in the presence of Washington [as painted by Gilbert Stuart] . . . and in this vast household of liberty, makes the remotest descendants familiar with the forms and faces of those who laid down all for their country, that it might be dear to their children." Aspirations for identity came from the nascent middle class of the villages, a class only gradually forging its social configuration and s

wedded to a rural artistic idiom that stenciled its "elegant" ornamentation and flattened its subjects' features.³³

The Village Enlightenment in the rural North was thus no simple diffusion of urban goods but a wider cultural movement in the new age of abundance. The bourgeois ethos of antebellum America grew out of rural roots. The diffusion of cultural commodities in this Village Enlightenment of the early nineteenth century led to a greater desire for display and a confirmation of taste. Enterprising artisan-entrepreneurs used their craft knowledge to offer emblems of status to rural Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century. For the social reality of the nineteenth-century countryside was far more complex than our simple endpoints of farm and factory or neat categories of rural and urban would indicate.³⁴

Notes for Chapter 3

1. The literature on portrait makers is voluminous. I found most useful: Beatrix T. Rumford, ed., *American Folk Portraits: Paintings and Drawings from the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1981); Jean Lipman and Tom Armstrong, eds., *American Folk Painters of Three Centuries* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1980); and Ellen Miles, ed., *Portrait Painting in America: The Nineteenth Century* (New York: Main Street/Universe Books, 1976). Also valuable were Clara Sears, *Some American Primitives: A Study of New England Faces and Folk Portraits* (reprint ed., 1941; Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1968) and Juliette Tomlinson, ed., *The Paintings and the Journal of Joseph Whiting Stock* (Middletown, Oh.: Wesleyan University Press, 1976) and William B. O'Neal, *Primitive into Painter: Life and Letters of John Toole* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1960).

For a fuller discussion of individual portraitists see my paper "One of the Primitive Sort": Portrait-Makers in the Rural North, 1760-1860," in *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: 1780-1900, Essays in Social History*, ed. Jonathan Prude and Steven Hahn (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

2. For studies of the changing countryside, see Thomas Dublin, ed., *From Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Clarence Danhof, *Change in Agriculture: The Northern United States, 1820-1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969); James Henretta, "Families and Farms: *Mentalite* in Pre-Industrial America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 35 (1978): pp. 3-32; Michael Merrill, "Cash Is Good to Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States," *Radical History Review* 3 (1977): pp. 42-71; Christopher Clark, "The Household Economy, Market Exchange, and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley 1800-1860," *Journal of Social History* 13 (1979): pp. 169-89; Robert

- Gross, "Culture and Cultivation: Agriculture and Society in Thoreau's Concord," *Journal of American History* 69 (1982): pp. 42-61; Hal Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
3. See Robert St. George, *The Wrought Covenant: Source Materials for the Study of Craftsmen and Community in Southeastern New England (1620-1700)* (Brockton: Brockton Art Center, 1979); Edward Cooke, "Rural Artisan Culture: The Pre-Industrial Joiners of Newtown and Woodbury, Connecticut, 1760-1820," (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1984); John Kennell, *The Hitchcock Chair* (New York: C. N. Potter, 1971); and Chris Bailey, *The Hundred Years of American Clocks & Watches* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1975).
 4. On changes in the cultural infrastructure of the countryside, see Richard Brown, "The Emergence of Urban Society in Rural Massachusetts, 1760-1820," *Journal of American History* 61 (1974): pp. 29-51; William Gilmore, "Elementary Literacy on the Eve of the Industrial Revolution: Trends in Rural New England, 1760-1830," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* (1982): pp. 87-171; Christopher Jedrej, *The World of John Cleaveland: Family and Community in Eighteenth Century New England* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979).
 5. For Chandler, see Nina Fletcher Little, "Winthrop Chandler," in *American Folk Painters*, ed. Lipman, pp. 26-34; Nina Little, "Winthrop Chandler," *Art in America* 25 (April 1947), entire issue. Also see Laurence B. Goodrich, *Ralph Earl: Recorder for an Era* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1967).
 6. "Reuben Moulthrop, 1763-1814," *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin* (1955): pp. 50-51.
 7. Rufus Porter, *A Select Collection . . .* (Concord, N.H.: J. T. Peters, 1884), pp. iii-iv. See Jean Lipman, *Rufus Porter, Yankee Pioneer* (reprint ed., 1979) (New York: C. N. Potter, 1980) for analysis of Porter's varied career and "Rufus Porter, Founder of the Scientific American," *Scientific American* (September 6, 1884) for the details of Porter's early life.
- The literature by and about the "Yankee" is voluminous. Autobiographies like P. T. Barnum's *Struggles and Triumphs* (reprint ed., 1866; New York: Penguin Books, 1984) attest to the entrepreneurial bent of these itinerant Yankees. The travelling "pedlar" stories of Seba Smith and T. C. Haliburton, "The Clock Maker," contain some valuable social history about nascent capitalism in the nineteenth-century countryside. See Walter Blair, *Native American Humor* (New York: American Book Co., 1937); Richardson Wright, *Hawkers and Walkers in Early America* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1919) and Jay Dolan, *The Yankee Peddlers of Early America* (New York: C. N. Potter, 1964).
8. John Neal, "American Painters and Painting," *The Yankee and Boston Lite Gazette* 1 (1829), p. 45; also see John Neal, *Wandering Recollections of a S*

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9. Rufus Porter, *A Select Collection*, pp. iii-vi; Hazeekiah Reynolds, *Directions for House and Ship Painting* (reprint ed., 1812; Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1978); pp. 5-6. Artisan-inventors of antebellum America are discussed by Brooke Hindle, *Emulation and Invention* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981) Eugene S. Ferguson, "The Mind's Eye: Nonverbal Thought in Technology," *Science* 97 (1977); pp. 827-36; Otto Mayr and Robert C. Post, eds., *Yankee Enterprise* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981); Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Rockdale* (New York: Knopf, 1980); and Merrit Roe Smith *Harpers Ferry Armory and the New Technology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).
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2. Mary Black, *Erastus Salisbury Field, 1805-1900*, (Springfield, Mass.: Art Museum, 1984); see also Rumford, *Portraits*, pp. 93-99; Black, *Erastus Field, 1805-1900* (Williamsburg: Rockefeller Folk Art Center, 1963); Black, "Erastus Field," in *American Folk Painters*, pp. 74-80.
3. T. S. Arthur, "American Characteristics," n.v. "The Daguerreotypist," *Godey's Lady's Book* 38 (May 1849), pp. 352-53.
4. On the early history of photography see Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene* (reprint ed., 1938; New York: Dover Publications, 1964); William F. Robinson, *A Certain Slant of Light: The First Hundred Years of New England Photography* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1980); Floyd and Mario Rinhart, *The American Daguerreotype* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981); and for an excellent case study of the reception of the new

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17. "Editorial Correspondence," *Scientific American* (August 6, 1846); *Scientific American* (April 9, 1849).
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19. Zadock Thompson, *History of Vermont, Natural, Civil, and Statistical in Three Parts* (Burlington, Vt.: The Author, 1853), pp. 213-14.
20. Thompson, *History*, p. 214.
21. Guild, p. 251; pp. 257-59.
22. Guild, p. 279. On changes in the American class structure see the following which emphasize the urban experience of middle class cultural formation: Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Karen Haltunnen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); and Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).
23. Guild, p. 277, p. 281.
24. Chester Harding, *A Sketch of Chester Harding, Artist*, ed. Margaret Eliot White and W. P. G. Harding (reprint ed., 1890; New York: Kennedy Gallery, 1977), pp. 5-6, 11, 13, 17, 18. On Chester Harding see Leah Lipton, *A Truthful Likeness: Chester Harding and His Portraits* (Washington, D.C.: National Portrait Gallery, 1985); William Dunlap, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (reprint ed., 1834; New York: Dover Publications, 1969), II, pp. 289-93; John Francis McDermott, "How Goes the Harding Fever?" *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin* 8 (October 1951): pp. 5-59.

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26. Harding, *Sketch*, p. 24. On Jouett, another itinerant portraitist, see William Barrow Floyd, *Jouett-Busch-Frazer, Kentucky Artists* (Lexington, Ky: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1968).
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28. Harding, *Sketch*, pp. 25-26.
29. Harding, *Sketch*, pp. 26-27; Roy T. King, "Portraits of Daniel Boone," *Missouri Historical Review* 33 (1939): pp. 171-83; Leah Lipton, "Chester Harding and the Life Portraits of Daniel Boone," *American Art Journal* 16 (Summer 1984): pp. 4-19; Bingham quote in Lipton, "George Caleb Bingham in Chester Harding's Studio, Franklin, Missouri, 1820," *American Art Journal* 16 (Summer 1984): pp. 90-91. On George Caleb Bingham, who began as an itinerant portraitist, see Maurice Bloch, *George Caleb Bingham* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).
30. Harding, *Sketch*, 27; notice quoted in Charles Van Raavenswaay, "A Rare Mid-Western Print: Portrait of Daniel Boone," *Antiques* 43 (1943): p. 77.
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33. William B. Stoddard, *Rural Repository* 11 (1835), quoted in Ruth Piwonka, *Painted by Ira C. Goodell* (Kinderhook: Museum, 1979): p. 3. On rural culture see George Lyman Kittredge, *The Old Farmer and his Almanack* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920).

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“Finished to the Utmost Nicety”: Plain Portraits in America, 1760–1860

Charles Bergengren

Riveting the attention of the modernist folk art world have been those paintings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with characteristics of flatness and frontality. Here I reexamine assumptions about these “plain” paintings by evaluating the social and stylistic tendencies of plain portraits in the northeastern United States.¹ I interpret style in the light of concerns of the patrons and communities for whom the portraits were made. The flatness and frontality of the paintings, it turns out, are a result of a social reticence in the presentation of self in egalitarian communities, rather than an unconscious abstraction resulting from as previous assumptions held, either bold innovation or technical short cuts, nor yet from ineptitude. The paintings done at a period of rapid social change—the formative years of the new republic—are as complicated as their era. The paintings are “ambivalent,” that is they display contradictory tensions. The portraits are poised between forces of modernization at the hands of an upwardly mobile bourgeoisie and forces of a conservative morality drawn from Puritan egalitarian lineage.²

Plain or otherwise, portraits are inherently objects of ego, statements of status and of individuality. As art historian Kenneth Ames has written,

Despite over half a century of glorification as key monuments in the pantheon of American folk art, readily available evidence about both the purchasers and producers of these images indicate that they were part of a developing middle class acquiring the trappings of genteel living. As a phenomenon, as

an artifact, portraits . . . are part of the great historical sweep toward social segmentation and individuation that Yi-Fu Tuan and others have outlined . . . With these portraits and with dishes, clocks, rugs, furniture, silverware, and pianos, upwardly mobile customers bought their way into modernization, consumerism and consumption. Competition, not community, dramatic economic and cultural change, not stasis, are the forces behind these images.³

The view that the artists who produced these portraits were tailoring a commercial product to this burgeoning market is ably explained by Donald Walters and Carolyn Weekley in the introduction to the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection catalogue and by David Jaffee in this volume. But I would argue that there is more to the story. Even as profound changes were being enacted in a progressive direction in these pictures, so also the moral climate, the ideal world of social obligation that people felt they should enact remained profoundly conservative. Thus the paintings may be said to be multivalent: they react to *both* the modernizing reality and the conservative egalitarian ideal. The pre-modern and modern worlds here collide, with all the "deep, rich and complex and ongoing . . . ramifications" that suggests.⁴

The majority of artifacts we can study, therefore, contain different features which simultaneously resonate to both folk and elite attitudes. The range of portrait paintings produced in America for various classes, shows excellent examples of artifacts with *ratios* of conservative and progressive attitudes simultaneously. For while portraits are all inherently objects of individuality and ego—and therefore represent a swing toward the appropriation of elitist values—the greater part of them, from Copley to Ammi Phillips to the as yet anonymous masters, show varying degrees of a visual and technical restraint which can be associated with the more egalitarian American religious or folk community. This discussion will compare the interpenetrating varieties of plain and academic style in American painting of the early nineteenth century, and show how these styles might relate to the social and artistic attitudes of the people for whom they were produced.

A Jaundiced View of European Art

Reactions by Americans to art produced in America related to the views to art made in England, the mother country. Americans learned

of the standards of painting from engraved prints of famous paintings and manuals describing the techniques and aesthetic systems to be followed.⁵ But paintings and even painters of the best quality (according to those standards) tended to stay in England and a great many Americans came to be severely embarrassed by this lack. Americans yearned for the refinements of the baroque and the rococo "style." Many Americans hoped that Hogarth's femininely curving "line of beauty" would sinuously extend itself into our sensibilities and many even believed that this process was inevitable given the historical "translation" of the arts from East (Greece ultimately) to West (first to Rome, then London and finally to these barren shores in the new dawn of the culture).⁶

Nearly everyone who would admit to an opinion on the matter of art would have agreed this process was necessary and belated. These people were, however, relatively few. A great majority might well have had misgivings about the appropriateness of an aristocratic art no less than for monarchy in politics. Indeed, the emotional identification of most would surely have been with the folk figure of Yankee Jonathan, a rustic bumpkin, gauche but wise, fiercely independent and democratic, rather than with his highbrow adversaries.

These new sensibilities were also given a remarkably erudite expression in the works of the Reverend Timothy Dwight, poet of the "Connecticut Wits" circle and president of Yale University. He perceived America as profoundly egalitarian and took the simplicities or even rusticities (homespun cloth, for instance) of American life as moral virtues to be praised, rather than as insufficiencies for embarrassment. In his poem *Greenfield Hill* (1794), he coined the phrase "glorious contrast!" to praise and encourage the egalitarian simplicity of New England's rural people—the very ones who chose plain style portraits—while damning what he saw as more pretentious urban Europhiles.⁷ Dwight combined the patriotic fervor of the revolution with the continuing Puritan ethos of his native New England. In doing this, he emphatically rejected the rococo excesses of English taste and American intellectual slavery to or "translation" of such aristocratic models. The manner, the titles, the ostentation of European nobility he saw as stilted. American habits by contrast he praised for their honesty, directness and their plainness. Dwight was sometimes not a little caustic about this "contrast." He called England a "dy'd serpent," "tinselled outside," "painted tomb," "foul harlot," and most amusingly,

a "fribble," as in "to a fribble dwindled from a man." Americans, by contrast, were "sunny geniuses," "Phoenixes divine," "plain," "frank," "practical," and presumably real men, too.

The plain portraits which form the center of this study are from and of the "arcadian" landscape Dwight praised, sometimes from the very communities he described. To get at the intentions embodied in their qualities—the polished plainness—it will be useful to briefly examine paintings of nearly opposite qualities, from the culture to which Americans were both reacting and relating—Old World Britain. English paintings of the aristocrats exemplify both the attitudes and manners Dwight decried as hypocritical, and also the painterly conventions and techniques they used to present themselves on canvas. Before turning to the American counterparts I will describe the extreme features of the aristocratic style by referring to British prototypes.

The paintings made for the aristocracy, the powerful and the proud, use techniques, codified and taught in the academies, which made a forceful and assertive presentation of personality and being. Paramount in the paintings of aristocracy is a romantic setting of wild and unruly nature, contained and controlled in a garden perhaps, or being tamed by the command of man. The emblems of such command are, of course, inevitably displayed in official costume, including medals, ribbons, uniforms, or robes which denote exalted station. Purposeful gestures and a good stride are common; often a downward pointing hand commands "bring it to my feet!," sometimes even in the unlikely setting of rocks and thundering surf.

Common, too, are the postures of refinement: legs and feet slightly turned out, arms and hands bent in Hogarth's preferred curve, knees crossed, heads cocked, eyes (sometimes) averted. The writers of the etiquette manuals which defined and promoted this new mode of social interaction in the latter eighteenth century were quite conscious of the increasing gulf between social classes and the threats and inequities this posed. Many of the gestures recommended were specifically intended to mitigate social imbalances by curbing the direct expression of power or command. The angles of limbs or heads, for instance, were not only more pleasing, but softened the aggressive qualities of a direct militaristic stance. The possibility of abuse of social position (the natural tendency of the lordly to lord) was thus recognized and gestures of counterbalancing egalitarian values were urged in their stead.⁸

Despite the sometimes ambivalent intentions in the content of these polite gestures, the paintings in formal terms result in aggressive, often radically dynamic, even unbalanced compositions. The classic example of these contradictory impulses is in Gainsborough's famous *Mr. & Mrs. Andrews*, who sit demurely at the extreme left of their portrait. Similarly, individual portraits can be full of counter-motions, as in Joshua Reynolds's *Lady Jane Halliday* (fig. 4-1), who walks in one direction, gestures in another and looks over her shoulder in yet a third. This painting also demonstrates the turbulent atmosphere often depicted in these English paintings. Clouds scud by and trees toss in the distance as her dress, scarf, sleeves and hair all swirl in different directions. Her distant expression underscores her sense of superiority over even the tempestuous elements, not to mention other people.

In many paintings of British aristocracy there is an ephemeral drama in the lighting. A shaft of sun breaks through the clouds or even a sunset to produce a strong chiaroscuro of light and shade on the face despite the shifting scene. A favorite trick of Reynolds's was to shine this beam on only a part of the subject, the face and a shoulder, say, leaving the rest in obscurity. This device creates both a temporal moment and a three-dimensional and focused space—a linear time in the Renaissance space. The effect of this space is that the viewer's attention is inescapably drawn to the point of focus on the eyes of the sitter; we look *into* the painting and at a particular individual personality. The impression of uniqueness is greatly increased by the quality of the expression (not a broad smile, but a fleeting one about to disappear at any moment, like the emotions that swirl around us), and by the dramatic and momentary quality of the light. The single shaft of light in the churning dark creates a veritable spotlight on the singular personality of the sitter, who is made even more important by the breathtaking drama of the moment.

A powerful sense of dynamic unrest lies in these aristocratic paintings, as befits the potentially aggressive attitudes of the powerful. This sense of activity carries through in these paintings even to the very surface of the canvas; it is a marked characteristic of academic or aristocratic painters to be free with their brush work, leaving a veritable record of their own personalities in the calligraphy of their brush strokes.⁹ Even in calmer moments this calligraphy remains highly charged. In Gainsborough's serene *Morning Walk*, the background



Figure 4-1. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Lady Jane Halliday*
(Photo: The Courtauld Institute; courtesy
Waddesdon Manor, The National Trust)

and costumes, the attentive dog, nearly everything in fact, is an impressionism of scribbly brush strokes. This lively surface in academic painting adds to the animation of the personalities and paradoxically to the solidity of their bodies.

Gilbert Stuart: The American English Painter

Reverend Dwight would have us believe that the whole of American society was more egalitarian than English aristocracy, though we can detect wide variations within the social climate of the time. Nevertheless, we should expect to find a "toning down" of the extreme qualities of English aristocratic art in even the most worldly of American portraits. Granted that there are fewer storms and crashing waves in American settings, and fewer titles and medals festooning American subjects. Still, Gilbert Stuart unerringly found patrons closest in attitude and aspiration to English models (Matilda Stoughton de Jaudenes, the 16-year-old American bride of the Spanish chargé d'affaires, for instance), and painted them with techniques approaching the agitated preciousness of Gainsborough or Reynolds. Art historian Jules Prown has observed privately that Stuart hardly deserves to be called an American painter, so strong is the English influence.

Stuart's portrait of Hepzibah Clark Swan is an excellent example of his American style and displays nearly all the features of aristocratic English portraiture. It shows a striking, confident gaze and an imprecise but confident, even deft, touch of the brush to match. As usual, Stuart suggests essences more than he delineates physical details. Mrs. Swan is perhaps more than typical of Stuart's patrons as well. She represents an extreme of the break some Americans were making with the local community and of the move toward international elitism. Her summer house at Dorchester was, for instance, said to be built on a French model she had seen in Paris. Locally it was called The Round House because of its conspicuous circular salon, which was filled with ormolu furniture, clocks and objets d'art which had been confiscated—or looted—during the French Revolution from the palaces of Versailles and Tuilleries. If these foreign and royalist associations weren't enough, she and her friends, most of them Stuart patrons, were all satirized for their snobbish exclusivity in a play called *Sans Souci, Alias, Free and Easy, or, An Evening's Peep in a Polite Circle*.¹⁰

Stuart's portrait of General Henry Knox, commissioned by his

close friend Mrs. Swan, demonstrates the painter's use of chiaroscuro as the general stands by his cannon in the churning dark of war. The quick and fleeting glances of his Mrs. Yates emphasizes the skill with which the mood and personality of the sitter was "nailed to the canvas," as West remarked. According to Stuart's daughter Jane, the whole point of his painting was to capture this individuality, this life and spirit of the sitter. This spiritedness further implies that the subject is special and superior. Jane Stuart further emphasized the speed (or spontaneity) with which it was done, sometimes in as few as two or three sittings.¹¹ This rapid technique occasionally results in a veritable blither of brushwork which renders imprecise the delineation of features, but astonishingly conveys the character more clearly than ever. Note in particular the blurred mouth on his Mrs. Perez Morton (fig. 4-2), another friend of Mrs. Swan's.

This energetic brushwork also adds to the individual and ephemeral effect. It constitutes a second layer of individuality, that is, Stuart's own personality, literally imposed on top of that of the sitter. Indeed, when he was once asked why he didn't sign many of his works, he replied, "I mark them all over." Stuart was also rather daringly free with his colors and proud of it, painting the flesh with the colors unmixed "so that they may shine thru each other, as blood shines through the skin," as he wrote to his student, John Neagle. He is even known to have scored the surface he was to paint on, if it had been too smoothly prepared. This too was to give the product a yet more lively texture. Viewed in strong reflected light, nearly any of Stuart's paintings will reveal a visible impasto, and not just on the background, but in such details as the hair or the ruff of a cloak (figs. 4-3, 4-4).

Stuart shows in his paintings a transitory, almost windblown, look, and in some cases a downright agitated preciousness, which to me emphasizes the rareness of the moment, the uniqueness of the individual and by extension his or her sense of worthiness and superiority. The professional plain portraitists of his era strive for exactly the opposite effect. They would likely have regarded such heavy impasto as sloppiness! Moreover, even someone as erudite and traveled, as worldly and European in outlook as the young Charles Bulfinch wasn't so sure he liked the newly loose style of painting. Bulfinch was, of course, the great classicizer of America. He is probably the designer of the oval "French" salons that Mrs. Swan and her friends



Figure 4-2. Gilbert Stuart, *Mrs. Perez Morton*
(Courtesy Worcester Art Museum, Worcester,
Mass.)

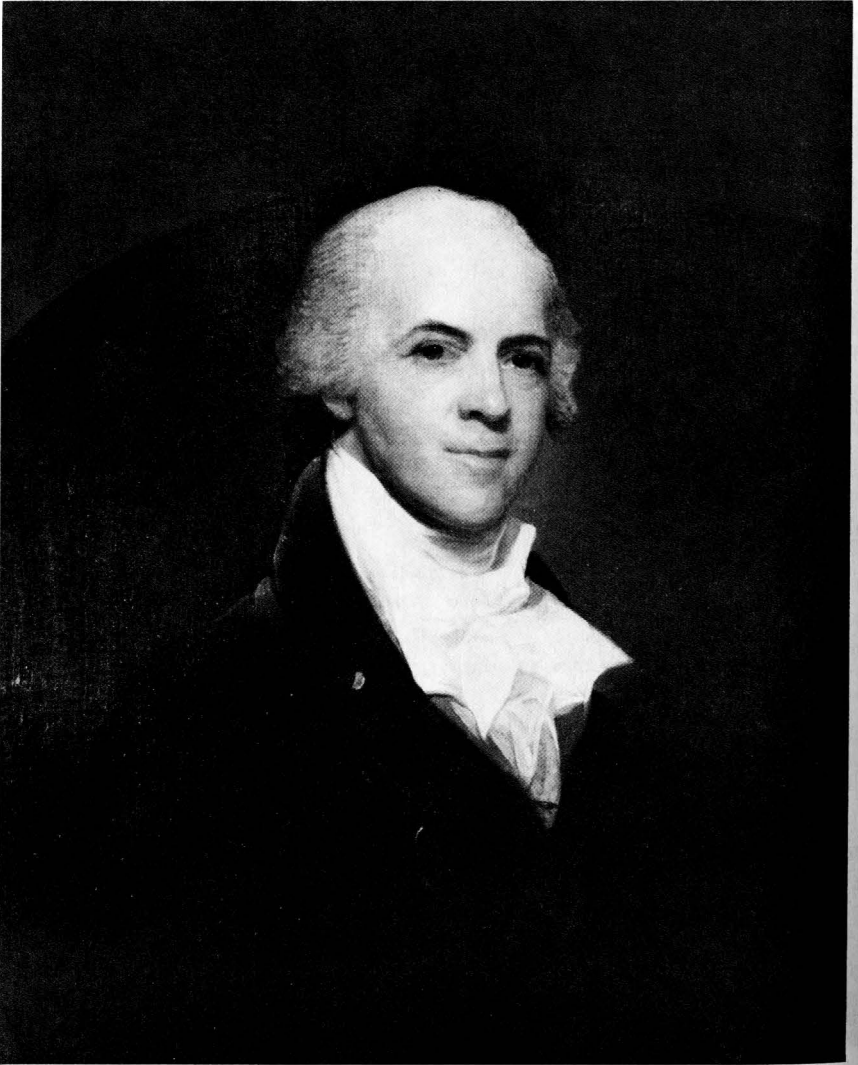


Figure 4-3. Gilbert Stuart, *George Logan*
(Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania)

Mrs. Perez Morton and General Knox all adopted. Apparently at his mother's behest, he had a portrait done while in London in 1786. It was by Mathew Brown, an American studying at the time with Benjamin West. Bulfinch's comment in a letter to his mother that he thought it "a very dull, unmeaning face" indicates that he was aware that a portrait, according to his social milieu, should record more than the visible, but also display something of the personality. He amusingly exonerates the painter for this deficiency, saying "it was not his duty to create, but to copy [nature]." Then he continues, "you will find it very rough, but that is the modish style of painting, introduced

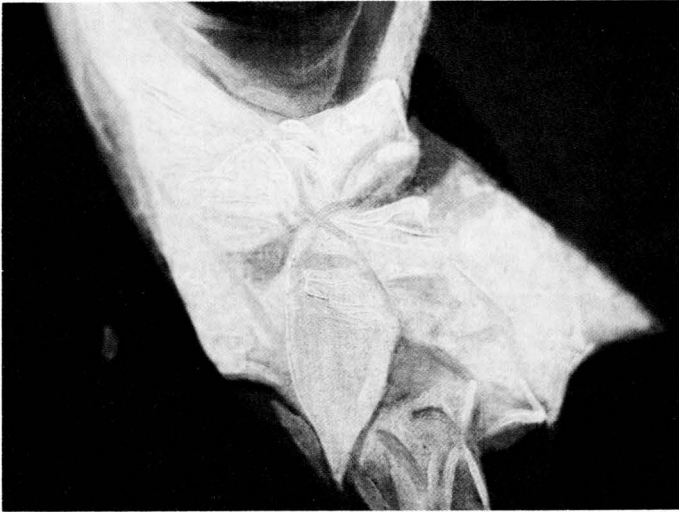


Figure 4-4. Gilbert Stuart, *George Logan*
Detail showing impasto technique.

by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Mr. Copley indeed paints in another manner, his pictures are finished to the utmost nicety, but then—they are *very dear*.”¹² Bulfinch is here referring with, I think, unique directness to the very qualities of finish and polish with which I shall be concerned in this paper. Despite his awareness that the freely brushed work was fashionable and appropriate to his social class, he was uneasy with it or knew his mother would be. He clearly would have preferred the smoothness and “nicety” in the finish of Copley’s work, but offered the excuse that it cost too much. Plainness of style is here the aesthetic preference *and* the more expensive one, at that.

The Boston Copley

The good mother Bulfinch had apparently been hoping for a portrait by the Bostonian John Singleton Copley. Copley himself had, of course, loosened up his brushwork considerably, nearly as soon as he left the religiously and aesthetically conservative social community of Boston. The contrast between two self portraits, one dated 1769 from Boston, the other among the first efforts once he was settled in England, show this change quite well (figs. 4-5, 4-6). The American self-portrait, a pastel, is no different from those he did for his clients, except perhaps that he portrayed himself in his recently introduced "informal" mode, in a dressing gown instead of a formal suit. It is a good example of the carefully controlled finish which characterizes his American work. But the English version of himself is altogether different. Copley greatly increased the looseness in the handling of the paint. He used the technique commonly for landscapes and backgrounds while in America, and then in England felt it was appropriate to render faces. And there is also an added element of motion to account for, an extra toss to the head, the eyes now averted, the chin jutting out with more than a tad of self-assertion.

Copley would never have tried to get away with that kind of thing in America. Jules Prown and Linda Samter, among others, have pointed out that his American work is carefully attuned to the conservative moral and egalitarian ethos of the Puritans he painted in Boston.¹³ He had, in fact, even toned down the vigor of his first mature style to a later smooth polish, while still in Boston's aesthetic climate. It was just this style—refined, crisp, breathtakingly real and solid—which Mrs. Bulfinch remembered and hoped she could obtain. Instead of being posed with classical statuary, Copley's American sitters often are shown in real places, in real chairs, usually in their own houses and furniture. Certainly they are shorn of the atmospheric and fluttering brush work. They are finished off nicely and smoothly; the momentary fickleness of emotions is calmed. They are shown instead with, as Virginia Woolf said, "the deeper beauty of things as they are." Actually, his likenesses are almost ruthlessly uncompromising and unflattering; some of his subjects, such as *Mrs. Samuel Quincy* in 1761, are almost famous for their physiognomic plainness (fig. 4-7).

In these ways, Copley may be said to reflect a folk aspect in the aesthetic of his subjects as Puritans, toning down the ephemeral and

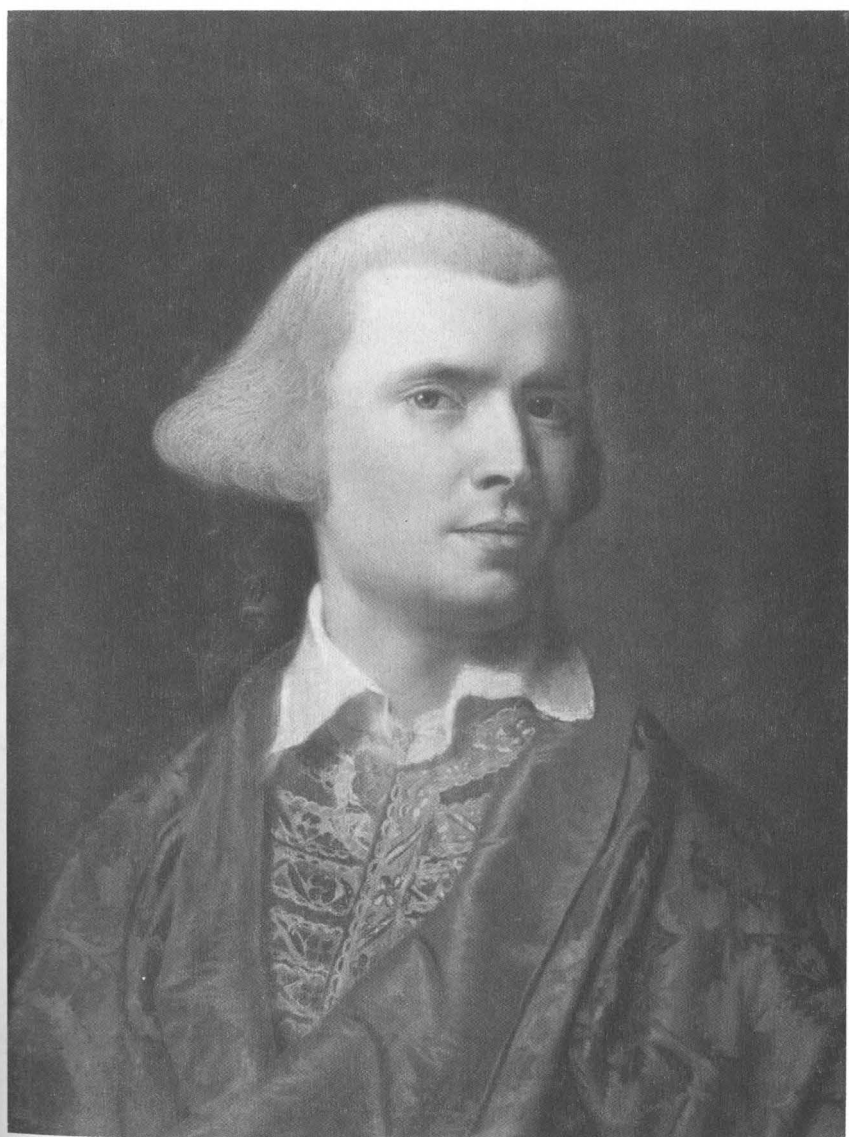


Figure 4-5. John Singleton Copley, Self Portrait in Pastel
(Courtesy *The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum*)



Figure 4-6. John Singleton Copley, Self Portrait in Oil
(Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian
Institution)



Figure 4-7. John Singleton Copley, *Mrs. Samuel Quincy*
(Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

transitory moods found in the academic style. But high style pretensions and academic techniques are also present in his work of this period. For instance, the costume Mrs. Quincy wears is a direct reference to, a copy of, a famous portrait by Rubens, which Copley knew from the engravings his stepfather sold. Copley's work is also famous for the intensely dramatic light he used, as arresting as any academic spotlight effect. And he is no less fascinated with the sheen of luxury, the glint of stuffs, than any painter of the rich. Both of these techniques are academic specialities which emphasize the "rare" and "superior" qualities of the wealthy. Thus, Copley's painting shows both Puritan egalitarian and mercantile elitist attributes, as, to varying degrees, do many portraits of less prominent individuals. The patrons Copley attracted were of the same social and economic status in American society as Gilbert Stuart's were later. They are moving no less emphatically toward individuation and a modern conception of self. But they clearly maintain some—and more than Stuart's patrons—emotional ties to customary values as well.

Plain Portraiture

Toward the other end of the spectrum of oil portraits are paintings by local artists such as Winthrop Chandler, Noah North, or Ammi Phillips. These and other plain painters are, of course, indebted to academic conventions for such basic features as the pose, or a view out the window to a scene of past triumph, or even the bag of props for attributes. But the treatment, the handling of this skeletal idea of a portrait, is different in the plain paintings. The restrained treatment reflects Dwight's "glorious contrast"—and the conflicting values of ego and community inherent in those portraits—even more obviously. The "painterliness" of these highly professional paintings is distinctly subdued. There is in the plain paintings a leveling of the visual extremes found in "high style" canvases (including Copley's). The clothing is plainer and less luxurious or pretentious, the lighting is flat, bland and purposively undramatic (fig. 4-8).

Among the first comments often made about plain portraiture is how stiff and expressionless the figures are. Indeed, if the academic convention of the off-center three-quarter pose is not adopted, the figure will probably stand squarely in the center of the frame: feet, shoulders, head and eyes directly upon the viewer. Alternatively, the



Figure 4-8. Simon Fitch, *Portrait of Mrs. Hannah Beach Hill Starr*
(Courtesy The Ella Gallup Summer and Mary Catlin Summer Collection, The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn.)

figure may be in exact profile or even symmetry of profile, as in the work of Joseph Davis. The three-quarter posed portraits quite frequently come in pairs, to be hung symmetrically on the wall, as Joseph Steward's *Mr. & Mrs. Bull* at the McCook House in Hartford still are. Such symmetry has often been noted as a feature of American folk art, or of egalitarian cultures generally.¹⁴

In any variation of poses there is nary a motion, and the expressions of the sitters are equally calm; in a word, eternal. That this formalism is a choice made by the sitters, adapting the received conventions of portraiture to their own aesthetic moral preferences, is demonstrated in the continuing tendency of conservative people to adopt similar poses at the sight of a camera. While a middle-class progressive or popularly-oriented person will often strike a relaxed pose with a wide grin, a person with a more "folk" orientation will likely "stiffen up" into the classic pose of the paintings. In the nineteenth century this posture may have owed to the long exposure time necessary. But the fact that people all over this country and in the third world still choose this posture *and* the facial expression rather than an equally stable but relaxed and spontaneous demeanor indicates that it is an aesthetic choice on the part of the sitters. It might even be argued that photography (or other fast portrait techniques) could become vastly popular despite this initial technical "limitation" exactly *because* they reinforced a pre-existing aesthetic attitude.

The intent of this formality is to project exactly the opposite impression from the academic models. People see those models and far from misunderstanding the originals or even trying to slavishly copy but botching the job, they understand them all too well. The ostentation of those fabrics, the pretentiousness of the dramatics, and the fickleness and variety of the projected emotions, are ephemeral—just what conservative sitters would want to avoid in such a permanent record as a painting or a photograph. Indeed, such excessive display of wealth, such aggressive assertion of person and personality, is grossly inappropriate and almost offensive in a close, egalitarian community. When Vince, one of Michael Owen Jones's contemporary Kentucky chairmakers, repeats, "For myself, I like a *decent* plain made chair," it means that the fancy work and turnings on the other chairs are *indecent*, immoral.¹⁵ The same attitude surely must have been true of the nineteenth-century folks ordering portraits. Like overripe fruit, the "high style" is just too much for them.

The flatness and linearity of the folk paintings, the totally neutral lighting, the de-differentiated space not present in the academic vision but characteristic of plain painting since medieval Europe, and even the treatment of the painted surface all contribute to the conservative effort to erase personality, to downplay aggressive "presence" and to present instead a stable, permanent, even eternal image for posterity. Every hair must be depicted in place, even though we know they never are. The wind-blown look will never do for a "down home" sitter. They want to present an unassuming but composed self, freed of quirks and nagging inconsistencies. The transitory mood is rejected in favor of control, a kind of staying power. The flatness and shadowless light only create a distinctly antiretinal, dematerialized quality, as if the likeness were of the spiritual concept of the person, and not the flesh and blood. It's *almost* an icon; as Paul Svinin, a Russian diplomat here in 1813, thought the many images of George Washington to be.¹⁶ Or rather, as art historian Jonathan Fairbanks remarks about New England's seventeenth-century paintings, perhaps the "essence and identity of the person as conveyed by the gesture of the sitter, the proportion and harmony of [his or her] parts . . ." was more important than "realistic representation [as understood today]."¹⁷ At any rate, the two-dimensionality of the "perspective," and the equal painterly attention to all areas of the canvas, completely erase background and foreground (even if the figure is clearly outlined against a blank field), no whole pops out. The eye is not directed to any single point in space.

And, there is *no* expressive handwriting in the brush work of plain paintings. In contrast to Stuart, there is every effort to leave a smooth, carefully stroke-free surface. They share with Copley the quality of being thus "finished to the utmost nicety," even while they forebear from his chiaroscuro and occasional baroque costumery. A detail in reflected light of Samuel Broadbent's *Mrs. John Churchill*, for instance, shows a polished surface, in contrast to the impasto of the academicians (figs. 4-9, 4-10). The texture visible is the texture of the canvas, not the paint on the canvas. In some cases the effect can be truly magnificent, as it is with *Miss Gilmore*, by Erastus Salisbury Field (fig. 4-11). In this painting, the edges and the ears are just buzzed out, almost like an air brush technique.

I can attest from having tried to paint this way myself, that the only way to achieve this effect is to take a very fluffy dry brush, and



Figure 4-9. Samuel Broadbent, *Mrs. John Churchill*
(Courtesy Connecticut Historical Society)

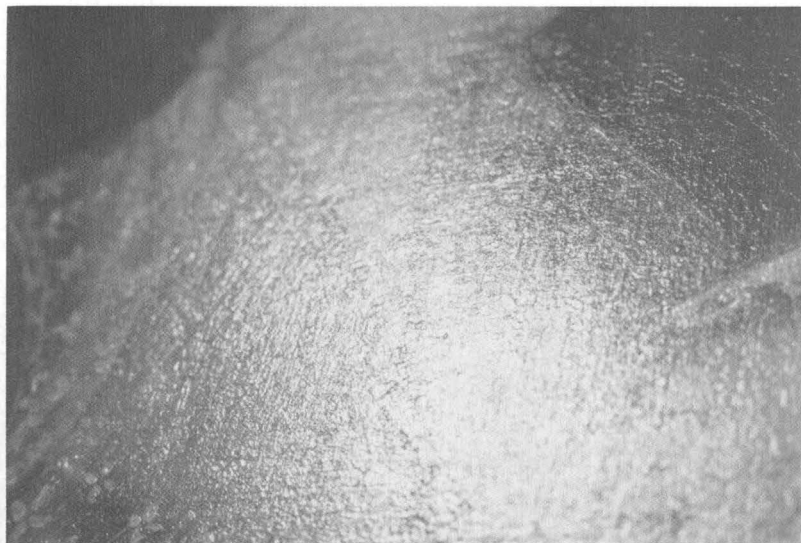


Figure 4-10. Samuel Broadbent, *Mrs. John Churchill*
Detail in reflected light.

ever so gently dust the edges together on all your colors, *after* each day's work is otherwise complete. This is called "enameling," and it is a technique of the Flemish Old Masters such as Holbein and Vermeer,¹⁸ whom some modern art historians consider to be ancestral influences on plain painters. In any event, enameling is distinct from "blending," the mixing of colors (which sometimes requires special equipment like Leonardo's silk brushes) or "glazing," the application of additional layers of thin, transparent pigment. Enameling is a dry brush process, merely fusing the still wet colors into a smooth surface. It is an additional process that the plain painter insisted on applying to the entire painted surface, not just selectively "important" zones (such as faces) as was the academic tendency. Rather than being misapprehensions of academic models, these plain paintings constitute careful and creative reworkings of the concept of presenting the self, and in some ways, in the matter of enameling, are in fact *more* refined than academic paintings themselves.

Some Suggestive Examples

Far from being misunderstood attempts to "achieve" the effect of the

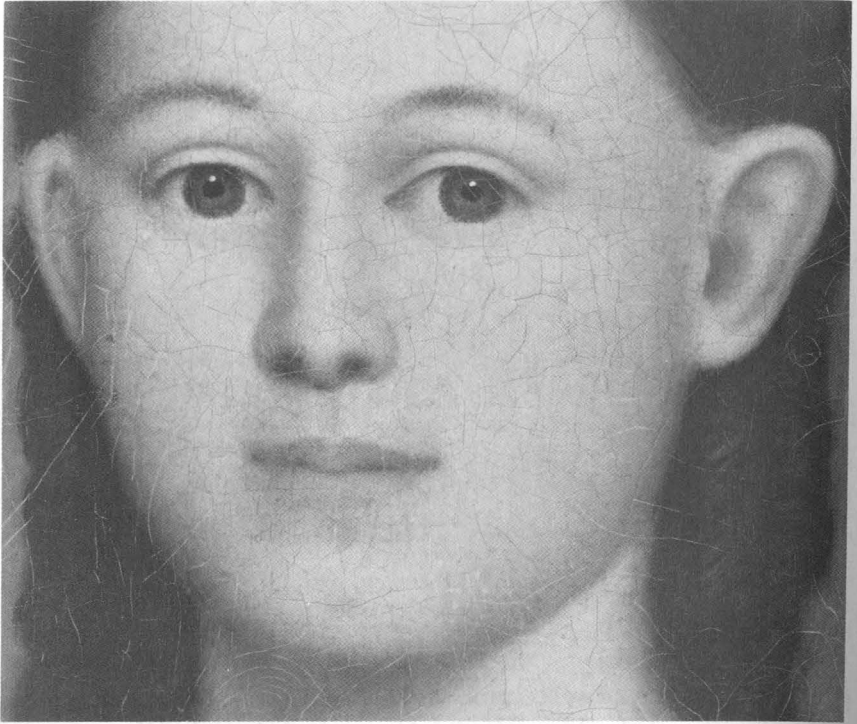


Figure 4-11. Erastus Salisbury Field, *Miss Margaret Gilmore*, Detail
(Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

arrogant, “high” (handed) models, or even of unconscious abstractionists, the amply trained and professional plain painters made highly polished works. This argument depends of course on the abilities of the plain style painters and their patrons’ familiarity with, but rejection of, academic convention.

To begin with, it must be recognized that the popular dichotomy of urban sophisticates—ever eager for the new—versus rural folk conservatives is really a shorthand for differing social attitudes rather than a geographic reality. Despite the urban/rural split played up in both Yankee Jonathan and Timothy Dwight, masses of unpretentious

people filled the cities, and many of the most worldly individuals built themselves appropriately decorated "seats" out in the country. For instance, paintings by Blackburn, Feke, and Copley were very probably at Montpelier, the French-style house of General Knox, immediately outside of Thomaston, Maine, on axis to the village road, facing it from the opposite rise.¹⁹ As early as the 1680s, the town of Concord, Massachusetts, transcendently bucolic even a century and a half later, contained a portrait of its first minister, Peter Buckley, by the English academician Sir Godfrey Kneller. Similarly, John Wickoff's portrait attributed to John Wollaston was in Monmouth County, New Jersey, by 1758.²⁰

As this smattering of examples shows, academic art has long been available in rural areas, to those who would want to see them. Indeed, the local people most likely to be thinking of having a portrait done of themselves (tavern keepers, merchants, the more prosperous middle class), would also be most likely to have social introductions to the nearby grandee. Still others would visit the local "great house" on business. Hospitality in small communities was, of course, obligatory. Eighteenth-century diarists, such as Ebenezer Parkman of Westborough, Massachusetts, speak only of the weather more often than of who came to call, or on whom they called, or at whose house they were obliged (by the weather) to turn in for the night when journeying away from home.²¹ And visitors from abroad were sometimes surprised at the lack of ceremony—or inhibition—in the interactions between social classes here. Thomas Aubrey, an English officer in Virginia in 1779, recorded how, during a visit to Tuckahoe, Colonel Randolph's seat in Goochland County, "three country peasants, who came upon business entered the room where the Colonel and his Company were sitting, took themselves chairs, drew near the fire, began spitting, pulling off their country boots all over with mud, and then opened with their business, which was simply about some continental flour to be ground at the Colonel's mill."²²

If their patrons could thus have been aware of what academic portraits looked like (and what kind of people had them), the painters as well had contact with, and not infrequently at least some instruction in, academic technique. For although the old bugbear of "artisan" or "sign painter" background is in many cases true (all but the priciest of portraitists had to resort to painting Masonic aprons, political banners and anything else that came down the pike, including an occa-

sional coach), still this does not explain the whole phenomenon. The precision and polish, not to say refinement, of Winthrop Chandler's portrait of his brother Capt. Samuel Chandler and his wife, or Erastus Salisbury Field's portrait of the Joseph Moore family, exceed both inspired amateurism and commercial entrepreneurship. It is simply untenable to maintain that the features of these paintings, and of the plain style in general, are due to substandard technique.²³

Field, in fact, studied for several months with Samuel F. B. Morse, one of the most atmospheric of all nineteenth-century painters, during the period when he was doing his turgid portrait of Lafayette in 1824. Though we have no exact evidence what was stressed during the study, one might imagine that one of the first things taught would be where to put a shadow, or a bit of easy perspective. Yet the moment Field got back to Leverett and Plumtrees, Massachusetts, he was doing flatly shadowless portraits, with the floors as vertical as the walls. In other words, the academic style was, for whatever reason, simply *not* what his local community wanted, nor were they willing to pay for it.

And again, Ralph Earl had the benefit of seven years of art training in England and had several sophisticated works to his credit there, including some with fluid brush work and some with Reynolds's "spotlight on the face and shoulder" device.²⁵ But he becomes, according to Alan Burroughs, in his book *Limners and Likenesses*, "an apparently less stylish artist upon his return to Connecticut." Though Burroughs felt strange "mentioning taste in such an objective way, as if it were a physical entity in some locales," to me it seems the only logical inference to draw. What Burroughs is saying is that there was a different aesthetic taste—a plain aesthetic—that accounts for the different styles being painted by the same artist.²⁶

That the painter's skill was less the issue than the cultural expectations of the patrons is further demonstrated by the suggestive contrast of both attitude and technique shown in the paintings Joseph Whiting Stock made of himself and his clients. Stock was born in 1815, the year Copley died, but was still as much a plain painter as any (fig. 4-12). He did his self-portrait in 1843 (fig. 4-13). It is in an oval cartouche, the form of, and a reference to, the genre of miniature, the kind of jewel-like exquisite object usually done on ivory. But this one is not tiny, it is a pastel of the respectable size of 8 by 10 inches. The strokes of shading one can detect are therefore all real features of the work, not photographically magnified to exaggeration (as might have been the case with an enlargement of a mini-

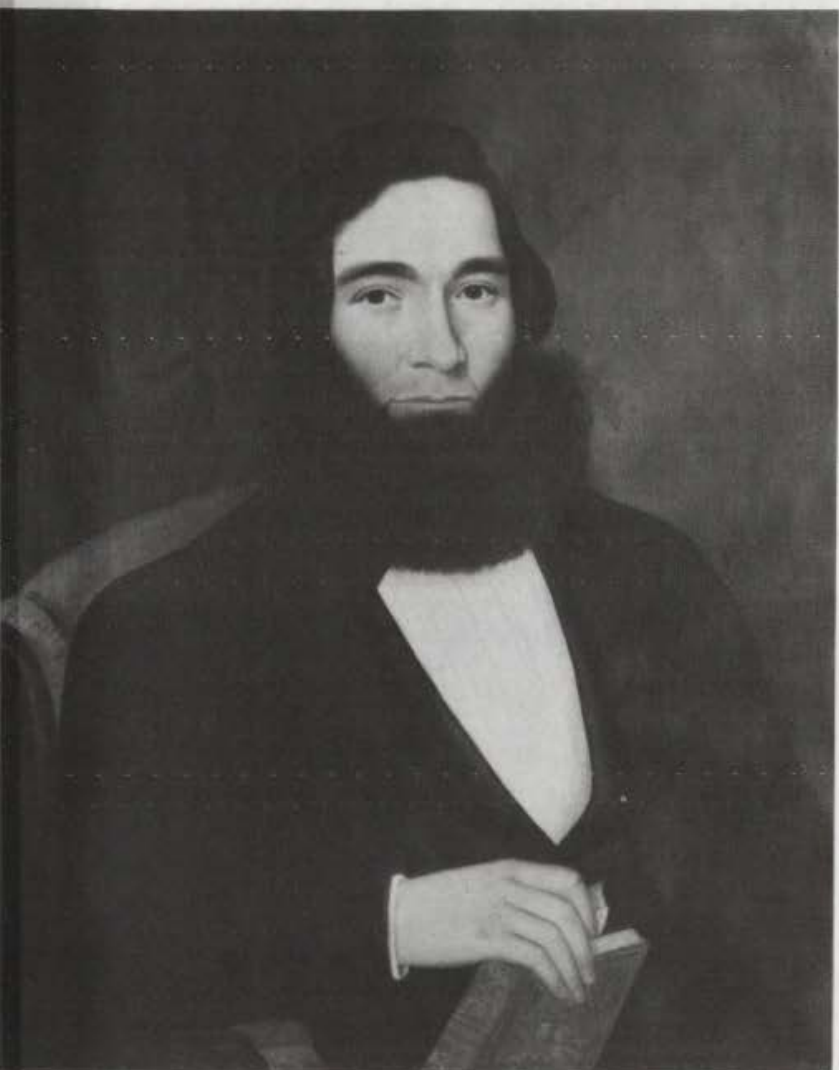


Figure 4-12. Joseph Whiting Stock, *Bearded Man with Odd Fellow's Book*
(Courtesy The Whaling Museum,
New Bedford, Mass.)



Figure 4-13. Joseph Whiting Stock, Self-Portrait, 1843
(*Courtesy Connecticut Valley Historical Museum,
Springfield, Mass.*)

ture). Anyone who has ever smudged a pastel knows that they take exceptionally well to blending, that this is in fact the normal mode for pastel. Therefore it is a safe assumption that the expressive strokes about Stock's forehead are intentional, perhaps to give a sense of dash. Notice, too, the shading of the features. It forms a chiaroscuro of shadow by the nose and eyes. There is even something of the toss to the head, the eyes glancing at us indirectly and probably not for long. All these features are indicative of a considerably self-confident (not to mention technically competent) presentation of self. As he did verbally in his diaries, he placed himself visually among the worldly artistes; not among mere craftsmen, members of community or guild, but rather among those he perceived as innovative individuals.²⁷ By contrast, Stock's portraits of his clientele seem almost stoically flat, even when they attempt a glimmer of a smile.

One could surmise economic motivations for the differences of degree of finish one finds in the portraits.²⁸ Needless to say, the plain style portraits were less expensive than the academic model such as Stuart or Sully or, as even Bulfinch ruefully remarked, Copley. This cheaper price did indeed open up the market of the rising and buoyant middle class of the new republic. The entrepreneurial instincts of the era, to which artists were not immune, drew some artists to exploit that market. Rufus Porter, with his new-fangled mechanical shortcut, a camera obscura, which enabled him to produce a "correct likeness" in a mere fifteen minutes, or J. H. Gillespie, with his one-minute profile likenesses, would seem to be such cases.²⁹ Others also adopted cost-cutting efficient techniques. William Matthew Prior, for instance, is often cited for his sliding scale of prices, and for the variety in the quality of his work. The least expensive of his work was surely all that some of his clients could afford, and was indeed, "cheap and slight" (as the academician John Vanderlyn thought even the best of plain painting was).³⁰

But Prior had had enough training, possibly with C. Codman in Portland, Maine, that he could accomplish works in the academic mode as well, and exhibit them with aplomb at the Boston Athenaeum.³¹ Prior's skill as both artist and entrepreneur allowed him to give his public a full range of stylistic choices and price brackets. But among the *upper* end of his range were paintings with *both* the academic chiaroscuro (such as the *Young Man* of 1829) and luxurious paintings which were nevertheless without heavy shadows. An example of the latter is *William Allen*, 1843 (fig. 4-14), in which the

Figure 4-14. William Matthew Prior, *William Allen*
(Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



blond child, whose tresses hang daringly across one eye, sits with his restless hounds and a straw hat, in a robust and romantically looming wood. Despite the richness and painterliness of this work—which must surely have been one of his more expensive models—the shading of the face and arms is quite subtle and the finish quite smooth. It seems, therefore, that the desire for paintings of restrained impact or controlled temperament was the result less of artistic skill or of the patron's affluence than of something else—perhaps of moral caution. Rather than calling such painting imitations of academic style it might just as easily be said that the speedy and unembellished versions evidently produced for the middle-class market are copying the refined but soberly undramatic painting of the plain style. Here again it could be argued that the so-called "limitations" or "shortcuts" of a cheap technique could become so vastly popular exactly because they adopted and reinforced an already powerful aesthetic taste.

In terms of simple investment of time, the plain style painters were not any cheaper than the academicians. A reading of Joseph Whiting Stock's day book for the New Bedford visit from February 20 to July 29, 1843, shows that he required a minimum of four sittings and usually took six or more sittings. He labored for more than ten sittings for the miniature for H. Johnson before they both were satisfied. Gilbert Stuart, on the other hand, delighted in dashing off one of his more spontaneous and lively portraits in, on one occasion, a mere two sittings.³²

There is also other evidence that a taste for the simple is not necessarily based on available cash. Orthodox Quakers, for instance, did not lack in wealth, but were restrained from portraits except simple silhouettes for fear of prideful vanity. Silhouettes, however, were acceptable because they were the very imprint of (Divine) Light on the world.³³ And even others who could afford it sometimes felt uneasy with the vigorous and free new style. As noted above, Charles Bulfinch knew that his mother, who had been painted by Joseph Blackburn, wouldn't care for the rough new textures.

Another example of wealthy persons who nonetheless preferred simple portraits was the rising industrial family of Asa Watters II, prime movers of Millbury, Massachusetts (fig. 4-15). Asa was born into a gun making family. When he took over the business he not only diversified the products made, but improved patents and got large, undoubtedly lucrative, contracts to supply the United States govern-



Figure 4-15. John Blunt, *Asa Watters, II*
(*Private collection*)

ment. His prominence ensured him several local and state offices. His connections to the federal government brought many visitors from up and down the coast. He was the first president of the local bank and instrumental in the local academy. In 1808 he built an armory, prominent in the town, and between 1826 and 1829 a large and elaborate mansion. Featuring a columned two-story portico across its entire front, it contained materials imported from Maine (pumpkin pine), the Caribbean (mahogany), and Italy (marble). Despite his obvious wealth and widespread contacts, when Asa Watters II came to provide this house and its guests with a suitable image of its owner, he chose the local Portsmouth, New Hampshire, limner, John Blunt. Though Blunt's work was considered the top of the line in Portsmouth, it is not the fashionable academic style Watters could easily have obtained in Boston.³⁴

Far from the easy and energetic brushwork of the English style of Stuart or his followers, suggestive as that was of the senses without being tied to the surface, Blunt's work is careful and precise; the lighting is even and subdued, forms are solid and clear. The Watters portraits are larger than any other paintings of one person currently attributed to Blunt, and he seems to have tried to make the foreground and bodies more naturalistic than on many of his other canvases. The armory is in view in the distance, and the mansion, exaggerated to four stories of colonnade, dominates the foreground out the window. Although Watters had spent years going in and out of Boston for the legislature by the time his portrait was done at age 61, he evidently did not consider it crucial to associate himself with the Europeanized set. Perhaps, he even felt it was not appropriate to do so in such a small community.³⁵

Concluding "Contrasts"

The "contrasts" which Timothy Dwight articulated in his erudite poems, and which I have found manifest in the differing qualities of plain and academic paintings, permeate many levels of early American popular consciousness.

Nineteenth-century popular drama, for instance, similarly adapted the love of "urban" and "rural" social types and pitted the values of these two communities against each other in the antics of Yankee Jonathan. He was rural "verdant," an espouser of the practical, a down-to-earth, homespun New Englander—but wise and fundamentally egalitarian. Inevitably he had a run-in with pretentious, mannered, and fundamentally elitist urbanites whom he always bested with his apparently bungling, but effective wit. His countrified consternation at city ways was stressed in these plays, always making a mess of refined courtesies or dainty dances such as the minuet. He used his local vernacular speech, full of colorfully earthy turns of phrase, no matter what the situation or company to whom he spoke.³⁶ The "better sort" with whom he had these set-to's (including a number of old country aristocrats in one series of plays) are always given the worst of it for their haughty arrogance.

The forms of folklore usually depict life in starker black and white dichotomies than the confusions of reality warrant. Though this intensification often serves to bring the ironies of life into high relief,

the irony here is that both plain and academic portraiture can be called "folk" art forms, each made for different communities, each appreciated by different segments of the "art world" for different reasons. Most importantly, the style of each is at least partly modified by the values of the other.

Thus the polite poses and refined gestures depicted in aristocratic portraiture are intended by their promoters in the contemporary etiquette manuals to curb the overt exercise of power or display of class differences. Nevertheless, the formal features and "painterly" techniques codified in the academics to depict those aristocrats all worked to produce a strong sense of the presence of ego, both in the physical person of the sitter and in the presence of the personality of the artist. The crescendo of drama points to a special personality and a precious moment, rare and therefore assumed to be superior. With individualizing portraits, the rich found expression for their sense of superiority and used those portraits, that sense of uniqueness and greater worth, to justify their positions of power and wealth.

The formal features and painting technique of the plain style contribute to erase transitory aspects of personality and emotion, and present instead a permanent image for posterity. Above all, the ego is controlled, for it is just plain unseemly, in a cooperative society, for individuals to aggressively assert themselves above their neighbors. The egalitarian ethos of the rural Northeast tempered the inherently prideful impulse in portraiture and produced exquisitely crafted works of muted control. Thus these plain paintings are simultaneously responsive to modern bourgeois *and* traditional values; they express both the pride in individual accomplishment and claims to new class status (as all portraits must) while also restraining these impulses with the moral caution of a communal aesthetic.

Notes for Chapter 4

1. Further discussion of the term "plain painting" is found in John Michael Vlach, "Plain Pictures": The Folkness of Easel Painting" (Paper delivered at the American Folklore Society Meeting, San Diego, 1984).
2. See Donald Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 1-17; Warren Susman, *Culture as History* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. xix-xxx.
3. Kenneth Ames, "A Few Thoughts about Creativity and Folk Art" (Prepared Comments for the Washington Meeting on Folk Art, 1983). The work by Yi-

Fu Tuan he mentions is *Segmented Worlds and Self: Group Life and Individual Consciousness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

4. Ames, "A Few Thoughts," p. 19.
5. J. G. Schimmelman, "Books on Drawing and Painting Techniques Available in 18th Century American Libraries and Bookstores," *Winterthur Portfolio* 19 (1984): pp. 193-206.
6. William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty. Written with a View of Fixing the Fluctuating Ideas of Taste* (London: J. Reeves, 1753). Kenneth Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution: Painting, Music, Literature and the Theater in the Colonies and the United States from the Treaty of Paris to the Inauguration of George Washington, 1763-1789* (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1976).
7. Timothy Dwight, *Greenfield Hill* (New York: Child and Swaine, 1794), Part I, line 203 (p. 17).
8. Etiquette manuals in the rococo eighteenth century are quite common. They were often integrated with dance instruction booklets; the ritual steps for entering a room were no less codified than entering a minuet. Some examples are Des Lands, *The Art of Being Easy at all Times and in all Places, etc., Written Chiefly for the Use of a Lady of Quality. Made English by Edward Combe of Merton College Oxon* (London: C. Rivington, 1724); *The Polite Academy or School of Behavior for Young Gentlemen and Ladies. Intended as a Foundation for Good Manners and Polite Address in Masters and Misses, containing . . . (etc.)* (London: ca. 1780); François Nivelon, *The Rudiments of Genteel Behavior* (London: 1737).
9. A. P. Laurie, *The Techniques of the Great Painters* (London: Carroll and Nicholson, 1949), p. 125.
10. *The Diary of William Bently, D.D., Pastor of the East Church, Salem, April 1784-December 1819* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1962), 4 volumes, entry for August 25, 1813; vol. 4, p. 193; Fiske Kimball, *Domestic Architecture of the American Colonies and of the Early Republic* (New York: 1922; reprint Dover, 1966), pp. 162-63, 186; Eleanor Pearson DeLorme, "The Swan Commissions: Four Portraits by Gilbert Stuart," *Winterthur Portfolio* 14 (1979): pp. 361-95.
11. Eleanor Pearson DeLorme, "Gilbert Stuart: Portrait of an Artist," *Winterthur Portfolio* 14 (1979): pp. 339-60.
12. Ellen Susan Bulfinch, *The Life and Letters of Charles Bulfinch, Architect; with other family papers* (1896, reprint; New York: Burt Franklin, 1973), pp. 56-57.
13. Jules Prown, *Copley in America, The Alisa Mellon Bruse Studies in American Art, volume I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 28, 37, 69; Linda Samter, "'High Style' in Eighteenth Century New England and London," *American Art Review* 4 (1977): p. 61.

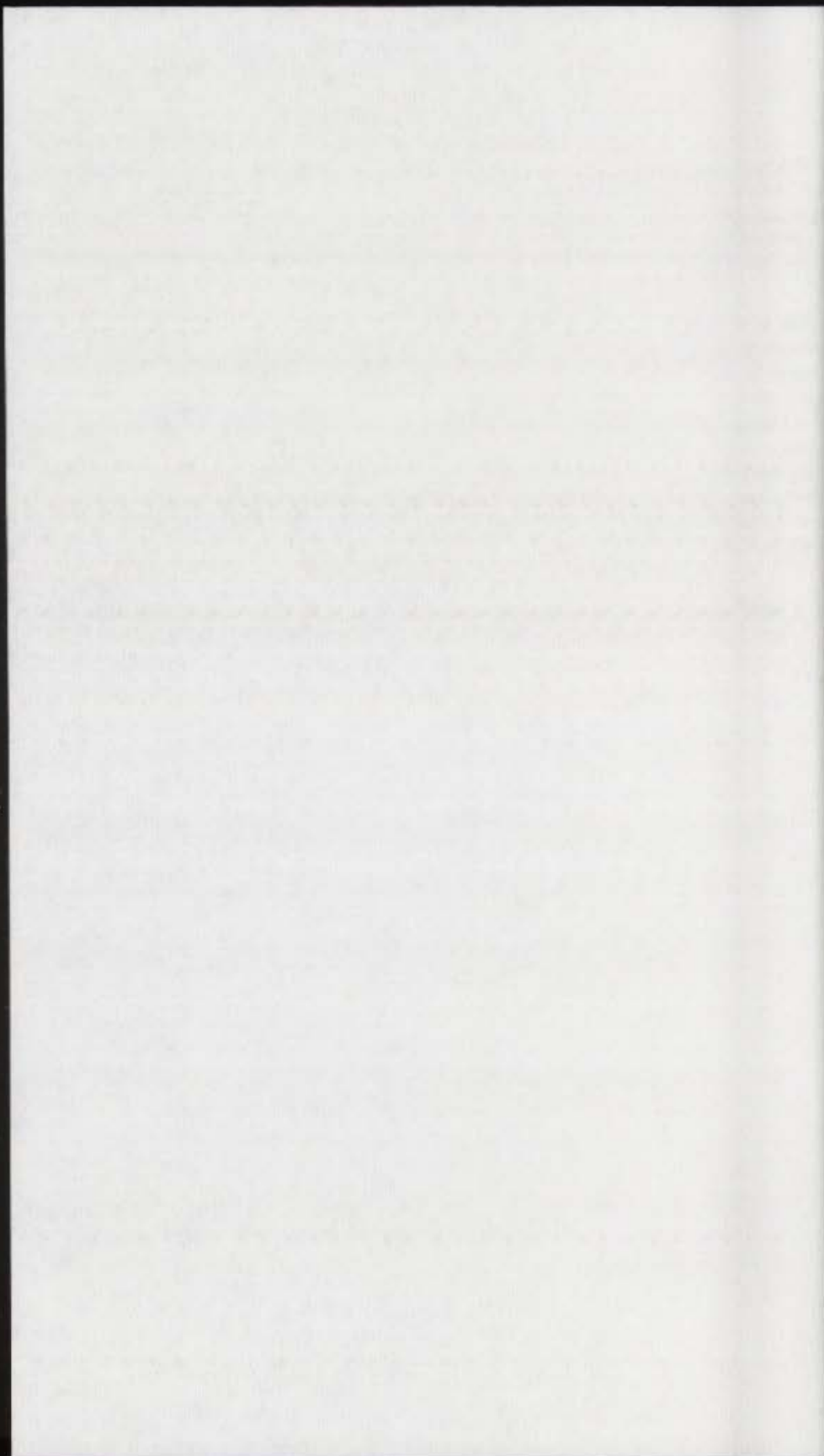
14. Henry Glassie, "Folk Art," in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 272; John Fischer, "Art Styles as Cultural Cognitive Maps," *American Anthropologist* (1961): pp. 79-93.
15. Michael Owen Jones, "'For Myself, I Like a Decent Plain-Made Chair': The Concept of Taste and the Traditional in America," *Western Folklore* 31 (1982): p. 48. See also Jones's *The Hand Made Object and Its Maker* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).
16. Jean Lipman and Helen Franc, *Bright Stars: American Painting and Sculpture since 1776* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), p. 36.
17. Jonathan L. Fairbanks, "Portrait Painting in Boston: Its History, Methods, and Materials," in *New England Begins: The Seventeenth Century, Volume 3, Styles*, ed. Jonathan L. Fairbanks and Robert Trent (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1982), p. 417.
18. My major authority on the subject of enameling is Arthur DeCosta, who taught me to paint at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (ironical enough, the very Academy established to import academic art). Enameling is also mentioned in Vojtech Volavka, *Painting and the Painter's Brush-Work* (Prague: Artia, 1954), pp. 145 and 69, 78; it is alluded to indirectly in Charles Eastlake, *Methods and Materials of Painting of the Great Schools and Masters* (1847; rpt. ed., New York: Dover, 1960), p. 500.
19. Personal communication from Carolyn Parsons, Strawberry Banke Museum, 1984.
20. Peter Benes, *Two Towns: Concord and Wethersfield, A Comparative Exhibition of Regional Culture 1635-1850*, Volume I: Catalogue of the Exhibition (Concord, Mass.: Concord Antiquarian Society, 1982), p. 15; Wilson E. O'Donnell, *The Demand for Likenesses Gallery Guide* (Freehold, N.J.: Monmouth County Historical Association, 1983), p. 15.
21. Francis G. Walett, "The Diary of Ebenezer Parkman, 1754-1755," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 76 (1966): p. 75.
22. Thomas Aubrey, *Travels through the Interior Parts of America*, II (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1923), p. 215.
23. Holger Cahill, *American Folk Art: Art of the Common Man in America* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932); Jean Lipman, *American Primitive Painters* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1942); Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester, *The Flowering of American Folk Art* (New York: Viking Press and the Whitney Museum, 1974); Robert Bishop, "John Blunt: The Man, the Artist, and his Times," *The Clarion* (Spring 1980), pp. 27-28. A discussion of the sign painter's craft is given by A. P. Laurie in his book, *The Technique of the Old Masters* (London: Carroll & Nicholson, 1949), the heart of which is comparison of signature brushwork of various artists, aided by photographic magnification and raking light. Sign painters, he found, use a thick, sticky medium called *stand oil*, quite different in consistency from the slicker

used by "fine art" painters. They also use soft brushes, some of them exceedingly long (over 2½ inches), and with very little taper, also quite different from the stiff brushes of art painters. In a skilled hand, even and smooth lines can be produced with one motion of the hand. Furthermore, it turns out that this use of a sticky medium, if not the same form of brushes, was in fact the very technique used by the oldest master of them all, Jan van Eyck (the putative inventor of the oil medium). He further asserts on the authority of an accomplished artist that the elaborate and tiny signature of van Eyck in the Arnolfini portrait could not be done in oil paints (using the stiff brushes, at any rate) but he found a sign painter who could do it (with apparent ease). He concludes, "A thick sticky oil medium made it possible to do much finer work than can be done with raw oil. There can be no question that the sign writer has preserved through the centuries the technical method of van Eyck and his followers" (p. 96). Perhaps folklorists need not be so embarrassed at the ascription of sign painter status to the folk artist, even though it *is* usually meant to imply inferior work.

4. Jean Lipman and Tom Armstrong, *American Folk Painters of Three Centuries* (New York: Hudson Hill Press with the Whitney Museum, 1980), p. 74.
5. The William Benton Museum of Art, *The American Earls* (Storrs, Conn.: The University of Connecticut, 1972), p. xvi.
6. Alan Burroughs, *Limners and Likenesses: Three Centuries of American Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 90.
7. Juliette Tomlinson, ed., *The Paintings and the Journal of Joseph Whiting Stock* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1976), p. 27.
8. Donald R. Walters and Carolyn Weekley, "Introduction," in *American Folk Portraits: Paintings and Drawings from the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center* (Williamsburg and Boston: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and the New York Graphic Society, 1981), ed. Beatrix Rumford, pp. 19-35; see also, David Jaffee, "'A Correct Likeness': Culture and Commerce in Nineteenth-Century Rural America," in this volume.
9. Beatrix Rumford ed., *American Folk Portraits*, pp. 107, 169.
10. Clara Endicott Sears, *Some American Primitives: A Study of New England Faces and Folk Portraits* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kenniket Press, 1941); Rumford, ed., *American Folk Portraits*, pp. 20, 26, 176; Barbara and Lawrence Holdridge, "Ammi Phillips 1788-1865," *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin* 30 (1965): p. 14.
1. Grace Adams Lyman, "William M. Prior, The 'Painting Garret' Artist," *Antiques* 35 (1934): p. 180.
2. Tomlinson, *Journal of J. W. Stock*, pp. 30-37; DeLorme, "Gilbert Stuart," p. 348.
3. Dot Yoder, "Religion and Folk Art: Trends in and Directions for Research" (Keynote Address at Reflections of Faith Symposium sponsored by the Museum of American Folk Art, New York City, 1984).

34. Waters was in Boston as representative to the Massachusetts State Legislature for instance, in 1823-24, while Stuart was still alive, and again in 1831 (the likely date of his portrait by Blunt) when Sully made one of his extended visits to that city. Monroe Fabian, *Mr. Sully, Portrait Painter: The Works of Thomas Sully, 1785-1872* (Washington, D.C.: National Portrait Gallery, 1985), p. 15.
35. Although it may be unfair to imply that a burgeoning industrial town such as Millbury was still literally a small town in 1831, they still promoted themselves as small and—however unrealistically—even bucolic places. It was incumbent upon the owners and managers of such establishments to convince the young workers coming in from the farms, that they would not be corrupted by life in the new towns, that they would not have to forego either their agrarian or republican ideals. Proximity of the towns to romantic nature (waterfalls) and the family continuity of cottage housing, among other things, was stressed in their public relations. See Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1981), chap. 4.
36. Richard M. Dorson, *America in Legend: Folklore from the Colonial Period to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), pp. 117-18.

Folk Art in Context



The House on Penn Street: Creativity and Conflict in Folk Art

Simon J. Bronner

What colors perceptions of folk art? Folk art owes much to institutions. Media, academies, and galleries reify the category, and they are connected to upper-class biases common to the art worlds. On a city block of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, a decorated house that some call folk art brought forth such issues of institutional and class connections dramatically before my eyes. Across the street from my own residence, a drama in paint and board unfolded. Rather than captured at a single silent moment for a gallery, the house went through many changes as part of a running dialogue for a neighborhood. In those changes were recorded responses to social tensions between a local, noncommercial and a mass, modernist way of doing things. The decoration of houses became the backdrop for a small scene within a larger cultural picture.

Harrisburg's *Sunday Patriot-News*, the most widely read newspaper in town, took notice on May 15, 1983, of the changes occurring in midtown and used art metaphors to describe them. "Urban Renaissance," the headline read. "Penn Street Rowhomes Exemplify the Fine Art of Recycling Houses," large letters announced. A photo showed one side of the 1500 block of Penn Street, and was captioned, "Whole streets in historic residential sections of Harrisburg are looking 'up' these days and much of the credit can be laid at the doors of city housing renovators. One professional couple who live in a renovated Penn Street house say they are reminiscent of Back Bay Boston." Capping the photo was a quote from a bank official: "Saving historic buildings and recycling existing homes for people and neigh-

borhoods that need them are the foundation of a rejuvenated Harrisburg and its economy."¹

Fred Raleigh, occupant of a home which was pictured, though enough of the article to put it in his front window.² That was the house I moved into less than two weeks later. Fred worked in state government as did most of the residents on the north side of the street. "There's folk art here," he proclaimed to me, "and I'm not the only one to think so. Across the street, take a look at Cal's house (fig. 5-1). If Fred's renovated house was the "fine" art, the contrast the "folk" art for him was a decorated house on a side not pictured but a side worthy of attention for what it says about the ways creativi



Figure 5-1. Cal's House, October 1983
(Courtesy Simon Bronner)

responds to socioeconomic change, and how "art" answers to cultural politics. Here in close quarters, what sociologist Ira Katznelson calls the "city trenches," displays of taste are the armature for one's social reality in the city.³

As with most folk art, the makers and their communities play primary roles. This scene has Cal, a housepainter, and his neighbors in midtown Harrisburg. The social significance of his decorations stem from economic, historical, and physical conditions particular to Harrisburg. Harrisburg is the state capital of Pennsylvania. Its main employer is government—32% of the job market; manufacturing and service industries dominate the rest. The greater Harrisburg area takes in three counties and almost a half million persons. In the last five years, it has experienced economic and population growth when most Pennsylvania cities have been in decline. The striking cityscape of Harrisburg stretches along the Susquehanna River, once the economic lifeline of the city. The residential strip by the river is bounded by a parallel strip to the east of railroad lines and industry. The city rests on the "East Shore." White suburban settlements in the past ten years have risen dramatically on the "West Shore." Harrisburg traditionally has subdivided sharply into neighborhoods. Residents easily circumscribe black sections (called The Hill and The Strip), the Jewish section (called Little Israel), the "gay" section, and the gentrified WASP section (called Shipoke). Center City Harrisburg is dominated by the Capitol Complex, but north of the complex back from the river is a series of narrow streets with neighborhoods in transition, neighborhoods seeking identity. They hold the highest concentration of residents in the city, and have what is commonly referred to as a "cloistered" atmosphere. Houses on the side streets are being claimed and resettled after the upheaval in the 1970s of a ravaging flood, the threat of a nuclear accident, change in political administration, and white flight from the city.

One of those old, narrow streets is Penn Street. Two blocks over is much wider Front Street and the river. Old mansions and stately buildings left over from Harrisburg's Gilded Age now house insurance, real estate, and legal firms, and lobbying groups. Second Street, just above Front, is the main thoroughfare northward out of the Capitol Complex. Residences share the wide street with professional associations and legal firms. The narrowness of the streets above Second, leftovers from the pre-automobile age have fostered more of a sense

of neighborhood than on Second. The 1500 block of Penn Street, however, has been slower to develop than others on Penn. The 1600 block, in the minds of residents, is "gay." Third Street, just above Penn, is black. Further down on Penn Street live the mayor, many "bohemians" (musicians and artists), and laborers. The 1500 block of Penn has a mixture of "young urban professionals," mostly state government workers, laborers, and persons on relief. Reily Street, running perpendicular to Penn Street, has several stores which cater to specific constituencies. A gourmet shop serves the "gay" community. A corner grocery is frequented most by laborers, a vegetarian restaurant attached to an art gallery serves mostly bohemians and young urban professionals, and a convenience store on Fourth Street is considered "black." Historians of Harrisburg refer to these few blocks as the "Hardscrabble" section of the city, but the term, more common at the turn of the century, has little significance today for residents.

A disastrous flood in 1936 saw partly to that. It changed the complexion of the riverfront residences. Before the flood, city leaders had already laid the groundwork for change. From 1902 to 1915, city administrators, under the influence of Mira Lloyd Dock, a wealthy burgher, undertook a "City Beautiful" campaign—an outgrowth of the nativist "house beautiful" movement of the 1880s and 90s. The "house beautiful" and the "city beautiful" which followed were intended to "reform" urban environments and their working-class residents by imposing symbols of a bourgeois order—"good taste" defined by decor reminiscent of descent in old stock American families.⁴ The burghers of Harrisburg, mostly Protestant Republicans, called for "physical improvement" which would "elevate the urban population. Speaking to the Board of Trade on December 20, 1900, Mira Dock told of the "hideous conditions" of Harrisburg, and she called for establishing an elitist "good taste" common, she said, to Boston, Milwaukee, and European cities. Cleanliness and the genteel beauty she wanted to build up had "cash value," she argued. An "attractive" Front Street, by the river in full view, would bring business.

Opposition to the vested interests in the "Front Street Scheme" grew, but the proponents' faking of a typhoid epidemic, the drumming up of a threat by the legislature to move the capital to Philadelphia and the spreading of leaflets accusing opponents of being "tight-fisted clams" secured a bond issue. Supportive middle-class wards outvoted working-class wards against the issue. The construction of roads, parks

and golf courses encouraging middle-class residence went ahead. By 1915, J. Horace McFarland, a burgher backing the campaign, could announce that Harrisburg was "a made-over town."⁵

The combination of the 1936 flood, sharp growth of automobile traffic, and a rise in the black population led to the second stage of planning in 1939-40, the "City Practical." For a nation that did not work well during the 1930s, the imagery of the machine suggested efficiency and rationality. In the face of impoverishment, art connoted wastefulness. The cities geared up. Harrisburg's "City Practical" was designed to accommodate "automobility" and business, synonyms for middle-class values, especially on the riverfront. As before, planners singled out the aesthetics of worker housing for attack. Planners found no "valid reason" for narrow streets and lots. They ignored older histories which commended the "caring," tight-knit neighborhoods fostered by the layout. The streets, the planners complained, led to "endless rows of monotonous houses" without "architectural merit." The rowhouses would be undesirable "in the eyes of the coming generation, which is witnessing construction of an increasing number of attractive single-family dwellings, set on adequate sized lots." The planners called for slum clearance and new "Neighborhood Units," including neighborhoods zoned for whites. Ensuing administrations encouraged the occupation of the northern riverfront by white middle-class residents.

Despite recessions in 1950, 1954, and 1955, employment stayed high and the economy grew steadily during the 1950s. Suburbia grew. Historians divide over whether this was a symptom of good times, or rising racial conflict. The black population increased from 1940 to 1950 by 32%, moving in to neighborhoods formerly occupied by ethnic immigrants and poor rural migrants. The number of families under the poverty line increased, but city leaders voiced the rhetoric of prosperity. Construction was at an all-time high; unemployment was low; Front Street looked good.

The Regional Planning Commission Report of 1958 was optimistic and self-congratulatory: "Prudent use of natural resources along with growth as a transportation and government center, followed by the development of commerce and industry, has created a thriving metropolitan community of over a quarter million persons." Much of this had to do with the automobile. "With the development and improvement of the automobile, the area became a major terminus for

people travelling within the Commonwealth as well as the cross-roads of some of the busiest highways in the eastern United States." The planners felt a whirl of change since early in the century. The river no longer provided the focus of the city. Not serving any transportation or economic value, the river was replaced by the central business district as a hub. The river could, however, the commission claimed, be of use as a sport area.

Seeing the future of the city in taking advantage of its role as an auto-traffic crossroads and its nativist middle-class heritage, the Commission complimented "the old Colonial architecture" and "well-planned residential areas." Striking out at traditional ethnic and working-class communities, the Commission asserted that "the toll of blight is observed where neighborhoods are small and isolated by heavy traffic ways." Neighborhoods should be defined not by social group, but economic needs and proximity to thoroughfares. To effect these changes, and entrench the commercial interests of the middle-class in the city, the Commission called for increased city control of housing and building, and the expansion of highways and streets. But the Commission failed to foresee that accommodating the automobile in the city would also encourage the middle-class to leave more easily.

Penn Street retained its narrowness, and it sheltered a rooted white, lower-middle-class neighborhood. Population shifts were quietly occurring, however. More blacks and lower-class whites were coming to the city; more middle-class whites were leaving. Still, a relative calm prevailed. Whites could give evidence of the town's conservatism by reminding one another that in the liberal landslide of 1964, Harrisburg had the only black ward in the nation to vote Republican. But in June 1969, race riots broke out on The Hill near Center City. Harrisburg, which thought of itself as quiet ("dull," the *Philadelphia Inquirer* liked to quip), and conservative, found conflicts rising to the surface.

With the national publicity given to the Harrisburg Seven trial in 1972, one civic leader, M. Harve Taylor, wrote in his diary, "You know, there's more radicals in this town than you'd think."⁶ There were other signs of discontent. Over 26% of all families in the city for 1969, the U.S. Census reported, had incomes under the poverty level. Yet the total average income was touted as "reasonable" because the 13.2% who made better than \$15,000 had pushed the figure upward.

In late June 1972, Harrisburg suffered its worst flood in the wake of hurricane Agnes. Taylor wrote, "The mess is horrible, and I'll tell them the smell afterwards is going to be even worse." Many middle-class residents saw the damage, and left for the suburbs. Harrisburg's population dropped by ten thousand between 1970 and 1978. Harrisburg, having concentrated its middle-class along the riverfront, lost its "City Practical." Penn Street's houses were left empty shells.

In 1973, a community survey done by the Greater Harrisburg Chamber of Commerce lacked the singlemindedness of past reports. The survey reported that the stability of the region lay in employment by state government and its growth lay in industry, but its roots were in the older neighborhood tradition "where people take the time to meet other people as fellow human beings." The survey encouraged "industrial management," the middle class, to come back to the city. It boasted of "an art association, a performing arts company, and a cultural society. . . ." "Come to Harrisburg," the survey concluded, "if you want a city in which you can really live and work." The city hoped to expose the unreality of the suburbs, but reality in the city was discouragingly sullen; it meant a working-class harshness. Another flood in 1975 fed disillusion.

Whole sections of the city lay tattered and bare. A reporter from a national network commenting on Harrisburg after the Three Mile Island accident in 1979 told viewers that city residents must be in shock because no one could be seen out downtown after five. "But no one ever is," a resident chortled. Meanwhile, local reporter Paul Beers came up with eight long-standing commandments for the city, of which the first few were now openly challenged and the last was looming larger: "obsession with eating, prudent conservatism, congenial obliviousness, small-talk enterprise, clear gender distinctions, contented prosperity, hatred of the cold, and a dark underside."⁷

Harrisburg was a worrisome place now. It was a city to work in, but to the middle class not one to live or play in. Harrisburg was left, temporarily, to the lower class, many working in menial, unskilled jobs or existing on relief. Penn Street's empty shells were favorite haunts for crime, drug use, and squatting. Of the original twenty-eight families in row houses on the 1500 block, only four remained around 1975. When the middle-class organizations of the American Association of University Women—Harrisburg Branch and Historic Harrisburg Association Incorporated sponsored a promotional historic

tour of Harrisburg, they conspicuously skipped over the old "Hard-scrabble" section. It was not "presentable."

The revival of the inner city was tied to the success of "Harris-town," a commercial venture to consolidate decaying small businesses into large modern shopping malls attracting professional clientele downtown. Its name gave it an antimodern tinge, but its subtitle of "Redevelopment Authority" gave its real intent. This was the third stage of planning, the "City Renaissance." It received unsuspecting reinforcement from a local history project sponsored by the public library, entitled "Harrisburg: City of Change." Aimed at lower-class middle-school students, the program highlighted the progress of business and architectural development in Center City where the library was located. Art and economics were linked again.

While commercial interests were working on Center City, some working-class families were moving to Penn Street. They took advantage of low rents and easy availability. Repairs were often needed, and residents regularly took parts of empty shells to improve their structures. Cal was one of those residents. Before the "urban renaissance," these working-class residents were renovating using *bricolage*, making personal ornamentation and repair from overlays of locally obtained objects.⁸ Residents were resurrecting an older open community based on communal aid and frequent face-to-face relations. Their notions of occupation and work were similar; they sought manual labor, and applied it at home.

The row houses had a mixed jelly-bean look. Although the structures were similar, diverse colors, porch additions, facade ornaments, and sidewalk alterations gave this side-street cityscape a variegated appearance. Yet the *bricolage* approach marked the connection of the residents and the control they were establishing by manually and informally altering their environment.⁹ New architectural faces speaking uniquely for their occupants, faces made out of the rearrangement and alteration of old parts, reshaped the old middle-class structures. In the process the creative and social texture of the community was reshaped, for the way the buildings were done and the way they looked bespoke entrenchment of an alternative social organization and occupational value system.

On Penn Street, Cal's housing began taking form (fig. 5-2). He brought in a fence to put out front. He changed partitions inside and painted them in bold colors. He dug up the sidewalk for a garden by



Figure 5-2. Cal Painting over the Facade, after Completing Construction of Shutters from Materials of Other Houses, July 1983
(*Courtesy Simon Bronner*)

his front window and constructed rough window boxes. Further up the street, with their painted blue car parked nearby, Carol and William Paine were painting their bricks a navy blue with white outlines. "It just come natural," William Paine told me, "something to do between sleeping and working." Their sidewalk garden had recycled tires and cans, painted blue, to create a distinctive environment. John Voss boxed in his porch to make another room. His neighbor took discarded concrete blocks to build up columns on his porch. Michael Williams's garbage cans got a jerrybuilt shelter with a familiar Greek Revival pediment from one of the flood's architectural casualties. Victor Ross's house stood out: it was painted orange and had awnings not original to the house. To George Henry, whose painted brown house had a hewn cross on its front, "Every house here is different." "Do you like it like that?" I asked him. He replied, "That way you know it's yours, and with who you belong."

In the late seventies, new state and city administrations came into power promising to "clean things up." The old dark underside of Harrisburg, they chided, included political corruption, economic decline, and urban squalor. The new agenda stressed encouraging business and high arts to come to the city. The mayor made moves to require city workers to live in the city. But the trend had already begun; the incoming administration brought waves of professionals new to the city. Many looked to the city for appealing housing. Turning away from the sterility and "unreality" of the suburbs, they found houses that could be owned easily and altered to suit their middle-class tastes. They found "services" to do specialized work on the house, much as they performed services for government.

The trend took on a name, the "back-to-the-city movement." In 1980, U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Affairs Moon Landrieu announced, "Americans are coming back to the city. . . . Renovation, in and of itself, will not meet our urban needs and put a halt to urban economic disinvestment."¹⁰ What would? He didn't say, but his use of "disinvestment" linked urban decline to economic decline. The answer in most city administrations was an economic and cultural hegemony of middle-class professional interests.¹¹ It was planning by professionals for other professionals—a culture of shared tastes. The emergent group was given an appropriate name—young urban professionals (YUP). A popular satire of the trend was published as *The Yuppie Handbook*. Poking fun at the group's preoccupation with mod-

ernity, art, and renovation, the book described the young urban professional as a city person who is between 25 and 45, and "lives on aspirations of glory, prestige, recognition, fame, social status, power, money, or any and all combinations of the above."¹² Essential to the label are housing and art—the renovated Victorian rowhouse. The rhetoric of the "house beautiful" could be heard again in descriptions of "homestyle." Art is "an obvious gauge of taste. Yuppies choose carefully and use sparingly." Their investment in the "physical improvement" of "living spaces" would "elevate" the city.

Harve Taylor, who was involved in Harrisburg's "city beautiful" movement early in the century, now questioned the new movement in 1981. "Today if your neighborhood's old, you're in luck. Used to mean you were just poor. But the bricks aren't the main thing—a town is people. And I wonder if all the newcomers will be givers or takers."¹³

Fred Raleigh was the first young professional to come to the 1500 block of Penn Street. He was lured by its short distance to work in the Capitol Complex and the building's potential for investment. "Renovation" meant giving the building a "clean, Victorian" look, usually engineered by hired "professionals." The brickfront was sandblasted, and inside the dry wall was removed to expose bare brick. A new door in a turn-of-the-century style with a brass knocker went up. He removed floor coverings and highlighted the bare wood. These flights back to the "original" were offset by modern touches such as the removal of a room on the second floor to create an open space above the kitchen to the third floor. A modern globe lamp hung from the third floor ceiling down into the kitchen. The focus of the house was directed away from the street. The house was made for privacy and a public image of genteel taste and refined self-control.

Fred influenced three other government workers to buy houses on the block in 1981. Two lived next door. They explained their choice: "We're from the Boston area where we were very familiar with what could be done with old homes. So when we came to Harrisburg, we were looking for something energy efficient, something in town close to our jobs and something for a reasonable price. We wanted space that we could 'grow' into and a house in an 'improving neighborhood' where we might even be able to get a return on our investment. The biggest plus, however, is that other professionals and many of our friends are nearby." Their brickfront had a "clean Vic-

torian" look similar to Fred's. Macrame and plants hung in the front window. Their focus too, in contrast to the houses of Cal and his neighbors, was away from the street.

Fred encouraged others to come and renovate their houses similarly, because "it improves the neighborhood." He explained, "Being in the city, there is a security in a community social network." The network was based on a perception of shared professionalism, economics, and education showing in "tastes." Encouraged by the city administration's optimism about the future, a special bank subsidy to promote middle-class ownership of downtown row houses, and the promotion of the river as a leisure area, two more professionals moved in by the end of the year. The north end on one side looked uniform. The houses were subdued, genteel, and to the residents, renewed and "real."

The professionals in their renovation projects tried to reclaim a past heritage and thereby create a present reality, but difficulties arose. "I was in the grocery store," one professional told me, "and I realized that no matter what we do, we're the outsiders, the moved-in set, even though we consider ourselves residents of Harrisburg." Their tastes were antimodern, yet they were treated as symbols of suspicious modern change.¹⁴

The professionals' renovated homes were in contrast with the other houses in the neighborhood, and with Cal's in particular. Cal's house appeared especially indecorous, "folk" to them. It was not all that different from the other working-class homes in its appearance, but it was more outspoken about its *bricolage*. It more openly defied middle-class sensibilities. Its carpeted steps and garden accommodated the loitering of visitors. Its garish decoration was jerrybuilt from local, and often discarded, materials. Its taste was not prescribed by popular fashion or professional advisers, nor put in place for the "therapy" of "doing-it-yourself." Rather, it was put in place with Cal's job-related skills, showing his mastery of paints. Cal's house faced outward, rather than inward. Its visitors, coming at odd hours of the day and night, appeared to be shiftless workers or wards of the state. The house and its occupants did not appear to be self-controlled.

Cal rents his house with two brothers, but Cal attends to its upkeep. Born in 1947, Cal was raised in Harrisburg with four sisters and four brothers. His father was a roofer whose sons learned to work

on houses from him. Cal "made things" in childhood. Sand statues and sculptures of bricks and boards filled the yard.

"Then somebody said why don't you learn how to paint," Cal told me one day, "so I started painting dog houses and parts of barns. As time went past, I started painting cars, old cars like a junk yard and sometimes I used to take paint and in my pastime just paint the cars up and all that. So then people see how good a job I did on the cars and everything, so they asked me to, do I want to start painting houses and I was getting older and all that. So, I said, I might as well, because I had nothing else to do. So, I started painting this grocery store down on Capital Street and everything. I painted a good job there so the neighbors kept on giving me jobs after jobs. I kept on doing that and then pretty soon my old man got me a job working for him and everything, fixing roofs, putting windows in, and all that you know. So I got more creative and I was going along, so I decided I might as well take stuff off the houses and put different parts of the houses together on paper and see how creative I can get as to how to build the house. So I started to putting things together here and there, find out what I can get a hold of."

"What do you mean by creative?" I asked him.

"You know like when people tear down balustrades and throw the wood away, I like to keep all the wood and make some kind of design out of the wood that they throw away. I don't like to throw nothing away if I can use it on a house. I like to keep adding to the house, make more designs on the house."

The designs were not just for him. He carved guns and numbers for a woman across the street to put on her brickfront, because she liked John Wayne's guns. For a religious neighbor he made a cross, and it went up on the exterior brick, near the door. Pearl, who hangs an American flag from her front window, received a "patriotic" eagle made by Cal. Cal adorned his house, inside and out with carved horses. "I just like horses so I made a horse tacked on my house." His objects connected him to people, and extended his influence.

As he was unable to own a house, altering and adorning his house was his way to "own" it. And his objects on the houses around him gave the area a feeling of community. Asked if he thought he could own a house, he replied, "No, but I dream about it. I had this dream house I built out of sticks, but I looked at it and got mad, and smashed it." His creativity dealt with conflicts, often tried to resolve them, but as it did, it could also raise conflict.

His father had given Cal technical skills, but encouraged him, and Cal said, "to create my own mind. . . . He thought I should learn by him but do it by myself." Grown, he did odd jobs. He could fix bicycles, roof a house, replace a window, or paint a wall. He had never had a nine-to-five job.

"Do you want one?" I asked him.

"Not really. I like to have more freedom doing the things I'm doing now. A nine-to-five job is just like a prison to me, closed in and everything. I like to be out in the open."

The first addition Cal made to the house was to paint the outside bricks blue and outline them in white. "Then I was building a couple of beds, and I said the hell with it. I made one shorter than the other so I said I might as well tack them on the front of the house and just see how they looked. And then this guy down here was cutting down a balustrade, so I just cut the railing part in half, turned it up a little bit, and just tacked them on there, just cut out the ends on the piece of wood I was making a bed out of, just tacked them on for designs. He painted the windows on the third floor with alternately colored rectangles and he painted his interior walls with a red and white brickwork pattern. He added wooden geometric designs to his front door frame and he painted his transom with a sunburst design around the house numbers.

A metal "no parking" sign put in front of his house by the city offended him. He built a box around it, then around the others on the street (fig. 5-3). City officials took them down. He kept the one in front of his house. Then he painted a fancy "one-way" sign on the paving. Painted bricks were put around trees and parking spaces were outlined and numbered. In the process, he expressed local control over the street. His neighbors picked up on parts of his aesthetic system. Strips of carpeting in different colors went up on front steps. The owner of the house next door to Cal asked Cal to paint his brickfront. A loud red and offwhite mix went up. On summer days residents would sit out on their carpeted steps and face one another.

When the professionals moved in, Cal and his neighbors were suspicious. "I don't fit into their category and then I feel I'm a reject or something like that." He felt that they didn't respect the "work" he did. To be sure, Fred thought some of his neighbors didn't "really work" and I heard references to the people down the street as the "funny" or "stupid people." Social contact between the two groups

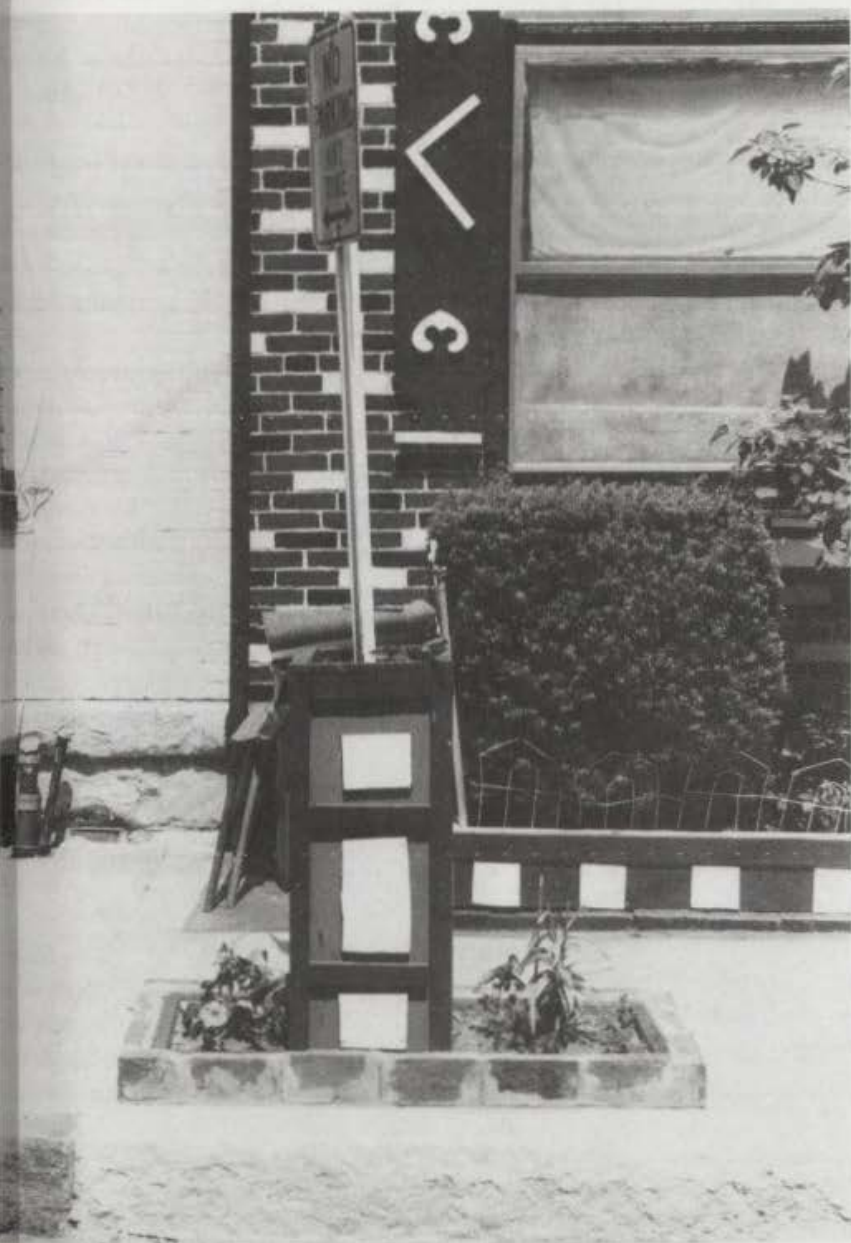


Figure 5-3. Cal's "Box," April 1984
(*Courtesy Simon Bronner*)

was either to make a curt greeting or some joking remark, like "hot enough for you?" Cal commented, "When I'm joking around them, acting the same as they do and everything then I feel right at home. But if you don't get into conversation, you realize you're left out and everything else."

Cal went about marking his right to home. He outlined his property by painting the curb in front white and extending the block of the garden to the end of his brickfront. The growing uniformity of the north end of the street made him feel uncomfortable. "I don't like to see something plain," he said out on the street, and neighbors nodded in agreement.

Cal's house was never his work alone. Brothers, children, and neighbors told him to add or take away objects and colors. Cal asked for and took advice. He covered the blue and white on his bricks with red and white. Often, he "sleeps on an idea. If it feels good to me while I'm dreaming then I'll go ahead and do it." Lacking the "official" standards of the "professional," he used social affirmation to motivate his work, and the extranatural to confirm his extra designs. When he works on other people's houses, he says, "I have them go by the work I do around the neighborhood. Usually there aren't complaints."

But some complaints could be heard from the professionals. A city administrator who moved in across the street from Cal scornfully commented to me, "I suppose that's an original work of art." Another referred to the side of the street as a "veritable petri dish," and the term caught on. When one of the professionals wanted to sell his house, he worried what the houses down the street would do to his house's marketability.

After the "Urban Renaissance" article appeared, two more professionals moved in. Of the fourteen row houses on the north side of the block three remained shells and seven were occupied by upper-middle-class professionals (saying "professionals" was commonly a way to avoid saying what class one was in). After moving in, the professionals quickly made their brickfronts conform to the clean Victorian look, and thus reflect their status. Cal's house was in the middle of the south end of the street on the opposite side from the concentration of professionals. Seven rowhouses on his side were occupied by laborers with incomes on the low end of the scale. The other side of the south end had two professionals sandwiched by three laborers and

two families on relief. Cal's paint, handiwork, and carvings had by now touched all the laborers and relief recipients on the south end (fig. 5-4). He had never touched any of the professionals' houses.

The "Urban Renaissance" article caused Cal to comment. He was sweeping the street, and he stopped when he saw me. "What do you think of that?" he asked.

"I noticed your house wasn't in it," I replied.

He turned to look back at his house. "Well, in a way it looks like art to me you know. Just like a guy going to take a stone from somewhere and carving a statue out of it. My kind of work is art to me you know—the way I'm doing it and everything."

"What makes it art?" I pressed.

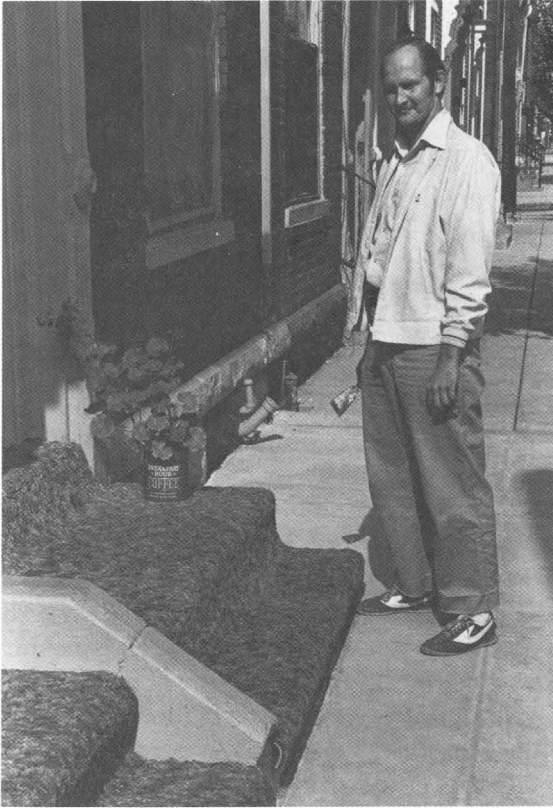


Figure 5-4. Cal Working on House across the Street from His, September 1983
(*Courtesy Simon Bronner*)

"Different parts that hook together make the designs and all that."

Cal worked on his "box" around the parking sign. He tacked extra boards on it and expanded the base. Its loud red and white colors had a bolder texture. He put earth in the base and added greenery. He planted a large bush in the sidewalk garden. Complaints followed, so he repainted the box a neutral gray. He continued to paint the front door, curb, step, and garden partition gray. But the color's blandness dissatisfied him. In August he painted the rectangular blocks on the box a bright red and gave a similar red and gray design to his shutters, window boxes. He built up his garden partition and painted red rectangles. He replaced his old orange carpet with a bright green one. His living was more forcefully outward.

The professionals became more vocal in their protest when Cal brought in a white garden statue of a scantily clad woman and put it in a barrel filled with earth and concrete (to prevent "theft," he said). His answer to the complaints was to greet the coming autumn with a subdued brown covering over the wood on his façade and sidewalk. He replaced the green carpet with a brown one. The statue, now adorned by a neighbor with black yarn for hair, remained in place. Just before Halloween, Cal took a door from an abandoned house and replaced his old one with it. It had a long vertical window and Cal put a larger paper skeleton on its pane for a haunted effect. His neighbors got in the spirit and filled their windows and doors with conspicuous decorations. The professionals' fronts hung quiet reminders of autumn such as fall corn husks, or nothing at all.

Complaints continued. The owner of the house, usually absent and unconcerned, left a note telling Cal to change it. Cal painted his shutters white—the absence of color to him. "I got tired of them always saying, change, change it, change, so it went white." But his silent protest, he told me, was to leave some of the shutters unfinished. His painted curb stressed the boundary of his house more than it had. The house looked confused, and the neighborhood at the south end was less visible too, as winter sent residents inside. Cal placed large green concrete blocks around his steps to make walls around where he usually sat on the front steps. He turned inward, and materialized his feeling of enclosure, after failing at his attempt to add depth to his house (fig. 5-5).

At Christmas, the south end came alive. Bright decorations, con-

sidered tacky by the professionals, went up in front windows. Up the street simple wreaths were hung on doors. One professional hired a professional decorator to arrange greenery inside her house. A Christmas party brought together all the professionals on the north end. Conversation turned to the "veritable petri dish" down the block. Cal was a "character," one said. Another responded that "he's no different from the others down there. He just puts more of it up front." When does he work; what does he do?" another asked. The group speculated on the new resident of an empty row house formerly owned by a university professor's wife. "I hear it's a professional woman."



Figure 5-5. Cal Enclosed in the "Porch" He Constructed,
June 1984
(*Courtesy Simon Bronner*)



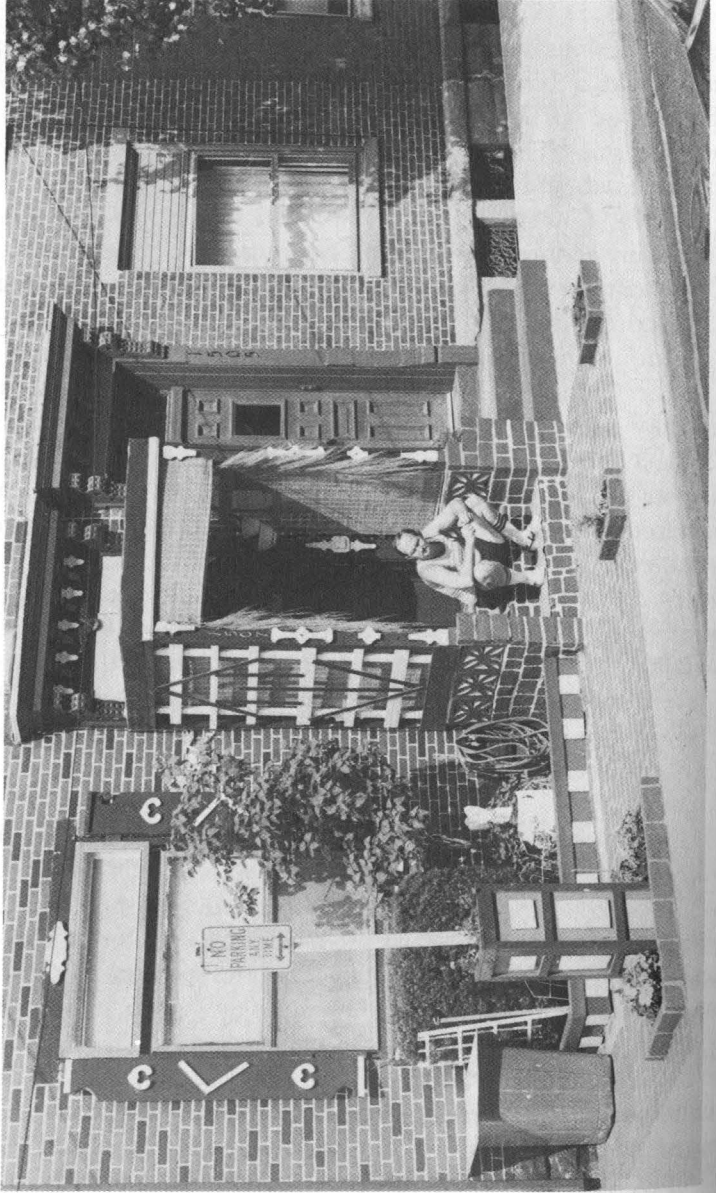
Figure 5-6. Cal Painting over the White Shutters with Brown Paint, January 1984
(Courtesy Simon Bronner)

After a powerful snowstorm in January 1984, Penn Street was neglected by the city. Neighborhood residents pitched in to help remove snow and ice, Cal being most active. Cal seemed enlivened by this. On a cold, blustery day he put on his coat, took a color suggested by his sister, and covered the shoddy white paint on the shutters with a dark brown (fig. 5-6). "She said it should be one color. It feels good to be out doing something, making stuff. It's not bad snow," he said. The house was calm. No complaints followed, but spring waited, and tensions remained.

Because newcomers, mostly professional, seek "neighborhoods" already occupied by laborers, conflicts commonly revolve around class-bound tastes. In Harrisburg, the establishment of renovated homes as a "fine" art and the consequent local designation of the others as "folk" or "non-art" by their absence from coverage put in place a hierarchy with the professionals, as in times past, setting standards tied to economic stability. Cal and his neighbors countered by using a display of creativity, but the trivializing of their effort reduced their effectiveness. They were trivialized by questioning the value of their work, and by using their lack of formal education to back up an image of communal shiftlessness. Their "art" could still be pointed to, but as a patronage of a frivolous class ethic. Their "art" became a bounded environment which underscored its contrast with the dominant middle-class aesthetic, and drew attention to an emerging localism (figs. 5-7). Not having access to "taste centers" or recognition of his creativity, Cal could only manage silent protest while subduing his products.

Architecture becomes symbolic in localism because it is constantly used and is so visible. It immediately tells of the occupant's level of self-control and his connection to others. To cultural critic Lewis Mumford, architecture's symbolism takes on importance, too, because it essentially reflects a wide variety of social facts and "the empirical tradition and experimental knowledge that go into their application, the processes of social organization and association, and the beliefs and world-outlooks of a whole society."¹⁵ The meaning of architecture to Harrisburg's residents, however, is conveyed by decorative overlays on prior forms. The appearance of Cal's house, for example, proclaimed his informal, communal learning and activity, and his ambivalence toward middle-class "work," both challenging notions. Using "decoration" to describe what he did implies something

Figure 5-7. Cal's Art, June 1984
(Courtesy Simon Bronner)



secondary and frivolous, but in this urban world, decoration becomes a productive way to show involvement in one's space or community, since the structure of the house is already predefined, and selection, especially to the lower class, is limited. Decoration becomes important socially, because it visibly shows social organization. At bottom, decoration gauges propriety, especially when placed out front. There it can show one's "taste" and can identify one's "taste culture."

In our dominant consumer economy, a sense of "folk" production usually comes from arrangement and alteration of ready-made forms. In the result is a transformation into a new unity. Often these are called "environments," places where the "making" consists of processes of arrangement and alteration. They are not as curious as they first might appear, for they stand in relation to commercial culture. The making of these environments acts out traditional attitudes which are affected by the rising consumer economy. The notion of "art" normally calls for isolation of the forms, but my vantage in the neighborhood showed me communal connections and activities not readily apparent in form. Still, the maintenance of those connections depended on individual initiative whose ability to persist would provide an alternative model to the commercial art world. Cal, stepping forward with non-traditional designs but often traditional ways of doing things, provided that alternative. In this urban setting, some of his innovations became part of the traditional order which working-class residents sought to define in the wake of the area's reclamation after the flood.

Decoration there, and elsewhere, was a source of conflict because it reflected normative taste. It provided a visible index of conformity and legitimacy. Too much decoration was seen as a lack of "self-control." The middle-class provided the model of restraint. Ironically, Cal's innovation appeared antimodern. The *bricolage* of his home and the others down Penn Street appeared more unusual because it worked outside of commercial tastes. It did not rely on the planning and professional service central to a middle-class consumer culture. It did not stand still. Based as it is on a creative process of recycling, informal learning, and communal activity, however, *bricolage* provides a "real" and "intense" premodern experience, and for this reason the neighborhood professionals were condescending to it. Normally, the forms of premodern experience can be manipulated, because they come as isolable things. But on Penn Street, the things were part of the life

there. In the confrontation which occurred on Penn Street, then, the professionals were hostile to Cal's house, but still it persisted.

"Class" did not enter the rhetoric, although it was implied in uses of "folk" and "fine." In a society like modern America's where the identity of "class" is generally denied, social status is often defined by "taste." "Taste cultures" have arisen through media and marketing in a mass society to replace older folk categories of ethnicity and region.¹⁶ Taste cultures are anchored in occupation, income, and social organization. In other words, status is assigned not just to how much money is made but the type of work done, how one defines community, and how one consumes goods and services. "Taste cultures" exert political control through art worlds. In art worlds, agreed-upon aesthetic systems are invoked to sanction types of creativity and implicitly downgrade others. In that process of recognition, class identity is channeled. Cal's working-class neighbors used localism to avoid the hegemony of another taste culture with an official stamp on it, but economic leverage and the pressure of "respectable" residents turned localism to the advantage of the professionals. Cal's neighbors failed to form an "art world." It was not part of their social organization, which depended on utilitarian labor and communal aid.

Although Penn Street might seem a special case, similar patterns have emerged elsewhere. In Elizabeth Collins Cromley's study of renovation in Brooklyn, New York, she found that "home-grown façades" clash and are full of anomalies when judged by the art world, which is steeped in commercial culture.¹⁷ Cal made his house clash and pose more anomalies in answer to normative pressures, before he was subdued. The clash simultaneously symbolized conflict and a quest for resolution. His creativity signalled his control of space and his connection to his working-class neighbors. By imposing a wholeness to his environment, creativity also became interpreted into a language of conflict. In Philadelphia, Paul Levy and Roman Cybriwsky point out, newcomers came to revitalized neighborhoods "to be with the people" but found "the people" insisted on a historical connection to the place to join the flow of neighborhood life. The newcomers, being professionals, appeared too transient. There, too, decorated houses, many remarkably similar to Cal's, were part of the streetscape.¹⁸

The vocabulary of art is often a tool in such conflicts. Coining and controlling "fine" and "folk" art, deciding on the presentation of history, defining fashion and taste and their levels, and dictating the

qualities of “professional,” “improvement,” “work,” and “beauty” are the strategies of cultural hegemony. Harrisburg does not have to be an urban art world center like New York City to show the currents of cultural hegemony. A year after the “Urban Renaissance” headline, a related story appeared in the *Patriot-News*. “Local law firms,” the paper announced, “are in the vanguard of preserving the older and historic buildings that play such an important part in the architectural beauty of Pennsylvania’s capitol city.” Later, a state senator, angered by a forced compliance to city architectural requirements in the historic district, threatened to paint his building orange and purple in response.¹⁹ Most of the stately buildings occupied by professional firms sit by the river, where they can be seen by a crowded daily caravan of people going to work (fig. 5-8). They create a visual gallery on the riverfront. They obscure the view of a *vernacular* further back.

All art, all creativity, involves collective action and systemic thinking. But art gains its levels through the institutions which support it. Artists like Cal do not seek institutions, because institutions deny his social organization. Art worlds thus tend toward commercial culture and upper class tastes.²⁰ When art is invoked by art worlds, and



Figure 5-8. Harrisburg Skyline, June 1984
(Courtesy Simon Bronner)

then, when it is sliced apart, power and ethical relations are implied. References to the ways groups view one another, what they do for a living, and the ways historical, social, and economic conditions are interpreted lie not far from the surface. Why? The ability to make and alter things has the potential of influencing others and identifying the individual's role in a larger system. The power to shape and control objects is also the power to reshape self and community, especially when the maker is allowed to control the conception, production, completion, and use of the artifact. And for many places, as Lewis Mumford warned, architecture is the "essential commanding art."²¹

February 1984. Cal's story lacks an ending, but has an epilogue. His colors have stood still for several weeks. Yet his activity, his creativity, continues to act and react, clash and resolve. He is out again. He adjusts the arrangements in his garden, fixes the window in Pearl's house, sweeps the street. Cars flow up Second Street and down Front, their drivers oblivious to the social currents on the side streets. Yet the currents affect the structure of city life. On Penn, traffic bows to people and houses. People and houses hold center stage here. Eyes now, though, are turned to the river. Rain has hit hard the last few days. The river reaches for the street. Once again the waters threaten to alter the reality people have wrought.

Notes for Chapter 5

1. Constance Y. Bramson, "Urban Renaissance: Penn Street Rowhomes Exemplify the Fine Art of Recycling Houses," *Harrisburg Patriot-News* (May 15, 1983), p. G1.
2. Names for residents in this essay are fictitious.
3. Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).
4. See Clarence Cook, *The House Beautiful* (1878, reprint; Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.: North River Press, 1980); Christopher Tunnard and Henry Hope Reed, *American Skyline* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956); Elizabeth Stillinger, *The Antiquers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), pp. 56-60.
5. Historical information taken from Michael Barton, *Life by the Moving Road: An Illustrated History of Harrisburg* (Woodland Hills, Calif.: Windsor Publications, 1983); William H. Wilson, "Harrisburg's Successful City Beautiful Movement, 1900-1915," *Pennsylvania History* 47 (1980): pp. 213-33; idem, "'More Almost than the Men': Mira Lloyd Dock and the Beautification of Harrisburg," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 99 (1975): pp. 490-99.

6. Barton, *Life by the Moving Road*, pp. 124–25.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
8. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 14–22.
9. For an analogous pattern, see Elizabeth Collins Cromley, "Modernizing: Or, 'You Never See a Screen Door on Affluent Homes,'" *Journal of American Culture* 5 (1982): pp. 71–79.
10. "Foreword," in *Back to the City*, ed. Shirley Bradway Laska and Daphn Spain (New York: Pergamon Press, 1980), p. ix.
11. See Laska and Spain, *Back to the City*, pp. 95–219; J. E. Vance, Jr. "Institutional Forces that Shape the City," in *Social Areas in Cities*, ed. D. T. Herbert and R. J. Johnston (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978), pp. 97–126.
12. Marissa Piesman and Marilee Hartley, *The Yuppie Handbook* (New York: Pocket Books, 1984).
13. Barton, *Life by the Moving Road*, p. 127.
14. For a discussion on antimodernist behavior, see Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), and my book *Grasping Things* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1986).
15. Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1938), p. 403.
16. See H. L. Nieburg, "Structure of the American Public," *Journal of American Culture* 7 (1984): pp. 49–56.
17. Cromley, "Modernizing," p. 71.
18. Paul R. Levy and Roman A. Cybriwsky, "The Hidden Dimension of Culture and Class: Philadelphia," in *Back to the City*, ed. Laska and Spain, pp. 138–55; Alice Gray Reed, "Making a House a Home" (Paper delivered at the Vernacular Architecture Forum Annual Meeting, Newark, Del., 1984).
19. (February 5, 1984), p. G1; "Angry Legislator Issues Colorful Threat to City," *Harrisburg Patriot-News* (July 25, 1985), p. 1.
20. See Howard S. Becker, "Art as Collective Action," *American Sociological Review* 39 (1974): pp. 767–76; Clifford Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System," *Modern Language Notes* 91 (1976): pp. 1473–99.
21. Mumford, *Culture of Cities*, p. 403.

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The Folk *Assemblage* of Autumn: Tradition and Creativity in Halloween Folk Art

Jack Santino

In 1982, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, I noticed a small pumpkin on the doorstep of a house. It was the third weekend in September, and at first glance I thought it was a bit early to display a pumpkin, but upon reflection it seemed appropriate (fig. 6-1). In that area, by late September, summer is on the edge of turning to autumn. The days are still warm, but the sun sets earlier and its rays are more oblique, so the light of late afternoon tinges everything amber. I looked around and saw marigolds and goldenrod blooming true to the color of their names. Milkweed was opening. The trees were still green, but the landscape had gone wheat-brown. All the colors were of earth and autumn and harvest. Plucked from its vine and placed on that doorstep, the pumpkin provoked in me this sensory awareness.

In October of the following year, 1983, the first such harbinger of fall that I saw was a jack-o'-lantern in the city. Its grinning face heralded the coming Halloween holiday. Like the uncarved pumpkin of the year before, it seemed to emerge anonymously, almost spontaneously, out of the very season of the year, and in this case it gleefully anticipated a special day. Halloween—that central holiday of the fall—was approaching. I began to wonder: was it the presence of the pumpkin and the jack-o'-lantern that made it feel like it was the autumn? Did the season create the symbols or did the symbols create the season? In certain ways, the answer to all of these questions is yes. To display pumpkins and make jack-o'-lanterns are customary acts which help us to feel properly attuned to the season of the year, and to the changing of those seasons. Calendrical holidays commemorate



Figure 6-1. Halloween *Assemblage*, Eastern Shore,
Maryland, 1983
(*Courtesy Lucy Long*)

historical, religious and political events, but they also celebrate the seasons in which those commemorations occur. People decorate their homes, inside and out, for the holidays. The placement of these decorations, in some cases the making of them, helps to create a feeling appropriate to the holiday season, to put one in the "mood" or the "spirit" of the holiday. Perhaps that pumpkin on the Eastern Shore *was* a bit too early. Nevertheless, seeing it in the unnatural context of a doorstep brought to mind associations with the harvest and a sensitivity to the turning of the year from summer to fall. Maybe that first jack-o'-lantern *was* put out a bit too soon; nonetheless, it triggered feelings—nostalgic, happy ones—of Halloween and all the magic and shrouded mystery of that great night.

The point at which a calendrical festival season begins and ends is variable and subjective, but the appearance of objects and the carrying out of folk customs attendant to a holiday show the gradual social movement into, and out of, a particular holiday or festival season.¹ Putting up decorations such as the jack-o'-lantern and taking them down mark the movement into and out of a socially defined period of calendrical time. The decorations frame that time and define it symbolically. In this way, people display their sense of when a holiday season begins and ends.

Folklorists have long been interested in calendrical customs and, sometimes, with the material culture associated with them today.² Without sanction from an "art world," however, Halloween decorations have eluded most folk art surveys, although they contain behaviors related to folklorists' concepts of folk art. Making and displaying Halloween decorations is a contemporary custom that continues folk traditions in our society that are ancient. These decorative objects are artistic embodiments of historical and contemporary ideas and emotions. They contain attitudes and beliefs, ways we think about and ways we feel about the season and its holiday.

This essay is an exploratory study of traditions that are broadly based in our society and part of the American calendrical cycle. I am here concerned with those decorations on the outside of the house, specifically the "Halloween dummy" and surrounding objects, and the ways in which these relate to the seasonal, occupational, and social cycles of the contemporary year. To fully comprehend the dimensions of meaning, and to approach an understanding of these objects on their own terms, I view them in the social and spiritual context in

which they occur and to which they belong. I will try to work toward an understanding of the unarticulated aesthetic according to which these are built, and attempt to discover the dynamics by which they have meaning.

We are dealing, often, with organically based figures, pumpkin-headed and straw-legged, stuffed with rags, seated next to cornstalks. Such figures are usually referred to as harvest figures, and certainly they do have at least a symbolic connection to the harvest.³ Observation indicates, however, that these dummies are often part of a larger display that includes paper cutouts of jack-o'-lanterns, ghosts, and witches, and other seasonal fruits and vegetables such as squash, gourds, and apples. Further, displays of fruits, vegetables, and sheaves of wheat oftentimes decorate a front porch without such a figure. Sometimes a lamppost in the front yard is transformed into a scarecrow-like figure. Sometimes a giant ghost sways in front of a house and sometimes a macabre figure is hung from a tree in the front yard. In each case, some or all of these elements, natural and artificial, have been chosen from many possibilities and combined to form a unique work. Thus, the term "harvest figure" is imprecise. Many displays do not include a humanoid figure at all, and those that do very often feature personages specific to Halloween—such as ghosts, witches, and ghouls—which are not self-evidently related to the harvest. Indeed, the phenomena range from artistically arranged groups of unworked vegetables to fully realized humanoid figures which are often only indirectly involved with harvest symbolism but instead are specifically related to the supernatural aspects of Halloween (fig. 6-2). Therefore, the term "harvest figure" does not account for related displays that are not figures, and is used to refer to displays that are not always directly related to harvest symbolism.

If humanoid figures are present, they are often similar in appearance to scarecrows, and they have been called scarecrows brought to the city.⁴ Although agricultural, the scarecrows have more to do with planting and growth than with the harvest. Perhaps the most ubiquitous motif used in these displays, however, is the jack-o'-lantern, and it is essential to this study. The jack-o'-lantern is the primary symbol of Halloween. The pumpkin is carved into a jack-o'-lantern. Doing so embodies a basic principle: the transformation of a natural, organic thing into a cultural object specific to the holiday. Moreover, the jack-o'-lantern is a personality, with a face, representing a trickster



Figure 6-2. Halloween *Atsemblage*, Boone, North Carolina, 1982
(*Courtesy Lucy Long*)

figure of traditional narrative who might lead men to harm.⁵ Original in Great Britain the jack-o'-lantern was made from turnips or potatoes, but in America it is always carved from pumpkins. A genuine folk object, it is found in great variation and elaboration (figs. 6-3, 6-5), and very often the more fully realized, three-dimensional figures are extensions of the jack-o'-lantern face, which is often seen as a disembodied head.⁶ The full standing figures often are jack-o'-lanterns given bodily form. Even Halloween costume disguises are based on the jack-o'-lantern. A direct continuity exists between the jack-o'-lantern and the so-called harvest figure on the one hand, both of which are decorations of the home, and on the other, the Halloween costumes, which are decorations of the self. People draw from the same well of symbols to create either, so masqueraders are often Halloween figures come to life.



Figure 6-3. Carved Pumpkin, Falls Church, Virginia, 1982
(*Courtesy Lucy Long*)

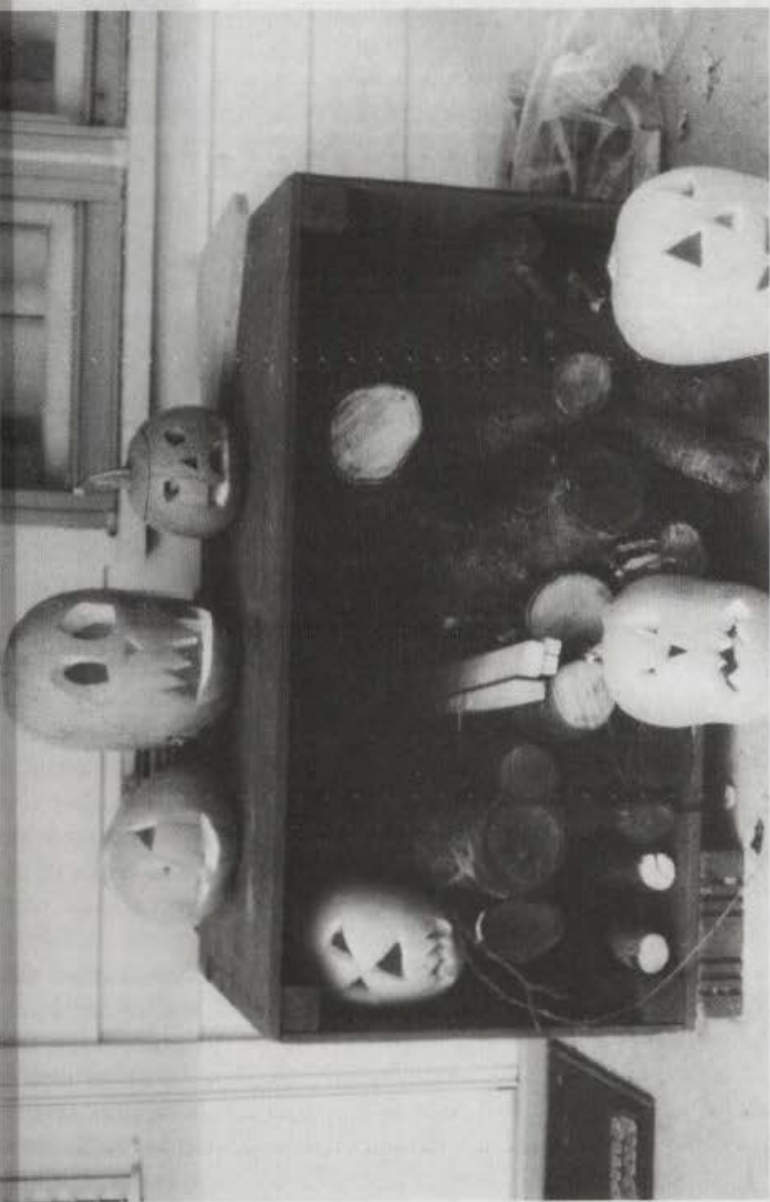


Figure 6-4. Carved Pumpkins, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1984
(Courtesy Jack Santino)



Figure 6-5. Carved Pumpkin, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1984
(Courtesy Jack Santino)

When dummies are present they are not usually alone. More often they are accompanied by worked and unworked vegetables such as corn, squash, pumpkins, and jack-o'-lanterns, along with homemade cutouts and decorations, and perhaps other figures in the yard. It is not the dummy on the porch or the pumpkin on the front stairs or the corn on the door or the paper cutouts in the windows that constitute the work of art but rather all of these together, seen from the street, framed by the facade of the house (fig. 6-6). The front of the house becomes the "canvas," as it were, of a three-dimensional work of art.

As a term that would be more useful, and more precise than "harvest figure," then, I would suggest the French word *assemblage*, a term which refers to a category of art, a genre of sculpture done with found objects, a kind of three-dimensional collage.⁷ The groups of objects we are examining are something like a folk version of that, a folk *assemblage*. Specifically, we are looking at holiday folk *assemblage*, and more specifically, it is Halloween folk *assemblage*. Other calendrical holidays are also marked by the display of *assemblages*. Because the study of folklore and folklife has in the past been plagued



Figure 6-6. Decorated House-Front, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1984
(Courtesy Jack Santino)

with the elitist idea that the folk arts are merely debased versions of the high arts, some may feel that to call a folk phenomenon after a genre of high art is counterproductive because it wrongly indicates that the folk art is a poorly realized imitation of the high art form. Nevertheless, I think that the term *assemblage* is appropriate because it gets at the essential nature of the material we are examining: the combining of a variety of symbolic elements within a single frame, and the creation of a single aesthetic entity by grouping together disparate things. It is important to view the *assemblage* holistically, as it is created and presented to the public, rather than isolate elements

of it, such as a figure, and ignore other elements such as the vegetable arranged around it.

These folk *assemblages* are results of the process that Claude Lévi-Strauss has termed *bricolage*, described by Henry Glassie as "the very complicated synthesis of old and new ideas."⁸ One man, for instance, a farmer, transformed an old orange rubber ball into a Halloween figure by painting a face on the ball, and impaling it on a stick which served as a pole. On top of the ball he placed a blue hand on a spring the kind that waves to you from the backseat of a car. He said he did so because he had these things lying around. It was getting toward autumn ("beginning to feel fallish"), so he painted the face on the ball, and since he had this toy blue-hand, "Well," he said, "why not?"

It is this act of combining elements which are varied but limited (one is generally restricted to the symbols of harvest and Halloween) bounded but infinite (no two *assemblages* are the same) that I think is the outstanding characteristic of these works of art. *Bricolage* is the ability of the folk artist to connect bits and pieces of culture from here and there to create an integral art form. We see this process of *bricolage* in these figures when, for instance, a discarded Clorox bleach bottle is used as a head for a figure, but on a deeper level we see it in the use of culturally oppositional symbols of life and death in single displays. Always, the organic representations of life, such as flowers or corn sheaves, are combined with or modified into figures of death (such as skeletons or ghosts), or of evil (witches). As the organic becomes cultural (a pumpkin becomes a jack-o'-lantern) so the natural becomes the supernatural.

The range of available symbolic elements is limited but nevertheless wide, while the actual choice of elements is in each case unique. Each *assemblage* is a discrete aesthetic entity, a totality in which each of its parts contributes to a meaningful unit. Metaphor and metonymy are both in operation. For instance, a skeleton metaphorically stands for death. Placed next to it is a pumpkin which does not stand for death but is emblematic of the harvest. By putting the two together the meaning of the one informs and is affected by the meaning of the other. The skeleton is seen to have something in common with the pumpkin, to share meaning metonymically, by virtue of its contiguous placement. Since an *assemblage* usually has several elements, a complex system of metaphor and metonymy occurs among all its elements and throughout the work of art, simultaneously creating and reinforcing

ever deeper layers of meanings. It is this process of *bricolage* and the relationality (the greater sum resulting from the combining of parts) which defines and gives meaning to the works.⁹

When analyzing the folk *assemblage*, one can begin with formal characteristics such as the internal ratios of individual elements that make up the work, and the position of the *assemblage* in relation to the house. Commonly, several jack-o'-lanterns are placed in such a way as to create a whole greater than any single one of them. In addition, the façade of the house is itself an aesthetic element in these *assemblages*. It is the house that is being decorated in such a way as to make a public statement.

Because of the organic nature of so many of these, decay and deterioration become aesthetic elements. As the jack-o'-lantern rots and sags, its persona changes. With the passing of time they decay visibly, publicly. In this way, the objects are rooted in the cycles of the year: the seasons, the festival cycle of the calendar, and by implication, the work cycle. As the season comes and goes, so does its concretization in art. Earlier, the jack-o'-lantern and pumpkins and humanoid figures announced the approach of a day. Now they testify to its passing. As we move through the festival period, so do they. Comparisons to the Easter egg are instructive. Like the Easter egg, they are ephemeral, but even so they are purely decorative and expressive rather than instrumental. Like the Easter egg, they are artistic, but they exist in a transitory context—of social holiday, of calendrical ritual. To the extent that ritual, celebration, festival, and holiday overlap, these *assemblages* share a great many characteristics with ritual objects. They are a kind of ritual object deeply rooted in temporal context, and must be seen as such. If we made these at any other time of the year, they would look out of place. They would be out of time.¹⁰

Even though much of what we see, much of what constitutes the *assemblages*, consists in part of store-bought decorations and cutouts made by children at grammar school, these are usually combined with the organic and homemade materials as well. Again, the entire facade of the house is the statement, is the work, not any one aspect of it. Objects are placed in such a way as to force the passer-by to view them as whole: real jack-o'-lanterns, a larger and a smaller, are seen placed in front of the door, while a paper cutout of a jack-o'-lantern is taped on it. A door and two windows are filled with children's

cutouts, but there is Indian corn hung between. The entire front of the building is meant to be viewed as an entity. A front door filled with mass-produced store-bought decorations has small, handmade ghosts hanging in front of it. Often, the elaboration of the front of the house extends into the yard and onto trees. Almost always we find this process of *bricolage* and this relationality of elements. In the cases where we see the use of mass-produced items, they are usually used as part of a larger, tasteful, holistic *assemblage*. They are cut up and recombined according to a particular aesthetic and personal vision.¹¹ The basis of the work is social and communal; the work itself is particular and individualistic. The Halloween *assemblage* usually transcends the mass-produced materials and often eschews them altogether.

The Johnson family of northwest Ohio is an excellent example of a family group who make elaborate decorations for their house and yard at Halloween time and for other calendrical holidays as well. The Johnsons's decorations are so extensive that they might be seen as a kind of "folk art environment," but an essential difference between these holiday constructions and other, outdoor creations is the fact that they are not built for permanence but rather to celebrate a passage through a point in time.¹² Their content or symbolic language is drawn almost exclusively from tradition. They are seasonal and transitory, as is evident in the following words of Mrs. Louise Johnson. Mrs. Johnson, 59 years of age at the time of this writing, is the most productive artist in the family:

I have decorated like this for at least 20 years. Before that, I worked in a factory, but I quit when my mother died. I like doing the crafts, I like holidays—Halloween, Easter, Christmas are my favorites. It keeps you young, doing it. I started doing a little at a time. Now I do too much! I do St. Patrick's and everything. I learned by myself, not from *McCalls* [magazine] or anything, just by tinkering around. I'd see things at bazaars. If I see something I like, I go ahead and make it. Sometimes I make things in-between time and wait for the holiday to put it out.

. . . I just enjoy holidays. They keep you young. I used to make egg trees and I thought, "I ought to make a witches' tree." Some of the stuff is bought, but I made the ghosts and witches myself. I made that outdoor witch. That scarecrow . . . my brother Stanley and my husband made the teepee and the scarecrow and the ghost. They like

to do it every year. My husband Wayne feels I like to do it and he's glad for me. It gets me in the mood for the holidays. . . .

. . . Down the street they buy four different size of pumpkins, one for each in the family then each one puts his own features on them and he cuts it out. Then he takes poles and puts Christmas lights in there—twinkling lights—and then at night he's got the corn stalks next to it. And he does this every year—and it's pretty. Keeps you young. It's a big letdown when everything is down and it looks so *bare*—and there's a lot of cleaning, too!

Mrs. Johnson recognizes that the ephemeral but cyclical nature of the holidays creates fresh anticipation on a regular basis. New decorations are always necessary and this eternally recurring sacred time keeps her young.¹³

After Halloween, she says, "I'll be taking this stuff out and I'll have my pumpkins and turkeys and stuff. I'll take the ghosts off and the witches off. You can leave some stuff up: the pumpkins, I'll put pilgrims up. I've got some pilgrims I made out of clay pots then I'll have a basket with some fruit, little pumpkins. There won't be too much of that. For Christmas there'll be a lot. We have Christmas decorations up till January 6th—my mother's birthday and Three Kings' Day. You celebrate up till Three Kings' Day and then it's over. That's the Polish tradition.

"I start in the first part of November. I clean the woodwork and the drapes and all. I start decorating the first part of December—I used to make a Valentine tree and put hearts on it, but I don't do that anymore. I don't like to do a tree everytime because it gets to be the same idea. The only time I do trees are for Easter and Halloween."

Although these *assemblages* are found in urban and suburban as well as rural areas and are built by middle-class housewives as well as by isolated farming or fishing families, that is, as much as they are a part of middle-class popular culture, they are built according to ideas that are demonstrably connected in time to a pre-Christian festival, the Celtic Day of the Dead, November 1.¹⁴ Thus, they have a historical dimension, a time depth, that is certifiably ancient. The symbolism is traditional, and whatever the degree to which it has become commercialized, the making of these has always been primarily passed on by the folk processes of observation and imitation. Thus we are dealing with material which is folk in nature but which belongs to us all. The point here is that in the sense that we all have a "folk" part

of our existence, the spiritual-calendrical-holiday context is a folk context, even though many such holidays, including Halloween, are celebrated nationally.¹⁵ Perhaps we can say that while a mass-produced (as opposed to handmade) item used as a holiday decoration is not a folk artifact, the act of decorating for that holiday, using that traditional symbolic language, is a folk act, or a folk custom. Further, when that act involves the making of *assemblages* and jack-o'-lanterns, the customary act has produced traditional folk art. This folk art, long continuous in our culture, is thick with symbolic meaning. The *assemblage* has symbolic meaning. Like myth, its presence communicates at levels deeper than the surface.¹⁶ What do these *assemblages* communicate? What do they mean?

Anthropologist Victor Turner has noted that in the study of ritual symbols, the meanings of a symbol in question may be derived through a combination of: (1) native testimony as to how the symbol is understood by members of the culture in which it is operative, (2) observation of relative placement within the ritual, that is, where it is found sequentially and in conjunction with what other symbols, and finally, (3) analysis of the ethnographer who brings his or her own informed, analytical point of view to bear.¹⁷ Following this, when we attempt to determine meaning in the case of the Halloween *assemblage*, one identifies such factors as the means of construction, how they are constructed, who constructs them, their distribution spatially across regions and within regions, as well as temporally (when are they made? When do they go up? When do they come down?) and, of course, who constructs them and why they are constructed. The means and modes of construction we can ask. Physical characteristics such as the position of the *assemblage* relative to the house we can measure. Meaning we must determine by analysis.

Articulated aesthetic criteria are, as indicated above, not always available. Glassie's suggestion that "the folk artist has no articulation for his aesthetic other than production," leads us to read the object metaphorically, following Armstrong who maintains that "metaphor finally is the *being* of the work of art; through metaphor it exists."¹⁸ The Halloween displays juxtapose images of nature and culture, order and chaos, natural and supernatural, life and death. For example, a jack-o'-lantern, a creature of the other world, often associated with death, is placed in a garden of flowers, a symbol of life. These are culturally prescribed symbols. The *assemblage* forces us to work through

their meanings as they are conjoined together. The very fact of their existence challenges us. Why, we must ask, are there macabre, ghoul-like figures proudly displayed on suburban porches, denying the very concept of the secure and safe homestead, giving lie to the orderliness suggested by the neatly trimmed lawn? Why is it there? Why does it look like that? Why do I accept it? Why is it acceptable to build such a thing and hang it, as if lynched, from a tree?

Turner has pointed out the jarring reorderings of cultural phenomena which occur during the "liminal" stage of a rite of passage, the time of transition when an initiate often performs a task or goes through a ceremony in front of the community. During this time, when the initiate is outside of regular social structures, the liminal experience may force the initiate to reconceptualize his cultural categories. He must "set it right."¹⁹ In the case of the Halloween *assemblage*, we find a similar phenomenon. The individual symbols in the *assemblage* such as the fruits of harvested life, fruits harvested in order to sustain life, are juxtaposed to images of living dead, of dead life (ghosts, skeletons, vampires) and the otherworld. The natural world is combined with the supernatural world, and together these create meaning.²⁰

The decorations are important in areas where the autumn season is pronounced, such as in New England, the Great Lakes region, or the Eastern seaboard and in that regard they situate homesteads and people in the season (fig. 6-7). As Mrs. Johnson told us, Halloween decorations give way to Thanksgiving decorations, while the harvest symbolism common to both, such as the unworked pumpkin, remains. Thanksgiving decorations give way to Christmas/year's-end lights. Often in rural areas, the corn or wheat sheaves representing the dead of winter are left up, joined by the evergreen symbols of life in death such as the wreath. Each transition marks the inexorable progression from summer's end to harvest, from harvest to winter and dark days. At the same time, the life-death symbolism of the Halloween *assemblage* transcends the specifically agricultural or yearly cycle and situates individuals in the life cycle, by using the metaphor of the growth and harvest progression.

Ephemeral, transitional, lovingly aesthetic, the folk *assemblage* has expressive meaning and expressive use. They are their own meaningful units of discourse. Their elements contribute to their meaning. The construction of an *assemblage* and the presentation of it as part of



Figure 6-7. Halloween *Assemblage*, Eastern Shore, Maryland, 1983
(Courtesy Lucy Long)

the home is a statement to the community. It is a statement about belonging: we are involved in the special season, we are all involved in the rounds of the year and of life. These are badges, emblems worn by houses, by families. *Assemblages* are often created by families together, each pumpkin belonging to a different child.²¹ Family members pose for snapshots with parodies of themselves. Images of death and chaos are incorporated into life and family regularity. Families create the *assemblages*, and wear them on their homes for friends and neighbors to witness. The symbols of death in life, of evil in the cosmos, are placed on the front porch, the front stairs, in windows, in the yard. In sum, they are placed in the transitional areas between the insular family unit and the larger, surrounding society. The combinations seen in the Halloween displays, like the combinations noted by Turner, force us to think through our cultural conceptions. Inco-

porating the ideas of Claude Lévi-Strauss, we see this process as forcing mediation between life and death. From the artistic mediation comes acceptance. By placing this dichotomy in a rationalized framework, we tame, if not control, its terror.

The calendrical cycle of the year, with its holidays and associated customs and material culture, is an important realm of traditional human activity. As folklorists, we need only to look to the next holiday in order to study and appreciate living, functioning, traditional behavior in its context of use and value in society. I have tried to show here that decorating the house at holiday time is a traditional act. To be understood correctly the decorations of a home at Halloween should be viewed holistically, as a totality, as an *assemblage*. It is an art form in and of itself, and an *assemblage* has its own meaning and its own aesthetic. Because this material is widespread and ephemeral, and associated with a "children's" holiday, there may be a tendency to see the folk *assemblage* as frivolous, or worse, trivial.²² Fun to make they may be, delightful and entertaining to look at, certainly, but that by no means contradicts their import of consequence, nor denies their weight of message.

Ultimately, aesthetic expression is human. We bring the aesthetic to most if not all of our activities, both work and play, while our most central and most profound questions are expressed in purely aesthetic terms. In the case of the Halloween holiday arts, pure aesthetic delight is brought to our confrontations with dilemmas of the human experience. In that light, these *assemblages* are almost existential in nature. Faced with the uncontrollable, such as death, the imponderable, such as the meaning of life, and the unfathomable, such as the answers to those very questions, it is no wonder that we respond with a wink and a playful work of art. It has been said in reference to ritual and folk artifacts that objects have "real power" in the societies in which they were created, that they are an "affecting presence" in those societies.²³ I would like to suggest that these objects, the folk *assemblages* of autumn, have real power for us.

Notes for Chapter 6

1. See Alan Dundes and Allesandro Falassi, *La Terra in Piazza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 48.
2. See Venetia Newall, *An Egg at Easter: A Folklore Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971).

3. See Avon Neal and Ann Parker, *Ephemeral Folk Figures* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1969).
4. Statement made by Professor Louis Jones at the Washington Meeting on Folk Art.
5. The story of the jack-o'-lantern is widespread. See motif F491, Will-o'-Wisp (Jack-o'-Lantern) in Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, rev. ed., 1975).
6. See Sean Galvin, "The Carved Pumpkin as Folk Art" (typescript, Indiana University, 1983); see especially Steven R. Williams, "Ephemeral Folk Art of the Cooperstown Area" (M.A. thesis, State University of New York at Oneonta, Cooperstown Graduate Programs, 1978).
7. See Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966); William Chopin Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1961).
8. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 16-22; Henry Glassie, "Folk Art," in *Folklore and Folk Art*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 20.
9. See Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 19.
10. Richard M. Dorson, "Material Components in Celebration," in *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual*, ed. Victor Turner (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), p. 33; Roger Abrahams, "The Language of Festivals: Celebrating the Economy," in *Celebration*, ed. Turner, p. 161.
11. In comments made during the 1983 meetings of the American Folklore Society, John MacDowell noticed the same phenomena as regards Halloween costumes which may be store-bought but are often cut up and reassembled in novel ways at home.
12. See Daniel Franklin Ward, ed., *Personal Places: Perspectives on Informal Environments* (Bowling Green, Ohio: The Popular Press, 1984).
13. See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959); *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).
14. See Jack Santino, "Halloween in America: Contemporary Customs and Performances," *Western Folklore* 42 (1983): pp. 1-20.
15. Glassie, "Folk Art," p. 258.
16. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963). See also Victor Turner, "Introduction" in *Celebration*, ed. Turner, pp. 18-19.
17. Victor Turner, "Symbols in Ndembu Ritual," in *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 20. See also Turner, "Introduction" in *Celebration*, ed. Turner, pp. 20-21.

Glassie, "Folk Art," p. 266; Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence*, p. xxi.

Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*," in *The Forest of Symbols*, p. 105.

Robert Wildhaber notes a similar phenomenon when he cites a figure of death covered with "wreathes of egg shells: the egg in connection with death." Introduction, in Venetia Newall, *An Egg at Easter*, p. xv.

Karen Jabbour has also pointed out that families with children often allow each child to carve his or her own pumpkin; Alan Jabbour mentioned that this fact corroborates the idea that the *assemblage* represents the family as group.

See John C. Messenger, "Folk Religion," in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, ed. Dorson, p. 220. Halloween is classified as a children's holiday by Messenger, but in recent years it has grown in popularity with adults. See my "Halloween in America: Contemporary Customs and Performances."

See Barbara Babcock, "Clay Voices: Invoking, Mocking, Celebrating," in *Celebration*, ed. Turner, pp. 58-76; Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence*.

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Storing Contexts: The Brooklyn *Giglio* as Folk Art

I. Sheldon Posen

The chief problem presented by the sheer phenomenon of esthetic force, in whatever form and in result of whatever skill it may come, is how to place it within the other modes of social activity, how to incorporate it into the texture of a particular pattern of life. And such placing, the giving to art objects a cultural significance, is always a local matter.

Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge*

The celebration of the Feast of St. Paulinus every summer in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, New York, is an example of the kind of transformation Roman Catholic churches have developed into folk art.¹ It takes the legendary, the mythic, and the abstract, and renders them tangible, concrete, and very much in the present. For the feast, members of the local Italian-American community create a temporary folk art environment with lights, streamers, exquisitely wrought statues, printed images, and above all, a massive moving tower called a *giglio* ("JEEL-yo"). During the three-week feast the *giglio* is used to reenact the central legend of the community's patron saint. Although the context of the feast is ostensibly religious, there are other streams of meaning flowing simultaneously through it. Those watching the *giglio* being danced through the streets of Williamsburg are seeing the essence of the community being played out before them.

The Event

The history of the Feast of St. Paulinus in Brooklyn is a relatively short one. Most residents say it began in the late 1880s, soon after the neighborhood's first settlers arrived from Nola, a village in southern Italy near Naples. The legend that the feast re-creates dates from the fifth century A.D. According to the *Dialogues of St. Gregory*, Paulinus, Bishop of Nola, freed his fellow villagers, who had been carried off by pagans to be slaves in Africa. Through a divine miracle, he acquired the gift of prophecy to intercede with their captors. He and the villagers returned home in a ship along with a Turkish sultan who had aided them. They were greeted joyously by their fellow townspeople who carried "mountains of lilies" in their arms in welcome. When Paulinus was later elevated to sainthood, his feast day was established as June 22, traditionally held to be the day of his miraculous return.

The climax of the feast in Brooklyn—part pageant, part procession—reenacts this event. Its center is the *giglio*, a gaily painted, gracefully tapering spire six stories high, weighing about three tons. *Giglio* means "lily" in Italian. On each of the Feast's three Sundays, this giant lily, surmounted by a statue of St. Paulinus, is borne on the shoulders of 128 men and "danced" through the streets in front of the church. Music for the dancing is provided by a singer and a street band who ride on a platform on the *giglio* structure. Three *capos* direct the proceedings. They are older men in the community who, with the canes of office, give the commands and lead the younger men and the *giglio* in their dance (fig. 7-1).

The dancing is not continuous in the sense that a parade is continuous. Rather, it consists of short segments, each called a "lift." The lift lasts about two minutes and may cover twenty or thirty yards of ground. For each lift the *capo* determines what will be accomplished—say, moving the structure from where it stands on the corner to just in front of the DiAngelo house. He discusses the music to be played with the bandleader on the *giglio*. He then moves out in front of the structure, signals the band, and a tune begins. The first tune is always "O *giglio e paradiso*," written by a neighborhood musician in the 1950s. The first verse ends with a high blasting fanfare of horns. On the last note, the *capo* jabs the air with his cane and the lifters under the pole, jutting out all around the base of the *giglio* tense and jerk erect. The



Figure 7-1. The *Giglio*, with Its Statue of St. Paulinus on Top, as Danced in the Streets of Williamsburg, Brooklyn With his cane of office, a *capo* (center foreground) commands the 128 men carrying the tower on their shoulders. (Courtesy I. Sheldon Posen)

bystanders cheer and the *giglio* is up. The *capo* signals the first tune to stop, and shouts, "Musica!" A second tune, the one he has discussed with the bandleader, begins. Again, he punches the air with his cane, and in time to the music, the giant structure moves forward.

Each *capo* has his own style of leading. Some strut and prance like drum majors, others simply walk backward, warily watching to make sure the *giglio* is kept straight and the route is followed. To help control the structure, lieutenants at each corner of the *giglio* shout the *capo's* commands to their straining men. When the lift destination is reached, the *capo* signals a halt and everyone stops, still bearing the weight of the *giglio* on their shoulders. The *capo* shouts four commands in Nolan dialect. On the last, the men suddenly bend their knees, and the *giglio* comes crashing down on its supports. The crowd cheers, the *capo* is congratulated by friends and relatives, and the next *capo* takes his place for the succeeding lift.

The dancing continues all afternoon. There are fancy lifts sometimes—a complete rotation known as a "three-sixty," or a quick drop-and-lift called a "number two." There is also another monumental structure danced, a medieval galleon or boat carrying one more statue of St. Paulinus, a band and singer, and a costumed Turk with four young attendants. It, too, requires 128 men to lift it. The boat and *giglio* are danced separately over the three days, but the climax of the feast comes when the two structures are brought together at the crossroads of the church. Symbolically, St. Paulinus returns home to Nola, greeted by his people bearing their mountain of lilies (fig. 7-2).

The Environment

Many outdoor street processions and festival rituals occur in New York City, where the streets themselves have not been specially altered for the occasion. Part of the impact of the annual Puerto Rican passion procession through Sunset Park, Brooklyn, for instance, comes from seeing uniformed Roman Empire legionnaires and biblical characters juxtaposed with ordinary shoppers, traffic cops, bus drivers, and so on, carrying on business as usual on Good Friday. But an important part of the Feast of St. Paulinus is the construction of a physical environment in which the main events take place.

In some ways, the environment is almost generic, taking the form of a typical New York area Italian street festival which can be found



Figure 7-2. *Giglio* and Boat Are Brought Together in the Climactic Lift that Re-enacts the Return of St. Paulinus to His People
(Courtesy I. Sheldon Posen)

throughout the summer in many parts of the city. They all look pretty much alike. Streamers and patterned street lights frame the streets from above, while fast food booths crowding either sidewalk form a street-wide corridor for strolling festival goers. They stop and buy Italian food specialties such as sausages with onions and peppers, or deep fried dumplings called *zeppole*. They can also play games of skill or chance at booths offering midway-type entertainments. An atmosphere is created in which young people can meet and court, friends spend time together, and anyone can bring their own decorated objects—from bicycles to personal costumes—which in turn contribute to the festive feeling.

The street festival set-up forms a basic backdrop against which other artifacts and decorations specifically connected with the Feast of St. Paulinus can appear. There are posters and handwritten signs

in shop windows and on telephone poles announcing the feast. There are decorations whose import is more symbolic and implicit, such as the small statues of St. Paulinus adorning bakeries and living room windows. Still other items convey messages referring to contexts which to an outsider might appear tangential or irrelevant to the religious aspects of the feast, such as American patriotism and Italian ethnic heritage. These contexts are important to the community and the feast is seen as an appropriate occasion for expressing them. Thus American and Italian flags abound, and what can't support an Italian flag proper—like the many fire and police call boxes throughout the neighborhood—may be seen sporting a new coat of paint in the Italian national colors of red, white, and green.

Against the "ground" formed by the physical adornment of the streets, other aesthetic forms act as "figure." This is especially true of costume. The clothing of nearly every person with some active relationship to the feast signals his participation and denotes his role. The costumes turn the feast into a pageant. Some, such as the cardinal's red robes or the bishop's mitre and staff, are the ceremonial costumes normally associated with particular offices that exist outside the feast. But others appear only at that time and place, like that of the feast's Grand Marshal's scarlet robe and gold-trimmed sash, or the garb of the Turk and his entourage, looking like something out of "The Thief of Baghdad." The lifters, too, have their own costume, which amounts to something of a uniform. It consists of a soft cap and scarf or neckerchief, and the major feast costume component, a T-shirt. These T-shirts are silk screened in the church basement every year with the feast logo—St. Paulinus appearing in the skies above the steeples and houses of Nola. Hat, scarf, and T-shirt also compose the uniform of the rope gang, made up of young boys who keep the crowds back from the dancing area.

There are also non-uniform uniforms. *Capos*, apprentices, and lieutenants have no "specified" items they must wear. The convention is that they come dressed either in their best informal clothing—a leisure suit, perhaps, or new trousers, striped jersey, and a colorful bandanna—with perhaps a humorous item thrown in, especially in the hat department—an admiral's cap, for instance, or a cap with Mercury's wings attached to it. In among all those lifters in their T-shirts, this other style of dress makes the wearers instantly recognizable. It is, in effect, another uniform. Uniforms more often seen outside the

feast easily fit into the proceedings, whether they are those of the policemen on patrol who may take a turn with the lifters under the *giglio*, or the marines who are called in to form an honor guard for the "line of march" processions. Even local politicians, who come to be seen participating in neighborhood festivities, look to be in uniform as they stroll together through the street fair in their dark ties and spotless white shirts, the sleeves scrupulously rolled up to the elbows.

The presence of a uniform or costume "slot" in the structure of the feast gives participants latitude for elaboration and innovation beyond what have become normal feast dress requirements—the T-shirts and so forth. For instance, *Capo* Number One may stage anything he likes for his emergence from his house to join the line of march to the church on *giglio* days. In 1981, *Capo* Number One had his nephews appear first at the doorway dressed as Italian guards and medieval courtiers; his nieces appeared as angels. He and his wife then made their entrance in casual dress to be hailed with fireworks and flowers. It snowed confetti. The *capo* also had T-shirts specially printed up with his name and the year on them for members of his family to wear. Others besides *Capo* Number One have some latitude to improvise with their uniforms. On the lifters, for example, one sees cowboy hats and umbrella hats decorated with flowers replacing the short-peaked, soft lifter's cap. Other improvisations or additions to the uniform—crucifix earrings, long white knee socks with alternating red and green bands—can extend or reinforce the religious or ethnic messages that the rest of the uniform stores for participants.

The role of the T-shirt in identifying participants in the feast or showing the wearer's affiliation with it is considerable. Peripheral participants—onlookers, and even vendors in the food booths who next week will be in another neighborhood at a different feast—try to get hold of a current feast T-shirt. So important are T-shirts that, in an Italian neighborhood in the Bronx where a *giglio* is danced later in the summer, hawkers cash in by selling T-shirts to onlookers which feature two of the main themes of the feast: the *giglio*, and Italian ethnic pride. Many are preprinted, but one vendor sells custom spray-painted models, the *giglio* stencilled on and the customer's name put on freehand, linking customer and feast several times over. One lad watching a 1983 feast in New Jersey wore two political buttons on either side of the *giglio* centered on his T-shirt—"Vote For. . . ." A

political theme had been superimposed upon the feast and the *giglio* made to bear a political message in addition to all of its others.

The feast environment is so carefully and consciously arranged that the entire area resonates with its message:

No Opportunity Is Lost to Give an Item Meaning or Make It Fit

In Brooklyn, the car carrying *giglio* officials to the church for the dancing in 1983 bore a license plate—commercially made for the personalized car market—saying, “Italian Stallion,” very appropriate given the ethnic and macho dimensions of the feast. Similarly, the lights which bordered the street were designed, said one of the church priests, “so that if they were brought together and superimposed on one another, they would form the symbol for infinity.” And the colors of the lifting crew’s uniforms and of the *giglio* always refer to some important current event. In 1976, they were red, white, and blue in honor of the American Bicentennial; in 1981, they were the colors of the Italian flag, to commemorate the victims of that year’s earthquakes around Nola in southern Italy; in 1983, they were red and white in honor of a visiting Italian cardinal.

Single Items Are Made to Bear Multiple Meanings or Types of Information

For example, the cap which shows the lifter’s station in the feast becomes part of a religious statement when it is removed and held over the heart for prayer before the day’s lifting. It can show a family connection when placed playfully upon a not-yet-active member of the community (a baby son of a lifter), and perhaps be a step in educating him to future service. When placed on the head of one of the many young girls watching the dancing, the hat can show an affiliation between lifters and onlookers and underline a theme of the feast, that of virility and male physical power. When viewed on an entire group of boys or men standing together, such as members of the rope gang or the *giglio* lifters, the caps can also simultaneously make tangible the community’s aesthetic sense of what constitutes a set, illustrate the nature of being in the group rather than out, and make visible the bonding that takes place during the feast among the participants (fig. 7-3).



Figure 7-3. Multiple Messages from a Single Object—the Rope Gang's Hat
(Courtesy I. Sheldon Posen)

Redundancy of Form

Much repetition of images and artifacts occur in the feast. An element such as a statue of St. Paulinus can be seen in different versions over and over again through the site and even through the whole neighborhood. Often, these repetitions reinforce one another by sheer contiguity. Picture the feast galleon with the statue of St. Paulinus in the stern, parked outside a house whose window boasts a tiny statuette of the saint, while on the telephone pole in front of it is tacked a poster with an image of the saint in the upper right hand corner, and all of these are passed by the *giglio* during the dancing with its statue of St. Paulinus at the top.

Redundancy of Scale

If dancing the *giglio* is at all about monumentality, it is also about miniaturization. There is something the community likes about having smaller versions of what is going on. A children's *giglio* and children's boat, scaled down versions of the adult models, are borne by tiny lifters and commanded by pint-sized *capos*. Little girls can also be seen carrying dolls dressed in lifter's hats, scarves, even T-shirts. The result of this duplication in small scale is that whether one looks high or low, at children or adults, the same messages are available at every level (fig. 7-4).

Redundancy of Performance and Artifact

Most of the main values of the community are expressed during the feast as both performance and as item, object, or artifact. One sees ethnicity, for instance, in the Italian hand-and-fingers game of *morra* played by lifters during lulls in the dancing. One sees it in objects such as buttons which read "Italian Lover" or T-shirts that say "Italian Numero Uno" worn by participants and onlookers alike. Similar to the importance of the ties of family: in 1982, the godfather of the *giglio* (an honorary position in the hierarchy) and *Capo* Number One were father and son. For the climactic lifts which brought together the boat and *giglio* that year, father and son acted as the respective *capos*. In case the message was lost to anyone in the crowd, the singer on the *giglio* kept pointing out the appropriateness, the neatness, of the situation: "This is a father-and-son lift, ladies and gentlemen," he would announce over the P.A. system, "a father-and-son lift." By the same token, T-shirts worn by *Capo* Number One of a family are specially printed with his name in block letters, followed by "*Capo* Number One," and the year. Seeing these from time to time during the feast, the observer realizes that who is related to whom by blood is a significant item of information in this community.

The Giglio

Important as all these various artifacts are to the feast—T-shirts, patterned street lights, posters, license plates, flags—the single richest object—in meaning, in its power to store and bestow significance—



Figure 7-4. In Front of the American Flag on the *Capo's* House, Two Young Boys in Small Versions of the Feast T-Shirts with Members of Their Family
(Courtesy I. Sheldon Posen)

is the *giglio* itself. Its origins are obscure. No one in the Brooklyn feast can rationalize the presence of a tower form in the festivities beyond the legendary "mountain of lilies" explanation, nor explain its provenance beyond the fact that the *giglio* has "always" been part of the feast in Nola, the old ancestral village in Italy.

The celebration of the Feast in Nola differs from the one in Brooklyn, and the differences are instructive for understanding the latter. In Nola, not one but eight *gigli* ("JEEL-yi") are danced every year. Each is sponsored by a group representing one of the old guilds—market gardeners, port-butchers, innkeepers, bakers, butchers, cobblers, tailors, and smiths.² The tenor of the event is one of competition. Each group vies with the others in the design and construction of their *giglio*. The squads of lifters who dance the towers are hired by the respective groups. The group *capos* try to outspend each other in paying for team uniforms, *giglio* architects, and so on. The dancing of the *gigli* goes on for two days, then the towers are thrown down and entirely destroyed.

Ramoldo Martello is an important link in the celebrations on both sides of the ocean, but his experience points up other differences between them. As a young boy, Martello watched his father build *gigli* in Nola. In 1929, about seven years after he arrived in Brooklyn, Martello was himself approached to build the Brooklyn *giglio*. He was about twenty-four years old, a carpenter by trade. He found that his experience differed from his father's. In Nola, he says, *giglio* construction had been highly specialized: "Whoever does the frame put up the whole thing, that's one trade; whoever does the face, that's another trade; whoever does the painting, that's another trade." In Brooklyn, the single annual *giglio* was built more or less alone by a succession of skilled neighborhood carpenters. The structure was standard in both places: colorful papier mâché panels ("face" or "facing") hung on a tapering, four-sided, steeple-shaped skeleton or framework. The young Martello found himself doing everything from creating the molds for the papier mâché figures, to constructing the panels, painting them, then (with the help of one or two assistants) building the wooden framework "from the ground up, the pieces all criss-crossed and interlocked." One man remembers Martello, forty feet in the air atop the open, half-finished frame, calling down to his assistant, "Throw up a piece eighteen inches' or 'sixteen inches'—whatever length he needed at that point to build the next level." In those days,

the tower was eighty feet high. The facing panels were affixed with ropes.

In Nola, the *gigli* were redesigned every year to give them a new look. Since the groups competed with one another, innovation was highly prized. Photographs in Brooklyn homes and shops of Nola boast of *gigli* over the years. They show great variety: streamlined, "space age" *gigli*, classic "baroque" *gigli*, even a "corkscrew" *giglio*.

In Brooklyn, design was a more or less informal matter of choosing and coordinating components. Says Martello, "I used to just get ideas . . . I used to get designs from Italy, from here, from there, as long as it looked like something—saints, moldings, brackets." One man remembers, "The way Mr. Martello used to make molds, he would walk around, and if he saw a piece of junk that looked pretty, he would pick it up and make a mold out of it: pie plates, dolls, pieces off buildings . . . He would go by a construction or demolition site, 'Excuse me, could I borrow that piece.' 'Sure.' They were going to throw it out. He'd take that piece home, sink it into the plaster, make a mold out of it."

The Brooklyn design tradition was more conservative than Nola's in every sense. Standard components appeared virtually every year: gothic scrollwork, columns, angels, flowers, cherubs, vines and leaves, various saints and the Madonna and Child. With no crews of specialists working on the *giglio* full time, or *capos* competing to pay out more money, the Brooklyn builders saved the facings each year to be used the next. The papier mâché was good for perhaps five years. When it disintegrated or was beyond repair, the same molds were used to make more. The components might be recombined somewhat differently and more or less densely from previous years, but by and large over the decades, the overall look of the Brooklyn *giglio* remained the same.

Underneath the facings, a revolution was going on in the manner of constructing the framework. First (and it is not clear exactly when it happened), Martello did away with the central pole which had been used as an interior axis for affixing the outside framework. It is still a feature of the Nola *gigli*.³ Martello found the lumber in America stronger than the wood available in Italy, and decided he could make do with a hollow framework of boards nailed together, gradually diminishing in size towards the top. This made the Brooklyn *giglio* lighter than its Italian counterparts, and gave it a "whip" as it was

danced or set down that the older people still talk about. Martello's second great innovation came about sometime after World War II, when skilled help became scarce, lumber costs rose, and his stamina for spending two or three months atop a rickety wooden structure was waning. He conceived the idea of numbering the framework members and bolting them together, rather than nailing them: "Then I used to assemble it up, put it together, bolts and nuts and everything, and then after the feast I used to take it down piece by piece. The frame used to last four or five years. If a piece broke before that, I used to make another piece right on top of it—just replace the broken pieces." This new method made the *giglio* virtually a modular structure which could be put up in a tiny fraction of the time it had taken before. It also prepared the way for the total conversion in the early 1970s of the wooden framework to one of aluminum girders which essentially replaced Martello's numbered boards.

Martello "retired" from building the *giglio* shortly afterward, and his role was assumed by four young men—two sets of brothers—who lived in the neighborhood and had watched Martello since they had been youngsters. For the next three years they erected what Martello had left them. However, by the end of 1975, they felt they needed to make new facings if they were going to honor the American Bicentennial in style. Using Martello's old molds, they recast the components, "a saint today, a couple of angels tomorrow. We started stockpiling pieces in January, keeping them in the basement of the church until we came up with a design. My brother came up with several. As we made the pieces, he would play around with them on paper. We'd look at his designs, judge which ones we liked best, make the appropriate angels and saints, then put them on the frame to see how it looked. If it looked good, 'Good—we'll make it.' We tacked the pieces down and painted them. This process of making the pieces, putting them on the facing, coming up with a color scheme, painting the facing, piece by piece by piece, took us ten months, working every night. We didn't finish until the day we put up the *giglio*. We were still tacking little flowers here and there as the structure was going up. Because it was something we never did before."

The *giglio* made by the brothers in 1976 was still in use in 1984. It was a true *bricolage*, incorporating bits of former *gigli*, new papier mâché moldings and figurines, plus first-time plastic lilies, wreaths, and cherubs—Christmas decorations—bought at dime stores and local

hardware suppliers.⁴ The aluminum frame had stood up well over the years, but the facings were in terrible shape. Seen from far away, the *giglio* maintained its classic looks, but up close, the panels looked rough and ad hoc, with repairs obviously made two and three times over. The broken hand of St. Paulinus standing atop the tower had been replaced by a work glove hastily encased in plaster and painted in flesh tones. Throughout the early 1980s, there had been pressure for a new *giglio*, either to be bought from one of the teams in Nola after they were finished some year, or to be built locally. In 1985, two neighborhood residents, one a former *Capo*, the other a young man rising through the feast hierarchy (he had already played the Turk for two years), created an all-new face for the *giglio*. It is again in the classic style, with saints, angels, niches, and flowers, and word has it that once a week while it was being formed in the basement of the church, Ramoldo Martello would drop by. It is said that this new *giglio* is the most beautiful the neighborhood has seen in years.

Storing Contexts

As folk art, the *giglio* is a complex item. Clearly it has aesthetic dimensions like any piece of folk art. There are real, if mostly unstated, standards for what "looks good" on a *giglio*, and what makes one more or less beautiful than another. And as a young maker said wonderingly about the component compiling process Martello was so good at, "It's so simple, it's unbelievable. It's crazy how simple the things are. And just as simple as it is, it's that complex. It's an art." Martello is looked upon as the old *maestro* by these young makers, and his creations are regarded with great admiration and emulated as far as possible. Martello, on the other hand, was characteristically down-to-earth about his work. Asked how his *giglio* compared with the fine statuary being produced for church interiors in the early decades of the century in Manhattan ateliers, he replied, "Oh, no, that's special people. That's different work altogether. This is rough work; that's everything in details and everything."

The *giglio* is folk art that is meant to be performed. Like a West Indian carnival costume that is "real" only during the carnival when it is being "played," there is a sense in which the *giglio* is "real" only when it is being "danced." Except at a most inconsequential level, the *giglio* can't ever be "collectible" since it doesn't exist apart from the

feast. Like those carnival costumes, it is essentially disposed of at the end of the event.

This is not, of course, to understate the reality of the *giglio* as a physical object. It is its very monumentality that is the point of the feast. There are evidently tower-carrying rituals all over Italy, but none on the scale of Nola's—or Brooklyn's.⁵ In Brooklyn, the gigantic form dominates the feast environment. It towers over the proceedings, even at rest, and from certain vantages looks like a lighthearted, if imposing, parody of Manhattan's somber grey skyscrapers just visible across the East River.

But the *giglio* fills the feast environment in other ways than simply being its gargantuan self. Its image may be seen everywhere: in the children's version, in the plastic replicas carried by the Turk's attendants and sold at sidewalk concession stands, and as an image adorning feast T-shirts, posters, and buttons. So saturated is the feast environment with the image of the *giglio* that it spills over and out of that environment into other worlds. Blocks away from the site, people with no apparent connection with the feast—firemen in their station, storekeepers—may be seen wearing *giglio* T-shirts or buttons. Poster, people, scrapbooks in cupboards at home, all are immediately identified with the feast by *giglio* images they sport. The *giglio* may be detected in a situation not physically, but because participants *understand* it to be there. The *giglio* can be "played"—by children in the streets who carry chairs or milk crates as *giglio* stand-ins, or by grown up lifters who parody themselves by lifting each other on their shoulders and "dancing" when the day's ritual is through. And long after the feast is over, the *giglio's* presence may be evoked in a local bar by playing the jukebox. Selection Number 104 is the song that begins every *giglio* lift, "*O giglio e paradiso*," and Number 204, its flip side, is another lifting tune, "*The Giglio Cha-Cha*."

The *giglio* tower begins as a religious symbol but goes on to reflect the events taking place around it. Ultimately, it also stores contexts which may or may not have anything to do with religion, but which are just as vital to the community. For instance, the *giglio's* very form, rising by degrees from a broad base to a narrow top, surmounted by a single powerful figure, mirrors the structure of the feast, either in a religious sense (St. Paulinus above, the people below), or in terms of organization of its hierarchy (*Capo* Number One above, apprentices, lieutenants, and lifters underneath). Its shape

evokes another feast motif—male virility and power. There is evidence that the feast has its origins in fertility rites connected with the worship of Dionysius in ancient Nola.⁶ But one need not go any further back than the latest Brooklyn feast to see the *giglio* tower, carried by its straining young men while their commanders bellow, "Get it up! Get it up!" and a bevy of admiring young women watch and shout encouragement from the sidelines, to appreciate the phallic symbolism of the *giglio* form.

The *giglio* is symbolically connected to another major artifact of the feast, the *capo's* cane, to form a tableau that embodies the ideals of youth and adulthood in the community. A cane is carried by each *capo* and is part of its owner's style and personality. Some are light and almost pencil thin, others thick and heavy. Some are striped like candy canes or barber poles, others carved or inlaid, still others plain black with brass tip and ferrule. The *capo's* cane has functions other than sartorial. During the dancing of the *giglio*, the *capo* commands with his cane, pointing, gesticulating, jabbing the air, punching it in front of his body like a drum major or waving it elegantly like a conductor's baton. In the old days, the *capos* sometimes used their canes to beat the legs of the men under the structures if they were not lifting high enough or following the proper route. It is not hard to see that what the *giglio* is to the lifters, the cane is to the *capo*. The cane is a *giglio* in microcosm. It takes as much power to wield it as it does to lift the *giglio*, but a different kind of power. Watching an older *capo* dance lightly and easily, cane in hand, in front of the sweating, grunting young lifters struggling under the *giglio*, one is seeing brute physical strength paired off and contrasted with refined social power. It is a graphic representation of young vitality channeled for the good of church and community by mature authority exerted with effortless self-control and consummate grace.

Folk Art, Neighborhood, and Community

It would be impossible to separate the meaning of the Feast of St. Paulinus from its artifacts. In being imbued with the most cherished values of the community, the artifacts, especially the *giglio*, are given the capacity to store the feast and extend its dimensions in both space and time. The people who keep the feast can, through the feast's artifacts or representations, make it present at the most important

junctures of their lives. A wedding photograph in an old photo album shows the groom, a regular participant in the feast, looking on as his male friends dance his bride as if she were the *giglio*, lifting her on their shoulders in response to a *capo's* command (fig. 7-5). And in a Queens cemetery, the gravestone of a Brooklyn family long associated with the feast displays a center sculpture of "St. Paolino di Nola," framed by two images of the *giglio* engraved in the granite (fig. 7-6). Invoking the feast is possible in these situations because of the intimate connection between feast and artifacts; make present the artifacts, even by merely "playing" or picturing them, and you make present the feast. And to do so is appropriate because by invoking the feast, you are invoking the community with it.



Figure 7-5. Wedding Dance, 1950s
 Friends of the groom honor him and his bride by "dancing" her as if she were a *giglio*, with two lifters and a *capo* (left). A young boy echoes the *capo's* stance; the groom is at right. (Courtesy I. Sheldon Posen)



Figure 7-6. Cemetery Headstone of a Brooklyn Family with Close Ties to the Feast
A carving of St. Paulinus is framed by two *gigli* incised in the granite.
(Courtesy I. Sheldon Posen)

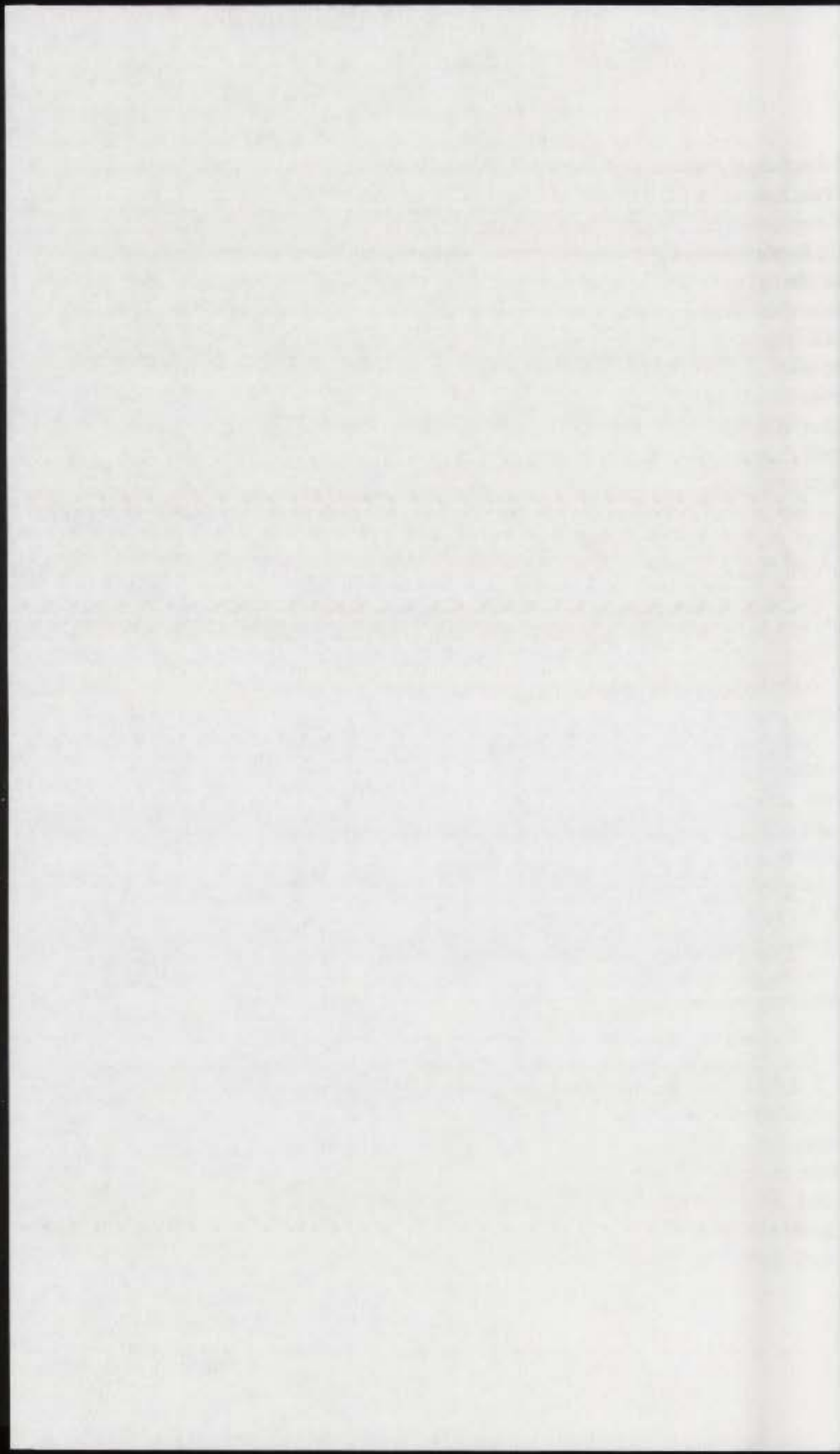
The identification of the community with the feast and its principal artifact, may in part have to do with how present a companion the *giglio* has been during the community's one hundred years in Brooklyn. The tower's form and fortune have shown an uncanny propensity to follow their own. Soon after the group's arrival in the New World, the *giglio* made its reappearance among them, ripe with additional meaning. Reduced from eight to one, the solo *giglio* now told a story not only of religion and history, but about being a relatively poor and small immigrant community that was more in need of solidarity than fragmentation and competition. From the 1920s to World War II, years perceived as the neighborhood's "Golden Age," the achievement of erecting a *giglio* every year that looked like and shared parts with the previous years', rather than straining for innovation in design or destroying old ones, reflected a community that was consolidating itself, adopting a somewhat conservative ethnic outlook and enjoying a geographically integral neighborhood. The years immediately following the war saw the neighborhood cut in half by an expressway that destroyed its old church, and in the decade and a half that followed, a whole generation of young adults left the neighborhood to find homes in the suburbs. The feast and *giglio* were in tune with these changes: in 1954, the local social clubs who had previously organized the feast lost control to the newly built church. New music was being written for the band, T-shirt uniforms appeared on the lifters, and the *giglio* boasted a modular framework. By the 1970s and into the early 1980s, the neighborhood was just holding on, much diminished in size and trying to lure back its young. The *giglio* too was just holding on, smaller than before, a patchwork of salvaged materials improvised by an American-born generation of makers with access to technology but barely remembered traditional skills. It appeared that in 1984, neighborhood and *giglio* were well past their prime.

It should have been possible to predict in 1983 or 1984 that there would be a new *giglio* soon, as actually appeared in 1985. In those two years it became obvious that the neighborhood was picking up. Artists priced out of Manhattan lodgings began buying and renovating houses in this neighborhood that is only a subway stop or two from Manhattan's Union Square. Young families, many of them Italian-American, also began moving in or moving back. In the mid-1980s, the neighborhood has suddenly become a mecca for New York Ital-

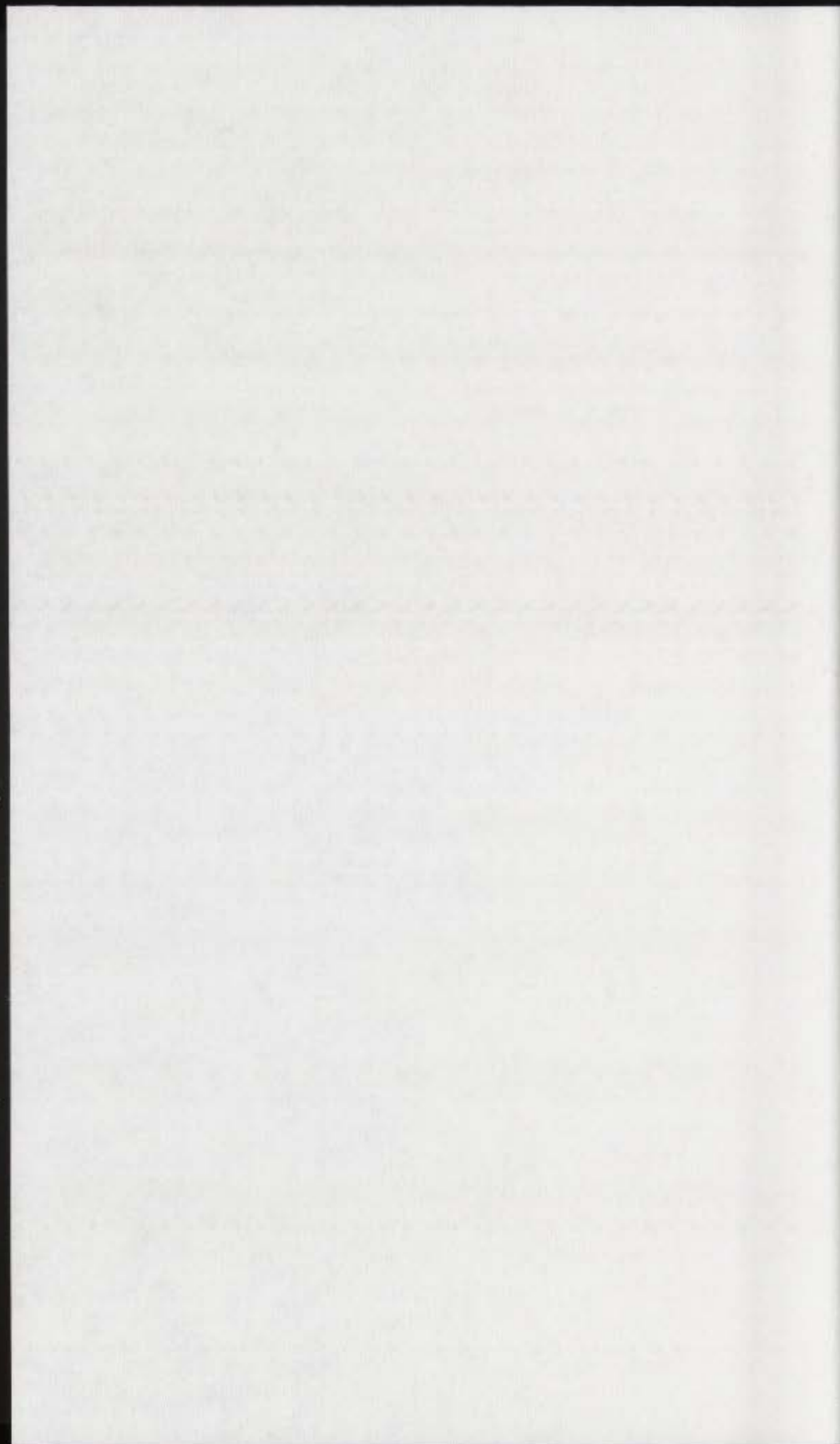
ians, largely because of the feast. Along with the Feast of San Gennaro (celebrated in Manhattan's Little Italy every fall), the Feast of St. Paulinus has become *the* Italian event in New York: for both members and non-members, it has come to represent what it means to be Italian-American. It is also an event where persons of Italian descent, whether they have any connection with the neighborhood from the old days or not, come "to have their Italian batteries charged."⁷ What is taking place here is the transformation of a community's symbol into an ethnic icon. Whatever else this may show, it is further evidence that the Brooklyn *giglio*, on any scale it works, is community based, and community creating, folk art.

Notes for Chapter 7

1. This article has benefitted from suggestions and insights offered by Maxine Miska and Joseph Sciorra. Mr. Sciorra also conducted the interviews extensively quoted herein.
2. An ample account of the Feast of St. Paulinus in Nola, along with very fine photographs, is given in Roberto De Simone, *Chi e devoto: Feste popolari in Campania* (Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1974).
3. A detailed comparison, with drawings, of the construction of the Brooklyn and Nola *gigli* is presented in I. Sheldon Posen and Daniel Franklin Ward, "Watts Towers and the *Giglio* Tradition," *Folklife Annual I* (Washington, D.C.: American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 1985), pp. 143-57.
4. *Bricolage* is discussed by Simon Bronner and Jack Santino in chapters 5 and 6 of this volume.
5. See Albinia Wherry, "The Dancing Tower Processions of Italy," *Folklore* 16 (1905): p. 248. De Simone suggests similar connections in *Chi e devoto*.
6. There were several towers at least as high and elaborate as Nola's as late as the beginning of this century, but I have found no sources to indicate that they have survived intact.
7. I owe these observations on the feast's recent status to Joseph Sciorra, who has been able to keep in direct contact with the neighborhood and its celebration. Mr. Sciorra should not, however, be held responsible for any conclusions I have come to based on his account.



Consequences of Collection



The Role of *Mexicano* Artists and the Anglo Elite in the Emergence of a Contemporary Folk Art

Charles L. Briggs

Up to the 1960s it was fashionable to envision folk artists as standing far apart from the perplexing currents of the modern world.¹ The use of such adjectives as "primitive," "grass-roots," "outsider," "backyard," "country," and "isolated," in connection with the artists provided a protective semantic shield between producers and consumers of folk art.² Somehow the work itself just found its way into major museums and galleries without exposing the artists to contamination by the market.

The naivete of this vision was seriously questioned during the late 1960s and the 1970s. Studies of artistic traditions from throughout the world revealed that dealers and collectors exercise an important role in shaping style and content.³ Research showed that when sales go primarily to patrons who are not part of the artist's own community, the two parties are likely to be separated by wide cultural, religious, and aesthetic differences. Since the buyers have an economic advantage over the producers, they often induce artists to bring their work more in line with their own tastes. In all too many cases, the result is the creation of an artistic industry which is at odds with the cultural, religious, and aesthetic sensibilities of artists and their communities.

Awareness of this process has revealed the need for additional research. We know far too little about the role of collectors, dealers, museum personnel, cultural organizations, and scholars in affecting

the course of artistic evolution. We are particularly ignorant about the motives which inform their participation in this process.

The question also remains as to what we, as members of this group, can really do to prevent the transformation of tradition through outside intervention. Some observers see dealers and collectors as villains who force folk artists to conform to market demands. The implication seems to be that everything would be fine if only the artists were left in peace, free from outside contamination. The naïvete in this perspective lies in the fact that the artists' communities and the political-economic pressures which affect them have changed radically during the past half century. Most folk artists must sell at least some of their work to outsiders if they want to make their living at it, and this means that they cannot entirely escape external cultural and aesthetic influences. In short, if the patrons disappeared, so would many of the artists.

Others have adopted a pessimistic stance. The plight of the artist is determined not only by the interests of dealers and collectors, but by cultural and political-economic shape of society as a whole. The role of the student is thus seen as watching, pencil and camera in hand, as the inevitable occurs, hoping at least to preserve an adequate record of what has happened. Although I fear that this pessimistic view is not entirely unwarranted, it does overlook one very important factor. Persons who talk and write about folk art under the aegis of either scholarship or connoisseurship play an important role in this process, affecting the way that artists and patrons alike perceive artistic traditions. Such fatalism thus reflects a failure to carry out one of the most vital components of the scholar/connoisseur role—critically examining one's stake in the game.

This essay looks at an instance of patron involvement in the evolution of a folk art. The artists are *Mexicanos*, descendants of Spanish and Mexican citizens who settled New Mexico and adjacent areas during the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. The objects are images of Catholic holy personages, carved from aspen, cottonwood, and juniper and they are sometimes painted. The patrons initially consisted of Anglo-American artists and writers who settled in Santa Fe and Taos, although these have been followed by a diversity of customers during the last half century. I am primarily concerned with who these outsiders were and what shaped their participation in the art. I will draw on this case in suggesting some ways in which

scholars and connoisseurs can help mitigate the negative impact of the market on folk art.

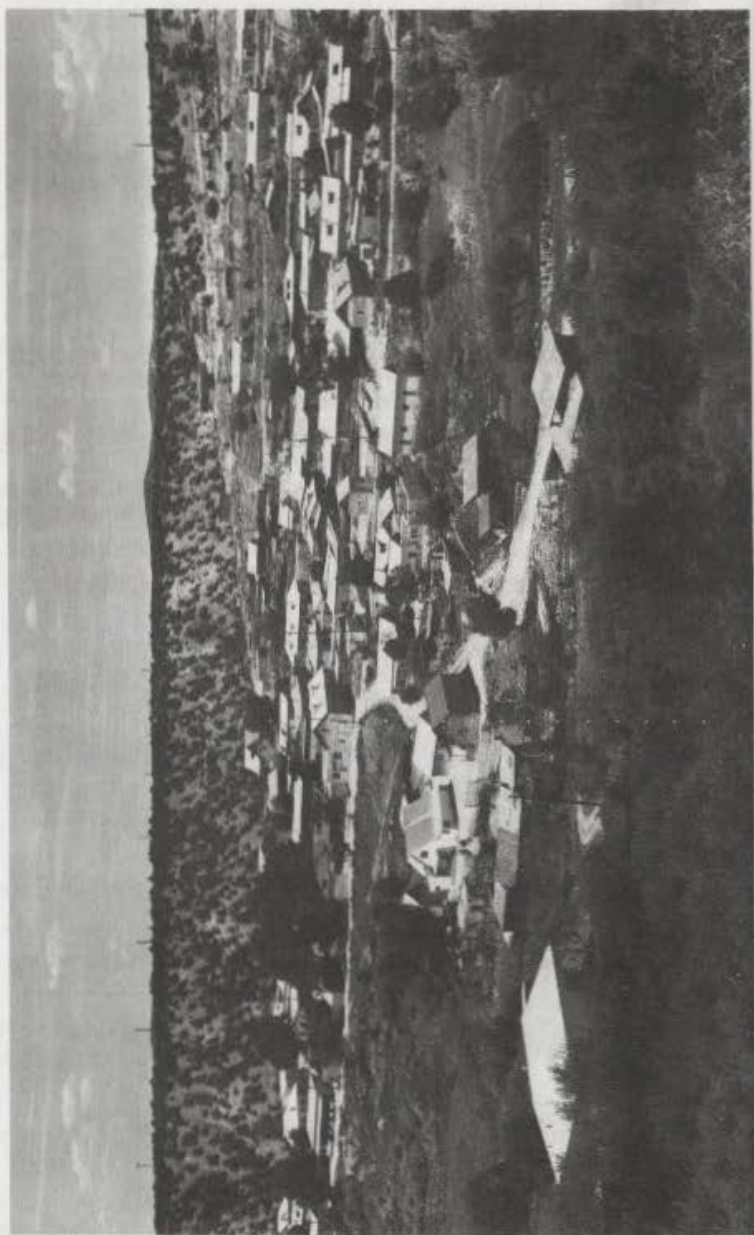
The Rise of the Image-Carving Industry in Cordova, New Mexico

The Spaniards brought images of the saints with them as they journeyed up from Mexico to conquer and colonize the northern provinces. The production of images in New Mexico dates from the late seventeenth century. Painted images on tanned buffalo, elk, and deer hides were executed by ecclesiastical and lay artists who possessed at least rudimentary formal training. In the eighteenth century, both oil paintings and sculptures were executed in Mexican Rococo style; many images were used in the conversion of the Pueblo Indians. A very different style arose later in the eighteenth century, when primarily native-born artists utilized both native and imported materials in an effort to fill the region's need for sacred images. The earlier orientation toward more academic prototypes and styles was replaced by local aesthetic and iconographic preferences, resulting in the creation of a distinct local style.⁴

José Rafael Aragon was one of the most prolific and one of the most highly skilled *santeros* or image makers. He fashioned *bultos* (painted wooden statues in the round), *retablos* (paintings on flat boards), and altar screens for churches, chapels, and homes. His work is graced by crisp lines and a bold palette. Aragon moved to Cordova (fig. 8-1), a small community on the slopes of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, when he had already reached adulthood.⁵ The local San Antonio de Padua del Pueblo Quemado Chapel, which was built around 1832,⁶ contains an altar screen and a number of *bultos* by Aragon. An apprentice of Aragon's is credited with having provided the two side altar screens and a number of *bultos*. Unfortunately, the railroad's cargo of lithographs, chromolithographs, and mass-produced statues displaced the *santero's* trade, and his art virtually disappeared late in the nineteenth century.

History shows, however, that the art was only dormant, not moribund. José Dolores Lopez (fig. 8-2) was born in Cordova in 1868; his father was Nasario Guadalupe Lopez.⁷ Nasario may well have been José Rafael Aragon's apprentice.⁸ It is clear in any case that Nasario produced a beautiful representation of *La Muerte*, a female

Figure 8-1. Cordova, New Mexico; a View of the Plaza from the South
(Courtesy Charles Briggs)



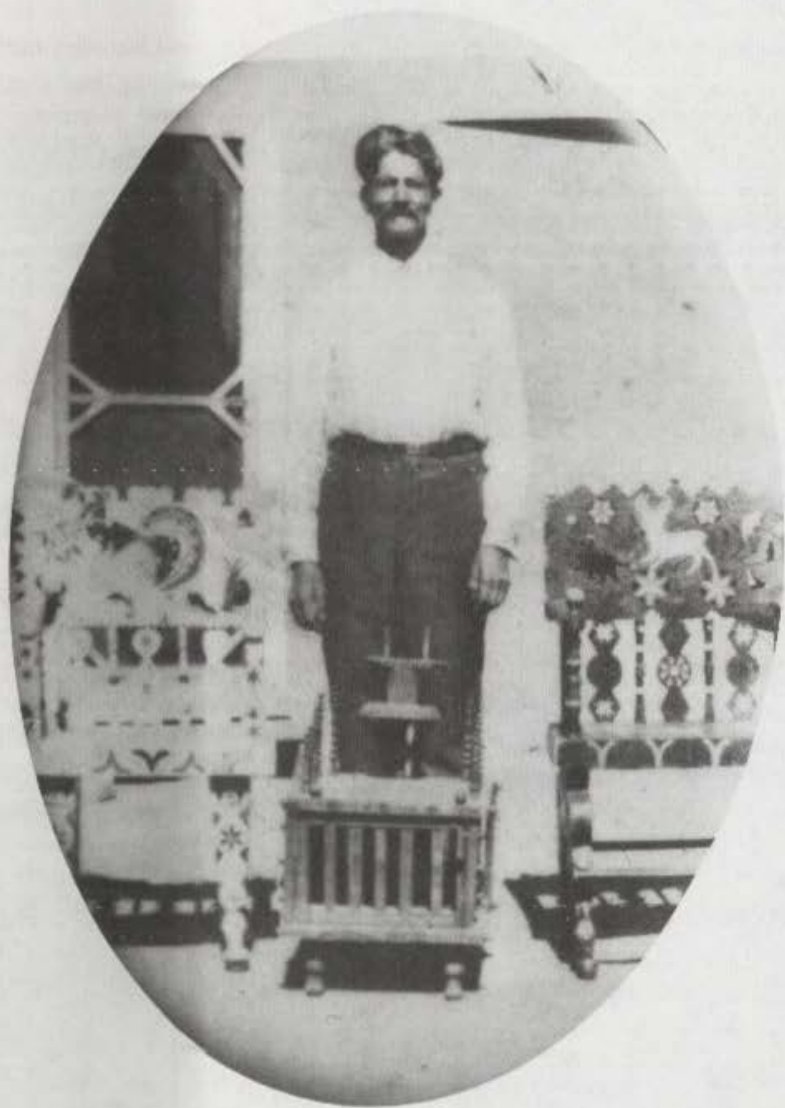


Figure 8-2. José Dolores Lopez, with Examples of His Painted and Chip-Carved Furniture (*left and right*)
The original metal-mounted photograph is in the collections of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
Courtesy Photographic Archive of the Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe)

personification of death, riding in a cart.⁹ Nasario and his sons carried on other *Mexicano* folk art traditions, including weaving and carpentry. José Dolores' primary vocation was farming and ranching. He grew corn, beans, wheat, chile peppers, legumes, and other crops in the Quemado valley and in montane meadows, and his herd of goats provided milk, cheese, and meat.

José Dolores also worked within the community as a carpenter, producing window and door frames, niches, roof beams and corbels, crosses for grave markers, coffins, and chests. His furniture repertoire included freestanding dish cupboards (fig. 8-3) and clothes closets, chairs, benches, hanging shelves, clock cabinets, and the like. As can be seen from the chairs in figure 8-2, many of the items featured brightly painted floral, animal, and decorative motifs. His furniture was well constructed, but it was not unusual. As sacristan of the chapel, he cared for the images, but did not make them. In short, although the art of the image maker had virtually disappeared by the early years of this century, individuals such as José Dolores Lopez were surrounded by the artistic and cultural traditions that had produced it.

The convergence of a number of forces catalyzed a resurgence of the art of the *Mexicano santero*. The first stimulus arose in the face of a personal crisis. Lopez's oldest son, Nicudemos, was called up in 1917 to fight in World War I. Lopez firmly believed Nicudemos would not survive the journey "to the other side of the ocean." Melancholy and sleeplessness threatened his health. In order to pass the time and turn his thoughts away from his son, Lopez began to whittle. He was greatly relieved upon receiving a letter from Nicudemos and a picture of his company, and used his new hobby to fashion a wooden frame for both letter and photograph.

By the time that Nicudemos returned home in 1919, Lopez was firmly entrenched in the use of his carving techniques. He used his new skills in providing furniture and other items for his own household as well as those of friends and relatives. Figure 8-4 shows a highchair that he carved for a family member. A comparison of the chairs pictured in figure 8-2 and a close-up of the niche (fig. 8-5) illustrates the contrast between Lopez's early (painted) and post-1917 (chip-carved) furniture.

Lopez similarly used this surge of artistic activity in addressing the religious needs of the community. He repaired and repainted a



Figure 8-3. José Dolores Lopez, *Trastero* or Free-Standing Dish Cupboard
Height approximately 1.8 m.
(Private collection)



Figure 8-4. José Dolores Lopez, Carved Red Cedar and Pine Highchair
59 cm. high x 26 cm. deep.
(Courtesy Spanish Colonial Arts Society, Inc.,
Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe)



Figure 8-5. José Dolores Lopez, Carved, Free-Standing Niche
Total height 63 cm.; box 4.4 x 39 x 29.5 cm.
(Courtesy Museum of International Folk Art,
Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe)

number of images in the chapel, including the principal image of the patron, St. Anthony of Padua (see fig. 8-6). A transitional piece is provided by the brightly painted Bible stand that he donated to the chapel in 1919 (fig. 8-7). In a clear departure from the generally anonymous works of the traditional *santeros*, Lopez carved or painted his initials in a conspicuous place on nearly every work.

This initial artistic revolution is, however, only part of the story. His style had changed substantially, but his repertoire remained largely the same. In contrast to his later work, he did not carve images, and his works were given away or bartered within the community; Lopez's reputation was still entirely local. The further development of his work was shaped by events which began far beyond the confines of the Quemado Valley.

Northern New Mexico was beginning to feel the impact of the industrial revolution and the commercialization of production and exchange. In order to survive in this harsh, semiarid environment, rural *Mexicanos* depended upon access to land that stretched between a number of ecological zones. Cordovans had enjoyed the use of small irrigated farm plots on the valley floor since the time the settlement was founded in about 1730.¹⁰ The uplands which stretch between the community and the 13,102 foot Truchas Peaks to the east had similarly been available for grazing, hunting and fishing, cutting timber and fuelwood, dry farming, and the like. Although the United States committed itself to recognizing the property rights of Mexican citizens in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, most *Mexicano* communities lost control over their land base. This was particularly true of the common lands which surrounded the settlements.

Such was the case in Cordova. The Court of Private Land Claims denied its claim to the Pueblo Quemado Grant in 1896.¹¹ The Forest Service later drastically reduced the number of goats and sheep that Cordovans could graze on these lands. Since the meager farm plots had never been sufficient to sustain the population, the local pastoral-agricultural economy fell apart. Cordovans turned to a variety of types of migratory wage labor in coping with the situation, including sheep herding, track laying, following the harvests, mining, and the like.¹² José Dolores Lopez's sons spent a good deal of time away from home. The elder Lopez wanted to be on hand to attend to the farm plots and to participate in the full round of familial and community rituals and other activities. Faced with the same needs for cash



Figure 8-6. Image of St. Anthony of Padua, Patron Saint of Cordova, as Repaired and Repainted by José Dolores Lopez
Height 55 cm.
(Private collection)

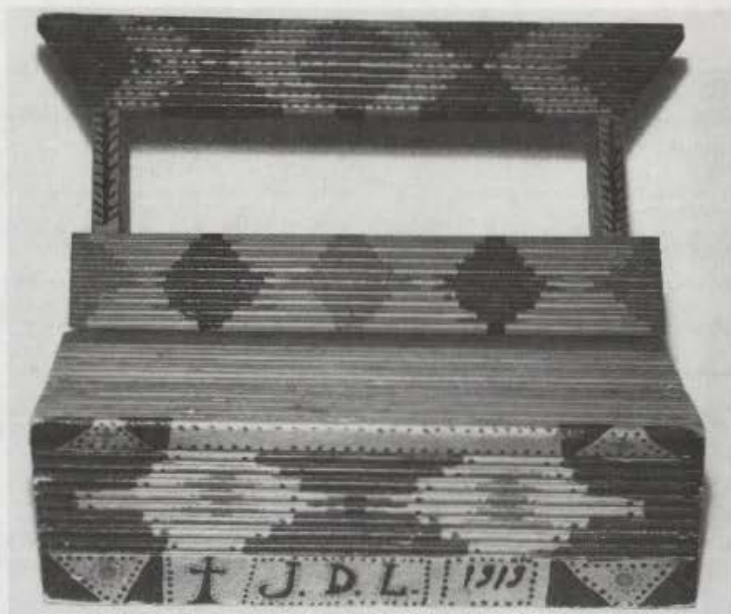


Figure 8-7. José Dolores Lopez, Bible Stand
 Total height 28.8 cm.; base 36.3 x 11.3 x 31.3 cm.
 Blue, black, and red paints rather than chip-
 carving adorn the stand; note the date 1919
 and Lopez's initials on the bottom.
(Private collection)

income, Lopez turned to wood carving to fill the gap left by subsistence production. The industry thus provided him with a means of coping with an economic crisis.

Since Lopez's neighbors were equally short on cash, he had to look outside the community for patrons. Nevertheless, a growing influx of Anglo-Americans to the area provided a market for his carvings. Merchants had trickled into the larger towns in New Mexico after the opening of the Santa Fe Trail from Missouri in 1821, and lawyers, bureaucrats, more merchants, and other Anglo-Americans arrived after the United States took possession of the area in 1846.¹³ Artists and professional writers began visiting the area in the late nineteenth century. By 1920, "colonies" of artists and writers had become established at Taos and Santa Fe and had gained national recognition.¹⁴

The area proved attractive to these individuals for a variety of reasons. A number of colony members, such as Alice Corbin (Henderson), sought a climate which would speed their recovery from pulmonary and other illnesses.¹⁵ All were intrigued by the beauty of the landscape, especially since it was relatively undisturbed by the appurtenances of industrial capitalism. The cost of living was lower than in urban centers. Marketing art was a problem; this was partly overcome by the establishment of the Taos Society of Artists, Los Cinco Pintores in Santa Fe, and other associations for the promotion and exhibition of paintings throughout the United States. Many writers and artists came at the urging of colony members; Joseph Sharp and Mabel Dodge (Luhan) in Taos and Mary Austin, Alice Corbin (Henderson), and Witter Bynner in Santa Fe were particularly effective promoters.

Beyond the natural environment, the single most powerful magnet was the exotic qualities that the newcomers perceived in the local Native American and *Mexicano* cultures. This helped them in overcoming the *ennui* with familiar subjects and satisfy, as Blumenschein put it, their "great enthusiasm for the discovery of fresh material."¹⁶ The fact that artistic callings were respected among Native Americans and *Mexicanos* also helped Anglo-American artists enjoy greater acceptance than they had experienced elsewhere. The intelligentsia believed that both cultures would soon perish if not protected from the homogenizing influence of mainstream society. As Maurice Sterne wrote to his then wife, Mabel Dodge, "Dearest Girl. Do you want an object in life? Save the Indians—their art, culture—reveal it to the world."¹⁷

The intelligentsia's championing of the minority-group cause entailed more than informing other Anglo-Americans of the two groups' plight through art and literature. They organized in opposition to legislation which they saw as threatening the welfare of Native Americans and *Mexicanos*. Artists and writers also figured prominently in the formation of associations for the advancement of such causes and for organizing cultural events, such as the annual Santa Fe Fiesta. With respect to *Mexicano* folk art, early fiestas included a "Spanish Market" or "Spanish Fair." A more concerted effort came in 1925 when writer Mary Austin, painter-sculptor-writer Frank Applegate, and others organized the Spanish Colonial Arts Society.¹⁸ Although the group fostered research and the dissemination of information on *Mexicano* folk

art, most of their activities were devoted to providing better marketing outlets. They accordingly organized exhibitions and markets, selecting work for display and awarding prizes. Year-round sales were promoted by the establishment of a Spanish Arts Shop in Santa Fe which operated from 1929 to 1933; Leonora F. Curtin sponsored a Native Market from 1934 until 1939.

José Dolores Lopez was "discovered" by leading members of the Spanish Colonial Arts Society shortly after 1921.¹⁹ Austin, Applegate, and their friends frequented Cordova during Holy Week. A lay religious organization which annually reenacted Christ's Passion, the Brotherhood of Our Father Jesus Nazarene, used self-inflicted corporal punishment in their rites. This proved as exotic an event to Anglo-Americans, particularly those of upper-middle-class standing, as did the Snake Dance of the Hopi Indians.²⁰ Lorin Brown, born in Taos of a *Mexicana* mother and an Anglo-American father, was living in Cordova.²¹ Being bilingual and well-acquainted with both *Mexicano* and Anglo-American cultures, Brown proved the perfect mediator between Cordovans and the artists and writers who were his guests during Holy Week. Brown introduced Applegate to Lopez, and Applegate acquainted Lopez with Mary Austin. They soon persuaded Lopez to exhibit his carvings in Santa Fe, and he won first prize for a wall rack in the carved furniture category of the second annual prize competition of Spanish Colonial Arts in 1927.²²

Austin and Applegate's "encouragement" soon had its stylistic effects. The two patrons convinced Lopez that the bright housepaints and the bold designs that were popular furniture decorations among *Mexicanos* would not prove attractive to prospective Anglo-American patrons. The combination of painted and chip-carved surface ornamentation that Lopez used on much of the furniture he produced for Cordovans gave way to a sole reliance on chip-carving on most of the pieces he made for sale to outsiders. His repertoire changed as well, with a number of traditional *Mexicano* items disappearing and pieces which were used in Anglo-American homes, such as lazy Susans (fig. 8-8) and record racks, appearing.

Lopez's patrons later "encouraged" him to carve smaller pieces, suitable for sale to tourists. He accordingly produced birds and animals of all sizes as well as multigure scenes, such as the animal musicians shown in figure 8-9. He similarly carved imitations of Swiss and German mechanical toys (fig. 8-10). He also produced screen doors on commission for Santa Feans such as Mary Austin (fig. 8-11).



Figure 8-8 José Dolores Lopez, Lazy Susan
Height 118 cm.; largest tray 50.5 cm.
in diameter.
Produced for sale at the Spanish Market of
the Spanish Colonial Arts Society, ca.;1929.
(Courtesy Spanish Colonial Arts Society, Inc.,
Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe)



Figure 8-9. José Dolores Lopez, *Animal Musicians*
Height 42.5 cm.
(Courtesy Spanish Colonial Arts Society, Inc.,
Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe)

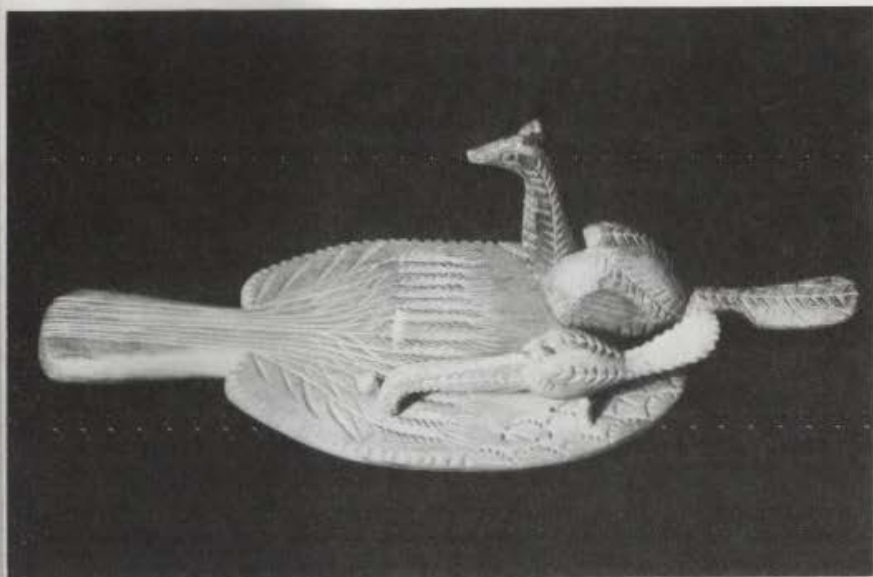


Figure 8-10. José Dolores Lopez, Pecking Toy, Birds in the Wheat
Leaf 20 cm. long; birds 15 and 10.5 cm. long.
The birds' heads can be made to bob up and down when the strings under the leaf are pulled out.

*(Courtesy Spanish Colonial Arts Society, Inc.,
Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe)*

But the most significant change in his repertoire came when Frank Applegate induced Lopez to carve unpainted representations of Catholic holy personages. His first works were based on Genesis, including Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the Expulsion (fig. 8-12). The prototypes for these figures were reportedly contained in "an old book of French drawings which Lopez displays with pride to his visitors."²³ Lopez also drew on nineteenth-century polychromed images by Aragon which resided in the local chapel. The *bulto* by Aragon, referred to in the community as Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows, influenced Lopez's Our Lady of Light.



Figure 8-11. José Dolores Lopez, Carved Screen Door
from the Lopez Home, 1929
Height 190.5 cm; width 96.7 cm.
(Courtesy Museum of International Folk Art,
Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe)

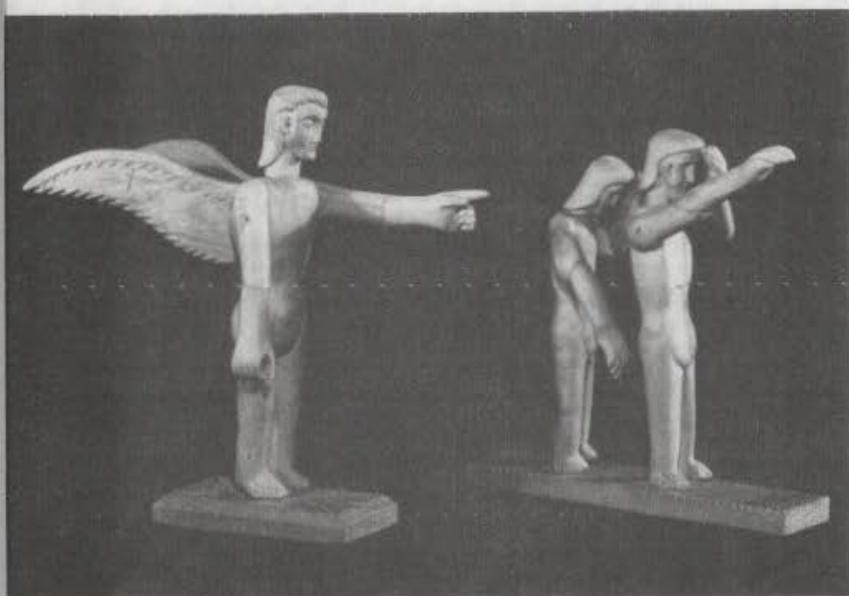


Figure 8-12. José Dolores Lopez, *The Expulsion from Paradise*
Adam 32 cm. in height.
Note that the angel's sword is now missing.
(Courtesy Museum of International Folk Art,
Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe)

The stylistic contrast between the two images yields insight into Lopez's departure from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century techniques. While Aragon used his palette in filling the broad spaces and articulating the halo, Lopez combined delicate chip-carving with designs adapted from filigree jewelry. Lopez elaborates the detail work on what was already a complex figure, reworking the iconographic features into an intricate crisscross of different types of elements. Lopez's exquisite *bulto* of St. Peter (fig. 8-13) was similarly modeled on a work by Aragon.



Figure 8-13. José Dolores Lopez, St. Peter
(San Pedro) with Key and Bible
Height 1.35 m.
*(On loan from Eva Salazar Ablborn to the
Museum of International Folk Art,
Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe)*

José Dolores Lopez died on May 17, 1937. His grave was marked by a cross that he had carved for himself early in his career, probably in 1917. It featured an intricately painted and carved set of crosses, stars, hearts, squares, and the like, along with an angel, two hands, and hearts, probably the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Lopez's lively wit and strong personality are still remembered vividly by older residents, and a prayer for the welfare of his soul is made each year during the darkness of the *Maitines* and *Tinieblas* ceremonies of Holy Week. His visual artistic legacy is very much alive today in Cordova as well. Daughter Liria and sons Nicudemos, Rafael, George, and Ricardo all became wood carvers, and the industry now rests in the hands of the grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and other members of the community. Although carving has not accorded great wealth to any of the artists, it has helped them hold onto their homes and land, and it has gained them recognition by aficionados of American folk art in the United States and abroad.

Factors Which Shaped the Artist-Patron Relationship

José Dolores Lopez appears to have been affected by three central concerns. First, he was a skilled carpenter and furniture maker who was fascinated by the possibilities offered by local woods as a medium of expression. Relatives and neighbors recall the delight which he took in carving. The comfort which it provided him after son Nicudemos was drafted into World War I suggests that it served him as an emotional release.

Second, Applegate and Austin added an important economic dimension to the art. Lopez was able to supplement the produce of his fields and the wages brought home by his sons with income from sales of wood carvings. The need for cash income seems largely responsible for Lopez's willingness to bring his work in line with the needs of the market. Lopez responded easily to the suggestions offered by his "marketing consultants"—Frank Applegate, Mary Austin, the McCrossens, and others. Lopez frequently solicited advice from Applegate and others with respect to the potential marketability of new innovations. A note to Applegate read as follows:

2/10/30

Mr. Applegate

I was here today looking for you.

I left this [sic] flowers for you to see what you can do with them

If there is demand for them let me know so I continue making more—for the [Santa Fe Annual] Fiesta if possible

Your friend

Jose Dolores Lopez²⁴

He was cognizant of the importance of new marketing opportunities, such as the annual Santa Fe Fiesta, the Spanish Arts Shop, and the markets and exhibitions offered by the Spanish Colonial Arts Society, and he sensed the importance of meeting patrons personally.

Third, it does not appear to be the case that Lopez thought of the patrons in economic terms alone. He considered such patrons as Frank Applegate, U.S. Senator Bronson Cutting, and Preston McCrossen to be personal friends. Upon receiving a letter from the manager of the Spanish Arts Shop which reported the death in 1931 of Frank Applegate, Lopez wrote that he felt "the greatest sadness in my heart" and that "on learning this I went to the church and rang the bell for the great sorrow [of his widow]. I will not forget my brother Frank for the affection that he held for myself and my family."²⁵ The patrons provided Lopez with an economic and social link to individuals who possessed much more familiarity with and access to the institutions of the superordinate society. Lopez enjoyed this contact. Something of a local politician, Lopez also used these contacts as a source of influence within Cordova itself.

The patrons' motives for involvement in the art were complex. On the one hand, the artists and writers were among the more sensitive of their time, and they were much more knowledgeable about Native American and *Mexicano* art and culture than their contemporaries. They genuinely sought to counter racial or ethnic prejudice and to improve the economic situation of the groups.

Their relationship to these groups was not, however, without its contradictions. They appropriated members of the two groups, along with their rites and arts, as subject matter, but Native American and especially *Mexicano* aesthetic values had little influence on their own styles. Van Deren Coke summarizes the work of the artists in the two colonies between 1882 and 1942 in the following terms:

It is true that the Taos group was seeking what Blumenschein described as "fresh material," by which they meant new visual stimuli. They were commercially oriented storytellers and needed the excitement of actual experience in order to create new pictures for the Mid-Western and Eastern art markets. They sincerely felt that the purpose of art was to reproduce an object literally while conveying an emotion that would be easily understood. . . . These painters were seduced by the external forms of Indian life and had little concern for the lesson to be learned from their subjects' own art. This resulted in a kind of empty gesturing which is most ironic, since most of these artists were genuinely fond of the Indians as a group and often studied their artifacts.²⁶

The depth of their interactions with *Mexicanos* was limited by a language barrier: few members of the intelligentsia spoke Spanish. They similarly sought to "preserve" the two groups' culture and art, to protect them from the homogenizing effect of industrial capitalism. Yet they provided strong magnets for drawing tourists and newcomers to the area, thus fostering the very development and modernization that they lamented.²⁷ Their collection of Native American and nineteenth-century *Mexicano* art similarly inflated its monetary value to such a degree that the ethnics' homes and churches were denuded through sales and thefts.

Perhaps most significantly, in seeking to "revive" and "encourage" Native American and *Mexicano* art, they set themselves up as the judges of the beauty and originality of works. By deciding who could participate in markets and exhibitions, they even determined what was to be defined as "traditional" *Mexicano* and Native American art. Such outside control of artistic expression has engendered resentment on the part of the artists. In the *Mexicano* case, this came to a head in the late 1970s through the formation of La Cofradia de Artes y Artesanos Hispánicos. The group sponsored exhibitions which were explicitly free from the conventions which guide the selection of art and artists for inclusion in the Spanish Market and similar events.

The Effects of Patronage on Mexicano Art

Austin, Applegate, and other patrons exercised influence over the development of Lopez's carving. As noted above, Applegate and Austin offered numerous suggestions to the elder Lopez regarding the aesthetic preferences of Anglo-American customers. Although Lopez's use of house paints in bright colors was popular among *Mexi-*

canos, the two convinced him that they would prove "too gaudy" for Anglo-Americans. They similarly induced him to carve items of furniture used in the homes of the intelligentsia, such as lazy Susans and record racks. The most profound change of all, however, came when Lopez began producing images of the saints for sale to outsiders and, in most cases, non-Catholics. This was resented as sacrilege by many of Lopez's neighbors, and this controversy persists through the present.²⁸

The overall effect of the patrons' influence in the development of Lopez's carving was thus to reorient the art away from the cultural and aesthetic needs of the community and to bring it more in line with those of a certain segment of the superordinate society. The patrons believed that *Mexicano* arts were quickly dying (if not dead). They accordingly felt that outside intervention was necessary to re-educate the *Mexicanos* with respect to the nature and importance of their own traditions. Note that it was the patrons who decided what was to be considered "traditional," "authentic," "Spanish colonial" *Mexicano* art. They used personal contact with the artists (as in the case of Lopez) as well as craft schools, exhibitions, fairs, prize competitions, and shops in bringing *Mexicano* art in line with their definition of tradition and with their sense of what would sell.

Unfortunately, the patrons failed to grasp the nature of the image-carving art. When they looked at *Mexicano* religious art, the patrons saw a set of objects. They accordingly filled private and institutional collections with these objects. Similarly, when they did not see *Mexicanos* producing the same types of objects, they set about the task of inducing the people to make them. Their actions thus reflect an attitude which might be called object-fetishism. They did not realize that carving consists of traditions which relate wood or color, design and workmanship on the one hand and an artist and his or her community on the other.²⁹ The nature of the art is to be found in the dynamic ways in which these patterns intersect with each historical epoch. The deep continuity between these different points of intersection lies in the art's responsiveness to the cultural, religious and aesthetic needs of *Mexicano* Catholics.

The patrons' promotion of work that remains within a narrow definition of "Spanish colonial" style contradicted this basic premise in two ways. First, the 1920s and 1930s found *Mexicano* society in a vastly different set of historical circumstances. With the loss of much

of the groups' land base and their immersion into industrial capitalism, the forces which underlay the art were hardly the same as those of the previous century. Second, the patrons' efforts did not "encourage" the artists to meet the needs of their communities, past or present. They rather taught the artists profit-oriented marketing strategies and ways of accommodating the newcomers' aesthetic patterns. The patrons thus ultimately furthered the very process of commercialization and cultural homogenization that they decried.

Conclusion: What's to Be Done?

This case study is not unique. The same process has affected innumerable traditions in the United States and abroad. In chapter 10 of this volume, Suzi Jones provides a poignant statement of its effects on Native American art in Alaska. Our interest in "folk" or "hand-made" arts and crafts moves us to buy and sell objects as a means of fostering tradition. I am not arguing that this process is entirely bad or that a few individuals could reshape it *in toto*. I do believe, however, that collectors, dealers, and scholars play a role in deciding whether the actions of patrons bring artistic processes and the needs of the artists' communities into harmony or discord.

As I see it, there are two primary ways in which we can take a positive role in this process. First, collectors, dealers, and scholars affect the way in which both artists and consumers relate to folk art. We must accordingly direct our efforts toward fostering patron awareness of the fact that artistic traditions involve complex sets of patterns. The objects themselves embody particular intersections of these cultural and historical patterns, but they are not the sole focus of tradition. We must respect cultural and artistic diversity, since these patterns will intersect in diverse ways at different points in time.

Second, the artists themselves stand at the intersection of the patterns which underlie their art, not patrons or scholars. Our interest in fostering tradition is thus best served by supporting the artists' freedom to decide where these patterns come together rather than by defining the nature of tradition or excellence for the artist. Ideally, works of art promote dialogue between individuals, communities, societies, and even different historical epochs. When one party can dictate the terms of the discussion, dialogue becomes monologue. The

central responsibility of collectors, dealers, and scholars is to lobby for a renegotiation of these terms. If a genuine dialogue can be established, traditional artists will have a better chance to present the richness and complexity of their message.

Notes for Chapter 8

1. Research on the Cordova wood carvers was funded by the International Folk Art Foundation and the National Institute of Mental Health. A research grant from the National Science Foundation and an Andrew W. Mellon Faculty Fellowship in the Humanities at Harvard University helped me complete my studies of *Mexicano* visual and verbal art. E. Boyd, Juanita and Gilberto Benito Cordova, Paul Kutsche, Marianne Stoller, and Marta Weigle generously extended both support and criticism. I was only able to undertake the study due to the willingness of the people of Cordova, New Mexico, particularly Silvanita and George Lopez, to teach me what life looks like from their vantage point.

Peter Seitel, Marjorie Hunt, and Thomas Vennum, Jr., of the Office of Folklife Programs, Smithsonian Institution, criticized a crucial passage, and they kindly allowed me to reprint several paragraphs from my article, "The 'Revival' of Image-Carving in New Mexico: Object-Fetishism or Cultural Conservation?" (in *1985 Festival of American Folklife*, ed. Thomas Vennum, Jr., Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution and the National Park Service, 1985, pp. 57-61).

2. See John Michael Vlach's "Properly Speaking: The Need for Plain Talk about Folk Art," chapter 1 of this volume.
3. See *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (vol. 6, no. 4, Fall 1982); Nelson H. H. Graburn, ed., *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Charles L. Briggs, *The Wood Carvers of Cordova, New Mexico: Social Dimensions of an Artistic "Revival"* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980); J. J. Brody, *Indian Painters and White Patrons* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971); Suzi Jones, "Art by Fiat, and Other Dilemmas of Cross-Cultural Collecting," chapter 10 of this volume; Nancy J. Parezo, *Navajo Sandpainting: From Religious Act to Commercial Art* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1983); Dorothy Jean Ray, *Eskimo Art: Tradition and Innovation in Northwest Alaska* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982); Simon J. Bronner, *Grasping Things* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), pp. 178-210.
4. See E. Boyd, *Saints and Saint Makers* (Santa Fe: Laboratory of Anthropology, 1946) and *Spanish Colonial Popular Arts* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico, 1974); José Edmundo Espinosa, *Saints in the Valleys: Christian Sacred Images in the History, Life and Folk Art of Spanish New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press; rev. ed., 1967); George Mills, *The People of the Saints* (Colorado Springs: Taylor Museum, 1967); and William Wroth, *Chris-*

tian Images in Hispanic New Mexico: The Taylor Museum Collection of Santos (Colorado Springs: The Taylor Museum of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 1982).

5. Wroth (*Christian Images*, p. 129) notes that José Rafael Aragon moved from Santa Fe to Pueblo Quemado, as Cordova was known until 1900, sometime between the death of his first wife in 1832 and his marriage to a young widow of Pueblo Quemado, Maria Josefa Cordova, in 1834. Aragon died in 1862 (Book of Burials for 1860–1924, Santa Cruz de la Canada Parish, Archdiocese of Santa Fe, p. 27).
6. In a document of 1 January 1832, the residents of Pueblo Quemado note that a license has been granted for a “public chapel of St. Anthony of Padua.” Since this statement contains their promise to build, maintain, and furnish the chapel, it was probably built shortly thereafter (Archives of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, *Patentes*, Reel 55, Frame 230).
7. José Dolores was the last child of Nasario Lopez and Maria Teresa Bustos; he was born on 1 April 1868 (Archives of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, Baptisms, 5 April 1868, State Records Center and Archives).
8. See *The Wood Carvers of Cordova, New Mexico*, pp. 26–29.
9. Mitchell A. Wilder and Edgar Breitenbach, *Santos: The Religious Folk Art of New Mexico* (Colorado Springs, Col.: The Taylor Museum, 1943), (esp. text opposite pl. 32) claim that the death cart’s maker was José Dolores Lopez’s grandfather, but family sources are in agreement that the carver was Nasario.
10. The exact date of settlement is unknown, since the original petition for the grant and the governor’s decree have not been found. A 1725 grant to lands immediately south of the community does not mention any settlement in the Cordova area. When the grant was reissued in 1743, however, the Pueblo Quemado was listed as the northern border. See Case #211 in the papers of the Court of Private Land Claims (in the New Mexico Land Grants Collection, State Records Center and Archives, Santa Fe.)
11. Court of Private Land claims, Case #212.
12. See Bernard J. Siegel, “Some Structure Implications for Change in Pueblo and Spanish New Mexico” in *Intermediate Societies, Social Mobility, and Communication: Proceedings of the 1959 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society*, ed., Verne F. Ray (Seattle: American Ethnological Society, 1959), pp. 37–44; Soil Conservation Service, *Village Livelihood in the Upper Rio Grande Area and a Note on the Level of Village Livelihood in the Upper Rio Grande Area* (Regional Bulletin No. 44, Conservation Economics Series No. 2. Albuquerque: Soil Conservation Service, 1937) and *Village Dependence on Migratory Labor in the Upper Rio Grande Area* (Regional Bulletin No. 47, Conservation Economics Series No. 20. Albuquerque: Soil Conservation Service, 1937); Allan G. Harper, Andrew R. Cordova, and Kalvero Oberg, *Man and Resources in the Middle Rio Grande Valley* (Albuquerque: University

- of New Mexico Press, 1943); Charles L. Briggs, " 'Our Strength Is the Land': The Structure of Hierarchy and Equality and the Pragmatics of Discourse in Hispano (Spanish-American) 'Talk about the Past'" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1981).
13. William J. Parish, *The Charles Ilfeld Company: A Study in the Rise and Decline of Mercantile Capitalism in New Mexico* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961) provides a detailed discussion of the advent of mercantile capitalism in New Mexico.
 14. The classic source on the painters in the two communities and their work is Van Deren Coke, *Taos and Santa Fe: The Artist's Environment, 1882-1942* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press for the Anon Carter Museum of Western Art [Ft. Worth, Texas] and the Art Galler, University of New Mexico [Albuquerque], 1963). Marta Weigle and Kyle Fiore, *Santa Fe and Taos: The Writer's Era, 1916-1941* (Santa Fe: Ancient Cry Press, 1982) provide a discussion of the literary history of the two communities and an anthology. Also see Laura Bickerstaff, *Pioneer Artists of Taos* (Denver: Sage Books, 1955); Patricia Janis Broder, *Taos: A Painter's Dream* (Boston: Little, Brown, for the New York Graphic Society, 1980); Van Deren Coke, *Andrew Dasburg* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1979); James Mann Gaither, "A Return to the Village: A Study of Santa Fe and Taos as Cultural Centers, 1900-1934" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1957); Arrell Morgan Gibson, *The Santa Fe and Taos Colonies: Age of the Muses, 1900-1942* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983); Mabel Dodge Luhan, *Taos and Its Artists* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1947); Mabel Major and T. M. Pearce, *Southwest Heritage: A Literary History with Bibliography* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1938, 1948, 1972); Claire Morrill, *A Taos Mosaic: Portrait of a New Mexico Village* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973); Mary Carroll Nelson, *The Legendary Artists of Taos: Expanded from the Pages of "American Artist"* (New York: Watson-Guption, 1980); Kay Aiken Reeve, "The Making of an American Place: The Development of Santa Fe and Taos, New Mexico, as an American Cultural Center, 1898-1942" (Ph.D. dissertation, Texas A & M University, 1977); Edna Robertson and Sarah Nestor, *Artists of the Canyons and Caminos: Santa Fe, the Early Years* (Peregrine Smith, 1976).
 15. Weigle and Fiore, *Santa Fe and Taos*, p. 10. The Sunmount Sanatorium in Santa Fe served both as a sanatorium and a hotel, hosting a number of ailing artists and their visiting friends. The director, Dr. Frank E. Mera, organized cultural events such as plays and poetry readings on the grounds.
 16. Ernest L. Blumenschein, "Origin of the Taos Art Colony," *El Flaco* 20 (1926): p. 190.
 17. Quoted in Weigle and Fiore, *Santa Fe and Taos*, p. 11.
 18. For information on the "revival" of Mexicano arts and crafts, see Briggs, *Wood Carvers*; Gibson, *Santa Fe and Taos*; Sarah Nestor, *The Native Market of the*

Spanish New Mexican Craftsmen: Santa Fe, 1933-1940 (Santa Fe: Colonial New Mexico Historical Foundation, 1978); Ann Vedder, "History of the Spanish Colonial Arts Society, Inc." in *Hispanic Arts and Ethnohistory in the Southwest: New Papers Inspired by the Work of E. Boyd*, ed. Marta Weigle with Claudia Larcombe and Samuel Larcombe (Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1983), pp. 205-217; Marta Weigle, "The First Twenty-Five Years of the Spanish Colonial Arts Society, Inc." in *Hispanic Arts*, ed. Weigle, pp. 181-203; Weigle and Fiore, *Santa Fe and Taos*; and the references contained in these works.

19. Brown reports that he introduced Frank Applegate to José Dolores Lopez shortly after the former's arrival in New Mexico (personal communication, 1976). Since Applegate came to New Mexico in 1921 (Coke, *Taos and Santa Fe*, p. 121), this places the "discovery" of Lopez nearly half a decade after his initial innovation of the contemporary carving art.
20. Artists and writers also drew on the Brotherhood rituals in their work, as witnessed by Alice Corbin Henderson's *Brothers of Light: The Penitentes of the Southwest* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1937) and her husband William Pennhallow Henderson's wood-cut illustrations for the book and his oil painting *Penitente Procession* (shown in Coke, *Taos and Santa Fe*, p. 33). See Briggs, *Wood Carvers*, pp. 44-45; Lorenzo de Cordova (pseudonym for Lorin W. Brown), *Echoes of the Flute* (Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1972); Marta Weigle, *Brothers of Light, Brothers of Blood: The Penitentes of the Southwest* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976); Weigle and Fiore, *Santa Fe and Taos*, pp. 57-58.
21. A brief biography of Brown and a description of his involvement in Cordova and with Santa Fe artists and writers appears in Lorin W. Brown with Charles L. Briggs and Marta Weigle, *Hispano Folklife of New Mexico: The Lorin W. Brown Federal Writers' Project Manuscripts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978).
22. Anonymous, "Museum Events: Spanish Colonial Arts" *El Palacio* 23 (1927): p. 337.
23. Anonymous, "Arts of the Southwest," *El Palacio* 34 (1933): p. 126.
24. Lopez was literate in Spanish, but he knew very little English. The note was probably translated and inscribed by a family member. From the files of the Spanish Colonial Arts Society, Santa Fe. This body of correspondence was brought to my attention by Marta Weigle.
25. Letter from José Dolores Lopez to Preston McCrossen, Spanish Colonial Arts Society, Santa Fe.
26. *Taos and Santa Fe*, p. 107. There are some exceptions. One of the pioneers of the modern art movement in America, Marsden Hartly, worked in New Mexico between 1918 and 1920. His work incorporated both Native American symbolism and stylistic elements of *Mexicano retablos* or paints on panels. See Coke, *Taos and Santa Fe* pp. 49-52. Gibson, *Santa Fe and Taos Art Col-*

onies, who takes a much more romantic view of the Taos and Santa Fe scene in general, seems to believe that the Native Americans' influence was much greater than is recognized by Coke.

27. Coke, *Taos and Santa Fe*, p. 59, writes that "The Santa Fe Railroad discovered even before World War I the importance of picturesque paintings as a means of bringing tourists to New Mexico. They gave artists free passes to encourage them and often purchased their work for display in Mid-Western and Eastern ticket offices. Fred Harvey in his hotels also became a patron of the artists. The advantage of projecting an image of the Southwest in a romantic light was understood by these commercial enterprises." See also Gibson, *Santa Fe and Taos Colonies* and Weigle and Fiore, *Santa Fe and Taos*.
28. See Briggs, *Wood Carvers*, pp. 192-197.
29. See David Pye, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968); Michael Owen Jones, *The Hand Made Object and Its Maker* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Simon Bronner, *Chain Carvers: Old Men Crafting Meaning* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985).

"Fame Don't Make the Sun Any Cooler": Folk Artists and the Marketplace

Rosemary O. Joyce

"Fame don't make the sun any cooler," professed an Ohio folk artist. The line demonstrated his scorn for the attention lavished on him for several years now. Such seeming indifference is countered by his delight in that attention: the stream of visitors, the newspaper and magazine articles, the banquet invitations, the television appearances, and the demand for his wares. However one might compare and quantify it, his "fame" is, perhaps, greater than that which most folk artists have enjoyed. Yet national interest in American folk art is burgeoning; consequently, fame is a growing factor in many artists' lives. What, then, are the long-term results for them as individuals and as artists? What is happening to their process and their product? And what will that mean in the larger picture of folk art?

This essay explores these questions. One of its purposes is to show that many folk artists are indeed becoming attuned, as it were, to the symphonies of the marketplace. As a result, out of a need for economic support or psychological gratification (or both) they are changing process and product, all in direct response to the pressures of the buying public. I use the term "buying public" for those who buy the "idea" of tradition. The buying public includes consumers, curators, collectors, and folklorists. A second purpose is to sound a call to those who are interested in folk art to reconsider their demands for change, however inadvertent, in folk artists' work. This can be accomplished by educating the buying public to respect both the artists' tradition and their culture.

The current condition of folk art contains a certain irony. Con-

sumers of folk art, the people apparently most concerned with preserving tradition, are contributing to its erosion. The artist, eager to please and to sell, complies with consumer requests. With a "vicious circle" momentum, the more the product is changed and removed from a tradition, the less authentic and therefore the less salable it becomes. Ultimately tradition is lost, the buyer is disenchanted, and the market is gone. Further, the artist is ignored, shorn of tradition, income, and dignity. A call to halt the present demands upon artists is not, therefore, one which has been issued from an ivory tower perspective or one that ignores the financial plight of the folk artist. Instead it takes the long view, respecting both the cultural aesthetics and the financial future of these artists.

However remote, however naive they are (or may seem to be), such artists are becoming educated to the fact of public interest in folk art, with a variety of results. This has been evidenced by most of the artists with whom I have worked in Ohio, several of whom I will use as examples here. But first, an important point: one of my reasons for choosing to work with these artists is that their products have been relatively little affected by the market pressures referred to earlier. Nevertheless, the buying public has made its influence felt even with them, though in diverse ways and in differing degrees.

What are some possible results of this kind of awareness? Since we have an historical example in the Amish, we can do more than speculate. Natives of Switzerland and Germany, the Amish settled in Pennsylvania first, moving on to Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, Iowa, and beyond during the nineteenth century. To protect and maintain their religious beliefs, the Amish scrupulously shunned contact with the "outside" world. Consequently, they have become a cultural island in a sea of change, one of the few such encapsulated entities in our ever-shrinking world. Their pacifist and nonconformist religious doctrines, their shunning of electricity and other modern conveniences, their horse-drawn buggies and farm equipment, simple, austere clothes, and modest houses furnished in somber colors are all manifestations of Amish withdrawal from the societies around them. And now these expressions draw the widening curiosity and speculation on the part of that larger world, a result of the wistful search for yesterday. A recent article in the American Automobile Association's *Traveler*, for example, touted a visit to Ohio's "unique Amish country" as being "like a trip back in time, giving you a chance to

realize how much things have changed, yet how similar some things are."¹

Many of the Amish, especially the older generations, are dismayed by the intrusive lens of the public eye. Journalists, researchers, and filmmakers are either barely tolerated or openly discouraged, since their products (such as the 1984 Hollywood film *Witness*) are not considered fair depictions by most Amish. Yet others in the community have welcomed the many opportunities to broaden income potential, and have become extremely astute in their knowledge of the marketplace. Antique dealers, combing the areas with higher and higher offers for old "cast-offs," were the first group to penetrate the wall. Now tourists are welcomed, even embraced—figuratively.

In and around Holmes County, Ohio (purported to be the largest Amish settlement in the world), enterprising merchants entice visitors from other states and even countries. Cheese "houses" abound in the area. They ship Baby Swiss cheese all over the world, and offer on-site cheese-making demonstrations. County shops are stocked with hand-made articles. Miller's Dry Goods store in Charm specializes in handmade quilts, calicos, novelties, and paintings. Miller's Home Bake Shop in Millersburg tempts the visitor with homemade candies, butter, apple butter, and egg noodles and the Rastetter Woolen Mill offers comforters, rugs, and pillows. To the east of Walnut Creek is Der Candlemaker; in Sugarcreek, Yoder's Country Meats advertises "Bar-B-Q Specials."² The Amish Farm in Berlin gives tours of its main house and buggy shop, and features buggy rides, live animals, and a gift shop. Many restaurants, such as The Amish Door in Wilmot and the Good and Plenty near Brice, advertise "old fashioned" or "family style" Amish cooking on billboards and in newspapers, and an expensive bed-and-breakfast has opened in Millersburg.

Traditions, especially those which could yield marketable items, have changed in direct relation to their market potential. R. H. Dean, a long-time horse buyer, noted one of the surprising results in Amish breeding of stock. Whereas formerly Amish horses were bred for drafting strength, now they are bred for the show circuit buyer. As a result, conformation has changed dramatically: from short, blocky, and powerful, to graceful, sleek, "racey" animals. According to Dean, "They like a lot of light under 'em now" (meaning long legs instead of short).³

But no better example of change in tradition exists than that of

the change in Amish quilts. These have long been renowned for their visual impact, outstanding composition, and excellent workmanship, whose appeal "originates in their successful adaptation of form to function."⁴ They were worked in natural materials and dyed with vegetable colors, both chosen from a limited range of acceptability in these cloistered communities. Their designs were starkly simple geometrics, repeating again and again the diamond, square, triangle, bar, or combinations of these (fig. 9-1). Their outstanding composition has brought the quilts wide acclaim, so that now they have become cherished and extremely expensive collectors' items (at least those dating before 1940, preferably even earlier). Amish territory has been regularly combed for those earlier products. Today, advertisements placed in Amish newspapers proclaim that certain dealers will pay the "highest prices available" for old family quilts, and warn innocent owners—and obviously educating them as well—not to be misled by persons with lower offers.

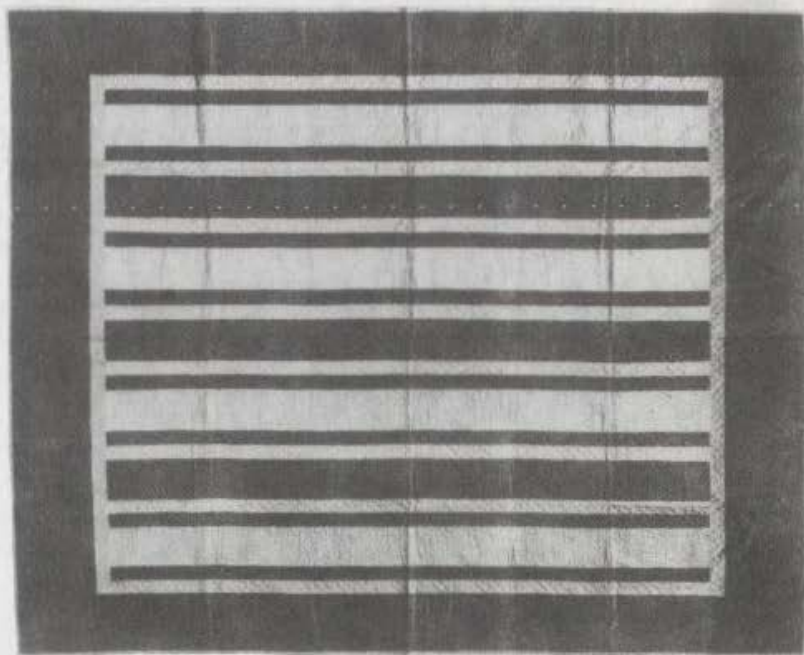


Figure 9-1. Amish Quilt with Split Bar Design,
Sugar creek, Tuscarawas County, Ohio, ca. 1920
Measures 72" x 87".

(Courtesy Darwin Bearley Collection, Canton Art Institute)

But this intense interest in the old quilts has not stimulated a respectful regard for the traditions of present-day Amish quilters. Eager customers have so cajoled them over the past twenty-five years, requesting a small change here and another there, that they have slowly but surely undermined and finally replaced this rich tradition. Gone are those glorious soft wools, the breathtaking geometric patterns, the handsome dark colors for which the Amish quilts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became so justly famous. Gradually the customer's preference for popular patterns and figured materials and bright colors have become prominent.

Nonetheless, demand for new Amish quilts continues to increase, and today they are sought by customers from all over the world. In order to handle the volume of sales from such popularity, some local retailers have organized their neighbors into a cottage industry. Different groups of women are assigned to specific tasks of either designing or cutting or piecing or quilting or finishing a quilt.⁵ Materials are ordered from all over the United States, rather than produced as before on Amish farms. Cotton and polyester blends have replaced wool and even cotton as choices. Further, those materials are offered in vivid reds and blues and greens, often featuring figured colors—polka dots, flowers, all-over designs—as well as solids. The Amish themselves use neither figured nor brightly colored materials. For a while the newer patterns were best sellers. But now older ones, i.e., those popular since the nineteenth century with the "English" (as the Amish refer to those in the dominant cultural community surrounding them), such as "Double Wedding Ring," "Log Cabin," and "Lone Star," are the top sellers. But contemporary Amish quilts are a far cry from their majestic abstracts of the nineteenth century—considered by many the forerunners of today's contemporary fine art abstract paintings (fig. 9-2). In addition to all these basic changes, yet another bow to modernity has come in the shape and size of the product. The customer's demand for small and thus inexpensive items has taken over, tilting production toward wall hangings, pillows, and the ubiquitous potholder.⁶

This evolution, even revolution, in a venerable artistic tradition has been the *direct* result of customer demands. It was not based on any one buyer's desire to erase a long, rich tradition of a people's ethnic and religious aesthetic. There was no malice of forethought, no deliberate subverting of a people's history. To most buyers, a quilt

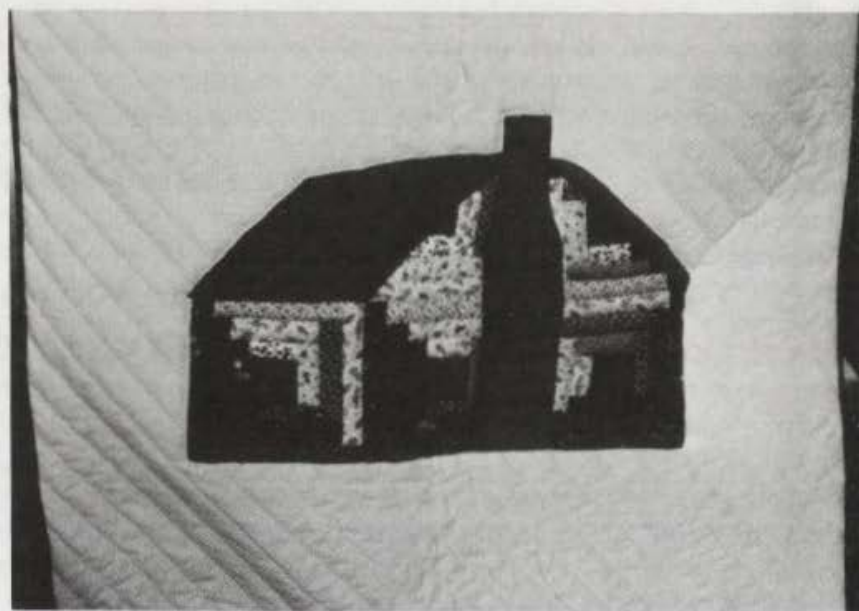


Figure 9-2. Amish Quilt with Departures from Tradition
30" x 30" wall hanging with "log cabin" pattern
made into a stylized log cabin.
(Courtesy Rosemary Joyce)

is a quilt. Their stereotype of brightly colored, stylized, polyester figures as the stuff of all good quilts was not meant to rob the Amish women of their artistic heritage. Nor was it designed to relegate them to paper doll figures interchangeable with all the other quilters of the world. But stereotypes do that. The cost of such change is high, yet it is exacted by a buying public quite unaware of the long-term effects of their seemingly small requests for change.

Let me offer a specific example. Lynn Malone is a handsome young woman who lives with her husband and two small sons on five acres near Oak Hill, Ohio. Their land borders her parents' and grandparents' land. And, like them, she has grown up in that steeply rolling hill country, where farming has become predominantly a part-time occupation. The work ethic is a strong aspect of their tradition, and one wonders how she is able to pursue her great love of quilting

between the cooking and canning, the cleaning and mending, the sewing for family and customers, the tending of children and assorted domestic animals. Nonetheless, it is obviously therapeutic. She says, "If I want to unwind, I pick up my quilt. It's pleasure, it's leisure. It's something I do for me, really, because I love creating beautiful things, and that's what I'm doing. It's not a kit; nobody else can go out and do it just like I can. Even if they would use the same patterns and colors, it would be different. It's just like I'm puttin' a part of *me* into it."

Lynn Malone has a strong sense of the tradition involved, and is quite proud of the fact that she has her great-great grandmother's quilting frame (fig. 9-3). "Sometimes when I'm quilting, I'm thinking, 'This could be great-great grandma Bradley sittin' here doin' this.' I mean she did the same thing, she used the needle and thread the same as I'm doing. Most of my things I piece by hand, which my great



Figure 9-3. Lynn Malone Quilts a "Wedding Ring" Quilt
Pieced by Her Grandmother
(Courtesy Rosemary Joyce)

grandmothers would've done. I've got thimbles that were my great-grandma Farrar's; they're miles and miles too big, 'n I can't use 'em, but I've got 'em. I've got the frames that my family has used down four generations back that I *know* of. You have to feel a link there; it's not like it's something abstract. It's just like you can touch the wood of those frames and feel where they've been—it's just warm, just like they've been there. . . . It's a link, most definitely a link. It's there, and it's tangible."

Malone's grandmother and mother taught her the fine stitching for which she is becoming well known. "I love it, and I think it shows in my work, because I am careful. My girl friend who's been my best friend for twenty-one years calls me a 'fussy sewer,' but I make all her clothes for her! So it pays to do your best in anything, and I feel like that's what I do. I do my best."

But recently there has been a definite progression of change in her quilting. Buyers are stating their likes and dislikes. Boutique owners from California are requesting specific products. She is becoming aware of which items sell best at shows and craft fairs. Thus she has begun to alter the soft cotton materials, the traditional patterns, and the muted colors her great-grandmothers, her grandmother, and her mother used (fig. 9-4). Instead she is turning to cotton blends (although she has given up on knits, stating "They're *impossible* to work with!"), to less traditional patterns and shapes, and to brighter colors—the same kinds of evolution which began for the Amish women in the 1940s. The quilting that has bridged at least five generations in her family is quickly becoming a popular expression rather than a traditional one.

To be sure, money plays a large part in any discussion of folk art and artists. Artists need income to live. But money has a number of faces. It is tangible proof of artistic worth; but it is also symbolic of personal recognition in this society, so the picture is further complicated. Money, however, is *not* important to someone like Dwight Stump, but it does play a key role in the future of his form of basketry round rod baskets.

Dwight Stump is a significant artist because of his skill and because he is among the last makers of white oak round rod baskets from his community (fig. 9-5). Eighty-five years old in 1985, Stump is a bearer of tradition and tradition is pervasive in every aspect of his life. He gathers herbs, collects Indian artifacts, dowses for water

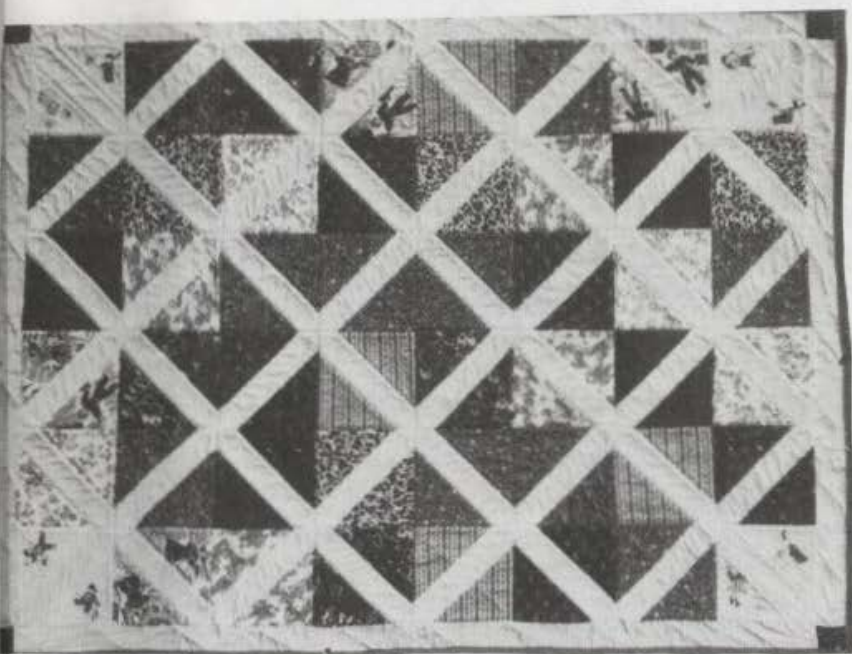


Figure 9-4. Commissioned Quilt by Lynn Malone Using a "Window Frame" Effect and Hand-Embroidered Figures from an Old Pair of Chinese Pajamas
(Courtesy Rosemary Joyce)

and crafts sisal rugs and wooden canes. He has made white oak baskets since he sat in a general store on cold winter evenings in Buena Vista and carefully observed the proprietor weaving white oak baskets. That was sixty-eight years ago. He is still hard at work.

Dwight Stump is a quiet man. He is happy to converse when questioned, and can be actually voluble on his favorite subjects, especially basketmaking. He was born and raised in rural southeastern Ohio, Hocking County. And, although he still retains a lively interest in the outside world (kept up mainly through watching the evening news on television), he seems more than content in his isolated surroundings.

His part of southeastern Ohio is so rugged that even in the last century farming was barely a subsistence occupation, and any jobs which could bring in cash were eagerly sought. That may explain the



Figure 9-5. Dwight Stump Weaves a White-Oak Round-Rod Basket
(Courtesy Rosemary Joyce)

surprisingly large group of basket weavers in that small, isolated area during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Stump himself learned from one of them, Mart, a neighbor who ran the general store at Buena Vista. Mart came from a whole family of basketmakers—mother, father, and eight (of their ten) children. The Hines family and their relatives, the Ciscos (Mrs. Hines's brother and his family), had a wholesale-type operation; at one time Stump himself drove a whole wagonload of their baskets to the railroad at Amanda, eight miles distant. It is difficult to imagine seeing a whole carload of baskets, especially since each one represents so many hours of work. For these are round rod baskets, requiring even more time-consuming and laborious work than the common flat splint type. There are at least forty separate steps involved to make just one.

To make a basket, Stump first goes to the nearby woods and finds a suitable tree, one at least twelve feet tall, tall enough to provide a fully round, knot-free, straight, eight-foot log. After splitting it into eight or ten wedges, he carries each heavy piece back to his shop. There he "works up" as much of the wood as he can use immediately, and stores the rest temporarily. Then, pulling the bark away with a tool of his own design, he works each wedge into quarter-inch strips. Next, in a difficult and arduous procedure, he pulls each of those strips through successively smaller round metal dies, until the size is just right for the size basket he plans to weave—smaller widths for a smaller basket. Using this process he shapes the distinctive round rods that are his particular specialty. Only then does he begin weaving. This, too, is an art, and requires another series of steps. Still, the final product is dependent on the skill utilized in the initial preparation of the splits.⁷

Stump reveals his feeling for the form of his products in his passing comments as he slowly, methodically goes about his work. First and foremost, a basket is a *container*, an object made for use, and usually for a specific function, not for decorative pleasure (fig. 9-6). The names and sizes usually reflect this function (a sewing basket, a corn basket, a clothes basket). As he commented vociferously when he pulled the "web of stay" together at the top—making an exotic shape—"I kin make 'em with the top pulled in, but *that's* no basket!"

Mixed in with his personal taste, however, is a practical awareness of his audience, his consumers: "They might think: I don't want no part of him!" (if he would, for example, make something strange and



Figure 9-6. Baskets Made for Farm Use by Dwight Stump
Clockwise, a two-thirds bushel basket, a bushel,
a peck, and a half bushel.
(*Courtesy Rosemary Joyce*)

exotic). And he does not lack for customers. Stump seldom leaves his acre and a half in Toad Hollow, so intent is he on filling endless orders for his white oak baskets. Because of a combination of appeals to the nostalgic buyer and the bargain hunter, basket seekers beat a path to his remote doorstep. And as his fame has spread, he has posed for literally hundreds of pictures, given informal lectures to visiting artists, demonstrated his skill at various art festivals, in Ohio schools, and at the Library of Congress.

Stump has enjoyed the recognition. Because of this—and because he is an accommodating person—he is very conscious of customers' preferences, and he attempts to oblige their requests. Most often those customers ask for change in shape. He has altered the vertical slant of the sides on some, he has experimented with different woods, and he has added new sizes (like the "apple basket" that has

only six-inch, straight sides). But he will bend only so far. He has never added color by painting or dyeing the reeds, never incorporated openwork designs, never made oval baskets rather than the traditional round, nor flat splint rather than round rod. He is not good at taking orders: he obviously does not like the pressure of being tied down to someone else's time schedule or shape or size preference.

Dwight Stump is scornful of shoddy work. Most of the old makers were careful, skillful weavers. But he recalled one man in particular as the exception that proved the rule: "He just couldn't get 'em together right. He couldn't get 'em round! Pretty soon when something was crooked or not just right, people started saying 'why that's made like Walter Kloppman's baskets!'"⁸ He has a great love for that tradition of excellence. Further, he considers himself a direct link to those early teachers. But his great disappointment is that none of his children has followed in his footsteps. Two teenage grandsons have shown uncommon dexterity in working with natural materials. Yet they have discovered there is little financial reward for the long hours required to make the handsome round rod baskets. Although his customers are delighted with the beauty and the strength of these artifacts, they seldom pay Stump a price that would equate with even a minimum hourly wage. Most of them are instead surprised—and in fact delighted—that he is still naive about prices. His grandsons, therefore, are directing their own skills to making numbers of kitsch items, such as macrame pot hangers and wall decorations. They are more profitable. Dwight Stump's tradition will soon be gone.

The work of many Ohio artists has not been negatively affected by outsiders. That can be referred to as the "good news." The "bad news" is that in most other regions of the United States agents of change have become far more endemic, and thus product alteration has become far more extensive. For example, many Appalachian and southern artists have been pressured, or simply instructed, to modify their products, especially since these are potentially ones which fit well into the public's desire for nostalgia. In Alabama a group of black women quilters sends their products north to a cooperative that specifies the color, material, size, and designs that the quilters must use. The range of patterns has been narrowed to only five, and even their traditional names have been changed—"Joseph's Coat" is now the "Coat of Many Colors," and "Trip Around the World" is "Grandmother's Dream."⁹ Suzi Jones has recorded extensive tribal art changes

in Alaska; and the kinds of transformations made in American Indian traditional art objects are legion. In the 1980s, assistance groups have worked with immigrant Hmong women to modify their incredibly rich embroidery tradition, again in size, shape, quality, and color.¹⁰

Who are these "agents of change"? They fall into five general categories: Individual purchasers, small shop owners and their sales representatives, crafts fair and bazaar managers, large department store and mail-order catalog buyers, and philanthropic institutions. Each is actively engaged in tailoring the products made by traditional artists to a real—or even an imagined—customer preference. Of course, customer demand has always been a part of marketing. In our own relatively brief American history, individual purchasers have always made their wants known to artists, who were, in turn, anxious to please. Customer demand has thus influenced the design, materials, and techniques for making practically every traditional object in this country, from muzzle-loading rifles to drop-leaf maple tables. Family members, too, have made requests for change, either voluntarily or at the invitation of the artist. Change in some degree is a "universal feature in human culture . . . a reflection, *in statu nascendi*, of the emerging present-day reality of the community."¹¹

In the Appalachian mountains that acceleration began modestly enough at the turn of the century. Not surprisingly, influences from outside the region gave impetus to a revival of handicrafts. Through the 1930s, a multitude of agencies—first private and later federal and state—developed with the idea of improving and marketing mountain crafts in order both to preserve them and to ameliorate poverty in the region. While most of this activity was terminated by World War II, it has been gradually resumed by a host of governmental agencies, local and state cooperatives, private foundations and even politically oriented groups.

In addition to the proliferation of these agents of change, department stores have recently hopped on the heritage bandwagon, using their designers' skills to make what could be far reaching changes, such as making pitchers and coffee mills into lamps; using the blues and mauves "so popular last year" in candles, encouraging potters to substitute pastels for the traditional dark pottery glazes that aren't "fresh-looking enough," asking makers to weave "strips of pink and the wonderful blues" into their baskets.¹² One enterprising young Kentucky woman, now a resident of New York City, has used her

design and marketing skills to create infant and toddler wear "made by loving hands from luxurious English fabrics" from the world-famous Liberty of London. Sold to and marketed by prestigious stores across the country, the garments have been hand-quilted by women she has hired in her home county. They include bibs, poke bonnets, "shorttalls," apron dresses, stuffed animals and little quilts—all available at high prices.¹³

The increased mobility of our society, along with the nostalgic appeal of traditional art objects, has placed agents of change either literally or figuratively at the artist's door. Most of the artists with whom I work take great pride in the interest in and purchase of their products by "customers from all over." They carefully name the far-away states and even foreign countries. Some actually keep track by marking maps with pins. Thus, in a very human response, their desire for the continuance of both recognition and sales makes artists ever more eager to accommodate requests. Western Maryland rag rug weavers, while certainly interested in their audience at festivals, are especially concerned with which items in the sales tent have been sold. And in Athens County, Ohio, basketmaker Elmer Knott admitted: "I hate t'make baskets. I'd do almost anything to get out of weavin' 'em. But I gotta. There's money in it now."¹⁴

Requests for change from individuals and from groups are often well-intentioned. And many, perhaps most, of the buying public are sincere in their pursuit of traditional items which are, in fact, authentic expressions of a culture. While they are not consciously disparaging the importance of those items, because of their ignorance of or disregard for the importance of traditional standards the end result has been a pervasive tampering with one of the basic manifestations of a people's culture: their art and craft.

Nearly twenty years ago, Henry Glassie pioneered the idea that "We folklorists must apply ourselves to locating, studying in detail, and then—why not?—helping the remaining folk craftsmen." Michael Owen Jones suggested similarly that the folklorist "aid individual craftsmen directly by finding markets for their products and by demonstrating that they can successfully increase their prices"; and, further, that we use our data to educate museum personnel and the general public about American folk art production.¹⁵ Yet few folklorists responded to their suggestions, primarily because of long-held beliefs in the need for academic detachment. But recently a new at-

titude has surfaced. In 1983, members of the Folk Arts Section of the American Folklore Society addressed the growing problem of externally-directed change, arguing that detachment was no longer a viable position for those interested in folk artists.¹⁶

Awareness of the impact of the marketplace on folk art can be developed through numerous channels: publications, forums, exhibits, and through dialogue with major purchasing companies. It is crucial to develop in the buyer an appreciation of the integrity in a traditional artist's product, a willingness to pay a living wage for that artistry, and a sincere appreciation of the colors and the shapes and the sizes and the materials that mark the expressions of a cultural system. At the same time, public education also involves encouraging artists themselves to maintain the cultural values inherent in their products, and to resist pressures from sales representatives of whatever organization toward alteration and change.

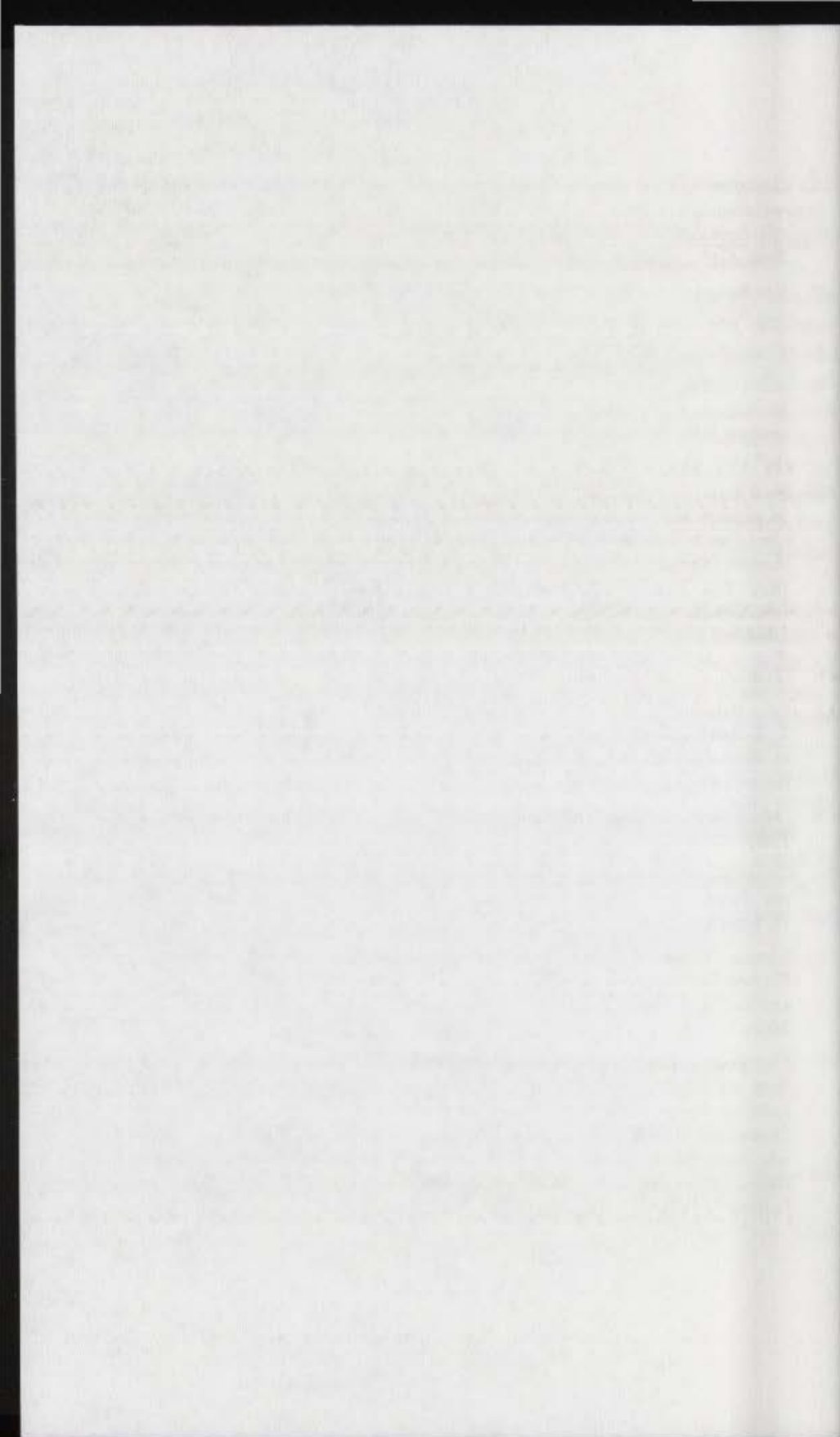
Granted, it does not seem a cardinal sin to ask artists to make small changes in their basket or jug or cane or embroidery—just a handle adjustment here or a pattern shift there, or perhaps a bit of color coordinating everywhere. Nonetheless, the sum of those seemingly insignificant changes is, ultimately, a breakdown in the whole chain of generational continuity and a loss of family or community tradition, leading to the abandonment of ethnic or racial or regional culture. H. L. Mencken once said, "A man's language is his very soul." I would add that peoples' handmade objects are their very heart.

Fame doesn't make the sun any cooler, true. But the warmth of that attention is a heady experience. It has its price. And if that is, in fact, the loss of the artist's original tradition, cultural aesthetic and subsequent income, the price is too high.

Notes for Chapter 9

1. *AAA Traveler*, December 1983/January 1984, p. 9.
2. *The Budget*, Sugar Creek, Ohio, 14 September 1983, p. 9.
3. Interview, Gibsonville, Ohio, 27 April 1985.
4. Robert Bishop and Elizabeth Safanda, *A Gallery of Amish Quilts: Design Diversity from a Plain People* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), p. 7.
5. Interview of Amish quilters with author, quilt festival, Athens, Ohio, 4 July 1981.

6. Compare with the same progression to small, easily sold items among Spanish woodcarvers in New Mexico, described by Charles Briggs in "The Role of *Mexicano* Folk Artists and the Anglo Elite in the Emergence of Contemporary Folk Art," chapter 8 in this volume.
7. See Rosemary O. Joyce, *From Baskets to Banjos* (Worthington, Oh.: Worthington Folklife Celebration, 1981), pp. 18-19.
8. Joyce, *Baskets*, p. 18.
9. Janet McDonald Strain, "Quilting Women," *Black Belt to Hill Country: Alabama Quilts from the Robert and Helen Cargo Collection* (Birmingham and Montgomery, Ala.: Birmingham Museum of Art and Montgomery Museum of Art, 1981), p. 23.
10. Suzi Jones, "Art by Fiat, and Other Dilemmas of Cross-Cultural Collecting" in this volume; Nelson Graburn, ed., *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); Robert Thomas Teske, "'Crafts Assistance Programs' and Traditional Crafts," *New York Folklore* 12 (1986), in press; C. Kurt Dewhurst and Marsha MacDowell, eds., *Michigan Hmong Arts: Textiles in Transition* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1983).
11. Graburn, ed., *Ethnic Arts*, p. 30.
12. John Burrison, "Folk Art: A Folklorist's Opinion," *Art Papers* 7 (1983): pp. 5-7; Robert Cogswell, "Folk Arts, Outside Markets, and Exploitation of the Folk in Kentucky's Lincoln Trail District" (Paper presented at the Great Lakes American Studies Association Meeting, Oxford, Ohio, 1983).
13. Department store buyer, interview with author, Columbus, Ohio, May 1, 1985.
14. Geraldine Niva Johnson, *Weaving Rag Rugs* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985). Elmer Knott, interview with author, Glouster, Ohio, 10 September 1980.
15. Glassie, "William Houck, Maker of Pounded Ash Adirondack Pack-Baskets," *Keystone Folklore Quarterly* 12 (1967): pp. 53-54; Jones, "Folk Art Production and the Folklorist's Obligation," *Journal of Popular Culture* 4 (1970): pp. 199, 203.
16. This position was presented in a panel entitled "To Market, To Market?: Folk Arts and Artifacts in a Changing World," Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society, Nashville, Tennessee, October 29, 1983 (Marsha MacDowell and Kurt Dewhurst, Elaine Eff, Robert Teske, and Egie Zygas, panelists; Gerri Johnson and John Michael Vlach, discussants; Rosemary Joyce, chair). Papers from the panel are featured in a special issue of *New York Folklore* 12 (1986).



Art by Fiat, and Other Dilemmas of Cross-Cultural Collecting

Suzi Jones

*Art and poetry are verbs not nouns. Poems are improvised,
not memorized; carvings are carved not saved. The forms of
art are familiar to all; examples need not be saved.*

Edmund Carpenter, *Eskimo Realities*

When I was asked to describe the effects of collecting on the makers of folk art I considered uttering a litany of anecdotes about various folk artists who, having been discovered by collectors at long last, are receiving their rightful due and are honored by the recognition, and I might have related instances of folk artists who, because of collectors, now have more comfortable lives with the income from the sales of their work. I could also cite a similar number of less pleasant examples of folk artists having been taken advantage of economically or personally by collectors. But I'm not sure a cataloguing of individual experiences of either sort would leave us much wiser than before. At the individual level, the effect of the collector on the maker will vary as widely as the personalities, the ethics, and the understandings of the particular individuals involved in the transactions of buying and selling.

At other levels, however, some consequences of collecting merit our consideration. I think particularly of some of the consequences owing, not to the personalities of collectors or folk artists, but to those situations resulting when collector and artist are from cultures with significantly different world views. Although this essay will deal

by and large with Native American art and Western collectors, some of what follows may have implications for other sorts of folk art whenever objects from one cultural group become the concern of a different culture.

During the past five years, in my work with traditional Alaskan Native artists (Eskimos, Aleuts, Athabascans and members of three Northwest Coast tribes), I have been confronted with my growing awareness of how differently our cultures view art. It is almost a daily issue in my work with the State Arts Council, an agency which gives grants for art projects. As I find myself trying to clarify, to interpret "our" (Western) sense of art in terms of the activities of Native cultures, I begin to feel increasingly arbitrary (maybe ethnocentric is a better word) in telling Native people which categories of their activities would be considered art and thus eligible for funding. Is ivory carving art? Yes. Beadwork? Yes. Mask making? Yes. Silverwork? Yes. Parka making? Mmm-yes. Kayak making? Canoe making? Dog sled making? Harpoon making? No . . . well, maybe . . . it depends . . . I don't know. . . .

In a multicultural society, how do public institutions and agencies collect, program, exhibit or fund art, in particular folk art or tribal and ethnic art? The way we have always done it with the fine arts? It is becoming clear that that will not always do—certainly not for the Native or ethnic groups involved, nor for those in the majority Western culture who want to understand the art of these groups, their aesthetics, and the meanings their handmade objects hold for them.

One place to begin looking at this is to try to understand the Western cultural attitude toward objects, toward *things*. We are great collectors and keepers of things. Even as I am writing this, sitting at my dining room table, my favorite quilt, a pieced eight-pointed star quilt with a bold red border, hangs on the wall to my left, while on the wall in front of me is a Yup'ik Eskimo dance stick with carved and painted wood figures of walrus, spotted seal, bearded seal, moose, caribou, and a man in a kayak. The shelf to my right holds a double whirligig of a washerwoman and wood chopper by a favorite Oregon whittler, while on the wall at my back hang two Polish-American papercuts and a Hispanic *santo* from New Mexico.

The Western attitude toward things is not universal. Among Native American tribes, white people are well known for their materialistic tendencies, habits that at times are puzzling to Native Americans.

Speaking to a Native arts conference in Alaska in 1981, folklorist Barre Toelken told about a Native American friend who describes white people

as a whole nation of museum keepers because what they do is build a house, then they spend all their time painting it and cutting the lawn and keeping the windows clean, and then building little shelves all over inside their houses and filling the shelves up so that they have to spend all their time dusting. And when you go to some white person's house, what you do is get a tour of all the *things*. . . . It's just like a museum tour. What do white people do with all those things?¹

There is a joke that is widely circulated among Native Americans in the Northwest. The joke provides us with a humorous insight into the differences in the way Native American people and white people look at objects, at things.

There's an old Indian man sitting outside a BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) office somewhere in the Midwest (you can make this anywhere you want to, of course) wearing a big western hat, wearing braids and a vest and some old work pants, and he's simply sitting there enjoying the day, a nice sunny day. At noontime a BIA administrator comes out to eat his lunch, sits down next to the old Indian man. Just as he opens his lunch bag to pull out his sandwich, the Indian man sneezes and then immediately blows his nose on the ground, "snort, snort," shakes his finger off, and then simply goes back to watching the afternoon. The white man is of course upset by this. He throws the sandwich back in the bag and says, "you Indians are just crude. You know, we've been here for a hundred years, and we haven't even taught you the basic amenities of life. You haven't even learned how to blow your nose right. That's just sickening. This is symbolic of everything that's wrong with you." The white man just gets carried away. This is his chance to make the big statement, and he rails on for about half an hour. Of course, the old Indian gentleman doesn't respond at all. Simply sits there. And after a while the silence falls, and the white man is just about to reach for his sandwich again when he sneezes, and he pulls out his handkerchief and blows his nose, puts the handkerchief back in his pocket. The old Indian looks over and says, "My God, you white people save everything, don't you?"²

Differences between white and Native American attitudes toward art objects are taken up by Gary Witherspoon in his profound study, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*. Witherspoon points out that in the case of Navajo people, "Navajos take little interest in the display or preservation of their works of art, with the exception

of silver and turquoise jewelry. They readily sell them to non-Indians who are looking for beauty in *things*.³ This corresponds to my experience with traditional Eskimo people in Alaska. In the homes of some of the finest craftsmen there is often no visual clue, no display of handcrafted objects that would suggest to a Western person that he was in a place where beautiful objects were made. I have often wondered about that: why these craftsmen seldom seem to have any of their own or their fellow craftsmen's work displayed for their own enjoyment.

Of course, at one time, traditionally, Eskimos put their works of art to practical use in their daily activities—baskets were used and ivory carvings adorned toggles, fasteners, and hunting implements. Masks were worn during dances and ceremonies, and in the case of Yup'ik people, were often disposed of after a single use. Now most handcrafted items are made for sale, not for use by the makers. This situation, again, is like that described by Witherspoon in writing about the Navajo. He notes that for Navajos who make baskets and other craft items,

It is more practical to sell them for money and buy stainless steel pots and other more durable but less artistic things. This practice offends the purist's view of aesthetics, but it is, in fact, not a depreciation of aesthetic value at all. It is simply based on the idea that beauty is a dynamic experience in conception and expression, not a static quality of things to be perceived and preserved.⁴

A concept of art as dynamic experience rather than static objects, as essentially process rather than product, is found in other non-Western cultures. James Clifford discusses this in his essay on the recent New York exhibitions of tribal art, and at one point in the essay he cites a passage from the foreword to the catalog for the recent exhibit of Igbo arts shown at the Center for African Art in which Chinua Achebe, an internationally known African novelist, explains the Igbo aesthetic:

The purposeful neglect of the painstakingly and devoutly accomplished *mbari* houses with all the art objects in them as soon as the primary mandate of their creation has been served, provides a significant insight into the Igbo aesthetic value as *process* rather than *product*. Process is motion while product is rest. When the product is preserved or venerated, the impulse to repeat the process is compromised. Therefore the Igbo choose to eliminate the product and retain the process so that every occasion and every generation will

receive its own impulse and experience of creation. Interestingly this aesthetic disposition receives powerful endorsement from the tropical climate which provides an abundance of materials for making art, such as wood, as well as formidable agencies of dissolution, such as humidity and the termite.⁵

I have heard similar sentiments expressed by a Tlingit woman in reference to preservationist attempts to remove totem poles and mortuary pieces from old village sites in southeast Alaska and "save" them in museums. It was this woman's opinion that the poles should be allowed their traditional—and natural—fate, which is to remain where they were erected and to rot in the forests, in the rain. Preserving them forever in museums was viewed as inappropriate in a way that brings to mind images of embalming or cryogenics.

The appropriation of tribal or ethnic art objects by Westerners for purposes far removed from the original functions served by the objects, and ethnic art (often called "tourist art") made specifically for consumption by Westerners, raises economic, cultural, and ethical questions. In 1982, the Alaska State Council on the Arts organized an exhibit of Eskimo dolls, primarily a tourist art. In the course of preparing texts and a catalog for the show, we interviewed each of the dollmakers. One Inupiat man from Shishmaref, Alaska, explained the impetus behind the creation of reindeer horn dolls in the 1920s: "We didn't use them as toys . . . the buyers wanted to buy a part of the Natives here, and that's the reason why they buy the dolls."⁶ Many Eskimo dollmakers take great care to dress the dolls in traditional, usually precontact styles of clothing (fig. 10-1). Attention to correct detail is acute. The dollmakers recognize that the dolls they make to sell are representations of their own ethnicity, and their intentional choice of historical, precontact styles of Eskimo clothing for the dolls corresponds to their sense of their own ethnicity and what constitutes being Eskimo (figs. 10-2-10-4).

Questioning the exhaustive collecting of tribal objects by museums, Karl Hutterer has written that "the act of collecting ethnographic specimens must be seen as an act of taking possession physically and symbolically of the essence of individuals as well as whole societies."⁷ For the artists and their communities the effects of this cross-cultural consumption are mixed. They range from the positive effects of enrichment and cultural revitalization to negative effects of outside aesthetic controls. Nelson Graburn summarizes these effects: On the positive side, the collecting of ethnic arts can lead to a revival of, or



Figure 10-1. Caroline Penayah, Originally from the Village of Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island, with Materials She Uses in Making Eskimo Dolls—Seal Intestine, Seal Skin, and Beluga Whale Sinew
(Photo: Rob Stapleton; courtesy Alaska State Council on the Arts)



Figure 10-2. Traditionally Dressed Eskimo Lady Doll in Above-Arctic-Circle Style Clothing, Made by Inupiaq Craftsworker Dolly Spencer
(Photo: Chris Arend; courtesy Alaska State Council on the Arts)

an assertion of, ethnic identity for the artist and his community. Collecting ethnic art can demonstrate to a minority culture that "something of theirs is distinctive enough to be admired, demanded and sold to the world at large." It can generate "new pride in threatened identities and undermined traditions." And it "may lead to a reinvestment of time and effort in dying handicrafts."⁸

In addition, revenues from the sale of ethnic art may provide cash income needed in a community where a cash economy is penetrating a traditional subsistence economy, thereby allowing people access to more comfortable lives and the amenities available from the marketplace. In rural Alaska this might mean cash to pay the phone bills, to subscribe to cable television, to purchase heating oil, gas for snowmachines, stereos and Ataris, or to pay rent on government housing. Because of the market for Eskimo art, individuals can turn their



Figure 10-3. Reindeer Horn Dolls Made by Vincent and Molly Tocktoo, Shishmaref, Alaska, 1982
(Photo: Chris Arend; courtesy Alaska State Council on the Arts)

traditional subsistence skills of sewing and carving into providing salable craft objects—dolls, masks, baskets and small ivory sculptures. This transition came up in the course of Susan Fair's interview with Inupiat dollmaker Dolly Spencer.

When asked if she had played with dolls as a child, Dolly remarked that they had no play dolls then, that they sometimes played with puppies, pretending they were babies. She said of her mother's generation: "My mother's group was never into making play things. They were always sewing for survival, getting ahead in making new mukluks for each family. She never had time to mess with making us a doll." Perhaps it is ironic that nowadays, in Alaska, when making money—participating in a cash economy—becomes increasingly necessary, making dolls has, for many women, become a means of sewing for survival.⁹



Figure 10-4. "Wintertime Seal Hunter" Made by Yup'ik Eskimo Dollmaker Mary Nash, 1982
(Photo: Chris Arend; courtesy Alaska State Council on the Arts)

Graburn has described the development of the production of ethnic art for sale as a parallel to "cash-crops versus subsistence foods, or to wage labor versus traditional obligations," and he points out that with this transition, the kinds of objects made specifically for sale may be free from the cultural restrictions which encumber sacred objects, even if they are close replicas of sacred objects.¹⁰ New restrictions, however, may be imposed on the artists and the art forms as the consumers' tastes begin to play a role. Ethnic art made for sale, in the case of Alaskan Eskimos, ranges from rather hastily produced souvenir items to magnificent objects of fine art, with consumer demands for the former often having negative impacts on production of the latter.

The effect of the market on Alaskan Eskimo art and artists during the 1960s is well documented by Dorothy Jean Ray in *Eskimo Art: Tradition and Innovation in North Alaska*. Ray writes that she heard

repeatedly from ivory carvers that what they carved was largely determined by what would sell; in this instance, objects that fit white stereotypes of Eskimo art—handmade walrus ivory objects of motifs associated with the sea and ice of traditional Eskimo pursuits. The reality of this phenomenon was brought home to Ray in 1968, when she witnessed repeated attempts by the late Peter J. Seeganna to sell an excellent, highly stylized carved wood walrus alongside many lesser items carved from ivory meet with total failure. Ray writes: "Never before had I been so aware how much the carver had been limited, not by himself or his own creativeness, but by the limitations of the marketplace and his customers. It is remarkable that the Alaskan craftsmen have maintained as high a quality and created as many memorable objects as they have."¹¹

In another context, contemporary Tlingit artist James Schoppert related the experiences of Bill Reid, a noted Haida artist. Reid was trained as a silversmith in the classical sense and learned jewelry design from the masters. Some of his creations were inspired by the art of his Haida heritage. These pieces proved to be popular, and his reputation as a Native artist grew. His jewelry that was non-Native in design, although stunning, could not compete with the popularity of the Native jewelry. Schoppert said Reid was miffed at this, and in a phrase which succinctly characterizes the effect of the collector on the maker, said that "unless his jewelry had eyes and teeth no one wanted it."¹²

Edwin L. Wade has discussed at length the artistic and economic dilemmas faced by Native American artists involved in an ethnic art market. Wade has examined the historical development of the Indian art market in the Southwest, and shown how the market has resulted in drastic, lasting changes in individuals and in their communities. While the economic consequences of the market have often been positive, enabling the Indian to remain in his home community where he can continue to participate in traditional ceremonies, the market thus serving as a "bulwark that staved off poverty and cultural dissolution," the artistic consequences have not been equally as positive.

The most serious threat to the Indian art market is persistent Anglo domination of Indian aesthetics and creativity. The market is built on a stereotyped, purist vision of traditional Indian art and culture, a vision which has little tolerance for unplanned, potentially disruptive innovation. Whose right is it to say what is good art or bad art, what is traditional or avant garde, what is

Indian or non-Indian? For the past fifty years the course of Indian art has been determined by Anglo-conceived and directed Indian art associations, historical and preservation societies, museum art revival programs, and federal arts and crafts projects. Through the selective allocation of federal craft money, with Anglo patrons, scholars, and dealers sitting on the various association's art judging panels, and with non-Indians controlling over ninety percent of all wholesale and retail outlets for this art, it was a simple matter to reward what they liked and damn to obscurity what they did not. . . . In the Indian art market . . . the general consuming public has never had a chance to see the full range of contemporary and innovative art.¹³

The marketing of ethnic art can and does affect both the art and the artist, and on a broader scale, it may also affect whole communities economically and socially. As we have seen, these effects are both good and bad. The appropriation of ethnicity which is involved in the collection of ethnic art made for sale is, by and large, a result of the conscious effort on the part of the artists to share such parts of their ethnic identity. The activity of collectors of ethnic art, however, does not stop with the acquisition of those items made intentionally for sale. It is when this happens that the issues get even stickier and the stakes higher, both monetarily and culturally.

In some contexts, the purchase of ethnic art which has been made for traditional use within the community can be disruptive to the social fabric of the community. In Alaska this has been especially evident in several Tlingit Indian villages, where the issue is further complicated by a tribal system of ownership that differs significantly from the Anglo-American system.

In recent years demands of art collectors for Northwest Coast Indian art and the resultant high prices such works can command have sent dealers into southeastern Alaska villages, seeking out the magnificent carved screens, house posts, hats and other ceremonial items, locating the individuals in possession of these items and convincing them to sell them, often for tens of thousands of dollars. I don't know that anyone has ever been coerced into selling his ceremonial objects; but stories abound of dealers flashing wads of cash in front of individuals whose entire annual incomes may be less than what is being offered on the spot for the sale of a single hat. Aside from the issue of the loss of important works of art from their homeland, another difficulty comes into these situations in that many of these ceremonial objects are clan objects (fig. 10-5). The individual who is in possession of them does not own them. According to traditional Tlingit law he

Figure 10-5. Tlingit Dancers from The Village of Angoon, Alaska,
Perform at "Celebration '84," Sponsored by the Sealaska
Heritage Foundation, Juneau, Alaska
Hats and robes worn by dancers are clan property.
(Photo: Suzi Jones; courtesy Alaska State Council on the Arts)



is the caretaker, the trustee for the objects. Property rights of ceremonial clan property are not vested in any single individual but are vested in the clan.¹⁴

This system of property rights extends beyond objects to the less tangible art forms of songs and stories. According to Tlingit scholar Nora Dauenhauer:

Each group—moiety, clan, house, and locality—claims sets of interrelated art, music, and literature. A Tlingit copyright system defines these art forms as property of a given group. Their use . . . is restricted, like real estate—they are private property with invisible "No Trespassing" signs for those who know. They are not for the public. Tlingit traditions are not public domain . . . To remove them from this context is stealing—a theft of the highest form. In the Western society's law it would be like grand theft. It would be like desecration of a most highly respected institution—like stealing from a cathedral. If art or oral literature is taken a person may suffer the consequences of some type of punishment.¹⁵

In the last five years there have been several cases brought to court in Alaska to resolve disputes that arose when an individual Tlingit has sold or attempted to sell clan objects. One case brought to the State Superior Court was remanded to the village tribal council for adjudication (*Johnson v. Chilkat Indian Village*, J76-12, U.S. District Court, Alaska, 1978).¹⁶ Another case, one where a Canadian and a New York dealer had purchased several items for a quarter of a million dollars, was resolved by an out-of-court settlement in which the dealers had to return house posts and a screen (fig. 10-6), while other artifacts became the property of the dealers with the stipulation that the dealers provide the clan with an exact replica of the screen (*King, et al., v. Young, et al.*, 76-516, State Superior Court, Alaska, 1978). In a third case, the Alaska State Museum has gone to court to clarify the ownership of a Thunderbird Screen which has been on loan to the museum since 1977 and is now being offered for sale by the individual who is the caretaker of the screen (*State of Alaska v. Jim, Sr., et al.*, 1JU-81-1785, State Superior Court, Alaska, 1982). This case is as yet undecided.

In these cases, the sale of tribal art does not affect the actual makers of the objects since they are long dead, but it does affect the community involved. It creates friction among friends and families, depletes the inventory of ceremonial objects still needed for potlatches and other ceremonies, and removes at a great distance from

Figure 10-6. Interior of the Whale House at Klukwan, 1985
Shows the house screen, house posts, feast dish, and other items
of clan property.
(*Winter and Pond Photographers; courtesy Alaska Historical Library,
Juneau*)



the community, often to museums or homes of the wealthy in Europe or the East Coast, the masterpieces of the Tlingit people's own art, their own cultural heritage.

It oversimplifies matters to lay sole responsibility or blame at the feet of the collectors. Many are motivated by a very serious (but thoroughly Western) concern for the preservation of world-class works of art, some of which are undoubtedly being maintained in fairly precarious storage arrangements. Yet it is difficult not to be saddened by the results of these purchases and frustrated at the lack of satisfactory answers. Pride in the international attention and respect accorded Northwest Coast Indian art is mingled with knowledge of the consequences that the high prices being offered for such pieces can wield and the uncomfortable positions the individual trustees of clan objects must find themselves when confronted by a dealer offering sixty or eighty thousand dollars for a clan hat, sometimes sweetened with an additional offer to substitute a replica that might pass undetected.

The placement of a clan hat at a recent New York auction brings some additional complications into the picture. Two years ago a museum curator in Alaska noticed a Sotheby Parke Bernet auction notice for a Frog Hat which appeared to be the Kiksadi Frog Hat from Sitka (fig. 10-7). In the community of Sitka rumors had been circulating for several years that the Kiksadi Clan hat had been sold to an art dealer. No one had any proof of this, and in the meantime the man who had been the clan caretaker of the hat had died. The hat was to have been turned over to the clan by his wife at a special ceremony, but this ceremony had been delayed, and no one yet had proof that the hat was gone. When it was determined that the hat being offered for sale in New York was in fact the Kiksadi Frog Hat, purchase was negotiated at a sum exceeding \$60,000 by the Alaska State Museum with the direct involvement of several Native organizations. The Tlingit-Haida Central Council contributed toward the purchase, and the Sealaska Heritage Foundation provided legal assistance during the negotiations. The Frog Hat is now kept in the museum with a provision that it can be taken out by the clan for use in potlatches. The Kiksadi clan has a 99-year option to purchase the hat from the museum. This story has a happy ending (although from a strict museum curatorial point of view, the continued use of the hat presents high risks). There is concern that the message of this purchase might lead to the sale of



Figure 10-7. Kiksadi Clan Crest Hat
(*Courtesy Alaska State Museum, Juneau*)

other clan items in anticipation that the State Museum will eventually buy them back.

A final instance of collecting Tlingit art that I want to mention is one that occurred over fifty years ago: the acquisition of the Kaguanton Shark Helmet by Louis Shotridge for the University of Pennsylvania Museum (figs. 10-8, 10-9). Louis Shotridge was a Tlingit Indian who worked for the museum for a number of years in the 1920s, collecting Northwest Coast tribal materials. This period was a time of great unsettlement for the Tlingit people in Alaska. Some were desperately trying to become acculturated to white, Christian ways, some were trying to hold onto the traditional Tlingit ways, and many others found themselves caught somewhere in between. Shotridge accepted the job of collecting tribal objects for the museum because he knew their value and he was convinced that they should



Figure 10-8. Kaguanton Helmet
(*Courtesy University of Pennsylvania Museum,
Philadelphia*)

be kept alongside other works of great art from elsewhere in the world.

Shotridge's account of obtaining the Shark Helmet was published in the museum journal:

I obtained this old piece for the Museum's collection from the last of the house group, the members of which are known as the founders of the Kaguanton Clan. When I carried the object out of its place no one interfered, but if only one of the true warriors of that clan had been alive the removal of it would never have been possible. I took it in the presence of aged women, the only survivors in the house where the old object was kept, and they could do nothing more than weep when the once highly esteemed object was being taken away to its last resting place.¹⁷

Shotridge concludes this article by saying that "a modernized part of me rejoiced over my success in obtaining this important ethnological



Figure 10-9. Louis Shotridge in Ceremonial Chilkat Costume
(Courtesy University of Pennsylvania Museum,
Philadelphia)

specimen for the Museum, but as one who had been trained to be a true Kaguanton in my heart I cannot help but have the feeling of a traitor who has betrayed confidence."¹⁸

During the Depression years Louis Shotridge lost his job at the University Museum, so he returned to Alaska, where he worked inspecting fish traps. He died under cloudy circumstances. One account has him falling off a roof and nobody coming to his aid. In another version, he is said to have fallen over a river bank, injuring his back, but again no one came to his assistance, so strong was the sense of his betrayal among the Tlingit. Even today there are many who will not speak of him.¹⁹

This story of Louis Shotridge and the Kaguanton Shark Helmet is perhaps more an illustration of the effects of collecting on the collector rather than the artist. It does, however, illustrate the profound dichotomy resulting from the desire of the Western art world—and the anthropology world—to preserve the best tribal art, especially given the precarious storage situations of many older pieces (in clan houses in Alaska objects are subject to decay and weather and would be quickly destroyed in event of a fire), and the desire of the tribal community to care for these objects in the traditional manner, even to the extent of letting Mother Nature take her course with poles and mortuary pieces in the rain forests of southeast Alaska.

This suggests that there are situations where taking an aesthetic attitude toward ethnic objects—declaring them to be "art," and then treating them as such—is not always in the best interests of the community of origin. It may have the effect of neutralizing the original purpose of the object. Moreover, turning sacred objects into aesthetic ones may inhibit belief in a community. Objects which are created to evoke the participation and inspiration of knowledgeable witnesses are transmuted into objects that command appreciation from audiences of relative strangers. Philosopher Arthur C. Danto has compared the process of transforming an object into a work of art by the fiat of a collector to the act of baptism—not in the sense of merely giving something a new name, but literally a new identity. Danto suggests that when an object is declared art, and when the new attitude toward it may be one of curiosity, admiration, education and even reverence by the new community, this can and does pose difficulties for the old, the original communities.²⁰

To cite an example, in 1977 I was collecting folk art from a

Russian Old Believer Community in Oregon for a small traveling exhibit. With great excitement I discovered that there was an icon painter in the community, and I inquired about the possibility of including an icon in the exhibit. The immediate and definite answer was no. I asked for reasons and was told that icons should be presented only in a religious context. So I asked about the possibility of including not an actual icon but perhaps a photograph of an icon or of the artist painting an icon. Again the response was negative. From the Russian Old Believer point of view, even the slightest possibility that a representation of the icon—say a photograph appearing in an exhibit brochure—might end up on the ground and get stepped on, or get thrown, as such things do, into the trash was dangerous. This would amount to desecration of the icon in the minds of the Old Believers. Arguments about the respectful settings provided by art museums are really beside the point. From the Russian Old Believer point of view, there is only one context for an icon and that is a devotional context.

This seems to me similar to the position taken by the Houdenosaunee Iroquois on the exhibition of their medicine masks. Not only are there no masks that can be made for commercial purposes, but any public exhibition of medicine masks is also forbidden. The Houdenosaunee policy statement reads in part:

Medicine masks are not intended for everyone to see and such an exhibition does not recognize the sacred duties and special functions of the masks. The exhibition of masks by museums does not serve to enlighten the public regarding the culture of the Houdenosaunee as such an exhibition violates the intended purpose of the mask and contributes to the desecration of the image.²¹

The situation with Zuñi War God figures is similar, and probably better known, especially since the recent notable absence of one originally scheduled to be shown in the 1984 "Primitivism" show at the Museum of Modern Art. In his article discussing the "Primitivism" show, James Clifford cites the special label explaining the absence of the Zuñi War God figure as evidence that the balance of power between the collectors and the cultures of origin of traditional art objects may be shifting. Clifford believes that there is a growing recognition that some objects may "belong" somewhere else than in an art or an ethnographic museum." I quote from Clifford's lengthy footnote on the Zuñi War Gods:

The shifting balance of power is evident in the case of the Zuñi war gods or *Abauuta*. Zuñi vehemently object to the display of these figures (terrifying, and of great sacred force) as "art." They are the only traditional objects singled out for this objection. After passage of the Native American Freedom of Religion Act of 1978, Zuñi initiated three formal legal actions claiming return of the *Abauuta* (which as communal property are, in Zuñi eyes, by definition stolen goods). A sale at Sotheby Parke Bernet in 1978 was interrupted and the figure eventually returned to the Zuñi. The Denver Art Museum was forced to repatriate its *Abauutas* in 1981. A claim against the Smithsonian is unresolved. Other pressures have been applied elsewhere in an ongoing campaign. In these new conditions, Zuñi *Abauuta* can no longer be routinely displayed. Indeed, the figure Paul Klee saw in Berlin ran the risk of being seized as contraband had it been shipped to New York for the MOMA show.²²

Since 1984, a number of major art exhibits and installations have opened in New York (the "Primitivism" show being the major one), which are now bringing attention to the issues involved in the collection and exhibition of ethnic art by the Western world. The April 1985 issue of *Art in America* lists six exhibits as part of "Tribal New York 1984-85": "Primitivism" in 20th-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," organized by the Museum of Modern Art; "Asante: Kingdom of Gold" at the American Museum of Natural History; "Te Maori: Maori Art from New Zealand Collections" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; "Out of the Mists: Northwest Coast Art" organized by the Museum of the American Indian and shown at the IBM Gallery of Science; "African Masterpieces from the Musée de l'Homme, Paris" organized by the Center for African Art; "Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos" shown at the Center for African Art (organized by UCLA's Museum of Cultural History); and the opening of the Margaret Mead Hall of Pacific Peoples at the American Museum of Natural History. These efforts may be creating ethical dilemmas even as they dazzle Manhattan with the genius of non-Western art.

Are there solutions to these dilemmas? At best, they are not simple, and at worst, some are perhaps insoluble. The current critical dialogue engendered by the New York exhibits is an important shift in the right direction. Furthermore, several of the New York exhibits—the Asante, the Igbo and the Northwest Coast—are exhibits which provide historical contexts for the objects that acknowledge the vitality of these cultures and their aesthetic standards, and thus challenge the Western art historical notion of a universal aesthetic. A key

premise of the "Primitivism" show is particularly provocative, to say the least, when in describing the admitted ethnocentric aesthetic posture of Western modern art it is noted that "one of modernism's greatest virtues [is] its unique approbation of the arts of other cultures. Ours is the *only* society that has prized a whole spectrum of arts of distant and alien cultures. Its consequent appropriation of these arts has invested modernism with a particular vitality that is a product of cultural cross-fertilization."²³ While the appropriation of these arts may have invested modern art with vitality, it all too often divested the societies from which these arts came of their own vitality.

One kind of solution to the problems of the cross-cultural consumption of art may lie in a development in the collection and interpretation of Native American materials: the establishment of tribal museums. When museum objects are important to the tribe, people will and do want them closer to home. As Andrea Laforet of Canada's National Museum of Man suggests, "as museums develop in Indian and Inuit communities, people may well develop new ways of conceptualizing and presenting objects from their own past which may differ considerably from what is done in museums now."²⁴ The next five to ten years should provide us with examples of this as an increasing number of Native American art exhibits are being curated by Native Americans.

Other solutions may be found in some of the approaches recently taken by public agencies involved in tribal arts projects. The Native American Code of Ethics which was adopted by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1981, and which is now required of all grantees receiving funds for projects involving Native American materials, is an attempt to locate the control of such projects with the tribe. A slightly different approach taken by a granting agency came that same year when the Alaska State Council on the Arts, acting on the recommendation of a Native Arts Advisory Panel, adopted criteria for the review of proposals for Native art projects which favor those projects where the interpretation and presentation of Native art is determined by Native people. Looking beyond the United States, the Australian Arts Council has an Aboriginal Arts Board entirely made up of Aboriginal people, and this board has final say on all government spending for Aboriginal arts.

Others have been seeking answers to these problems by developing protective legislation. The American Folklife Center has been

active in the World Intellectual Property Organization based in Geneva, an organization which has been developing international laws that would afford the various traditional cultures of the world legal protection for their creative expressions in matters of authentication, expropriation, and compensation as well as fostering internal maintenance of folk culture.²⁵

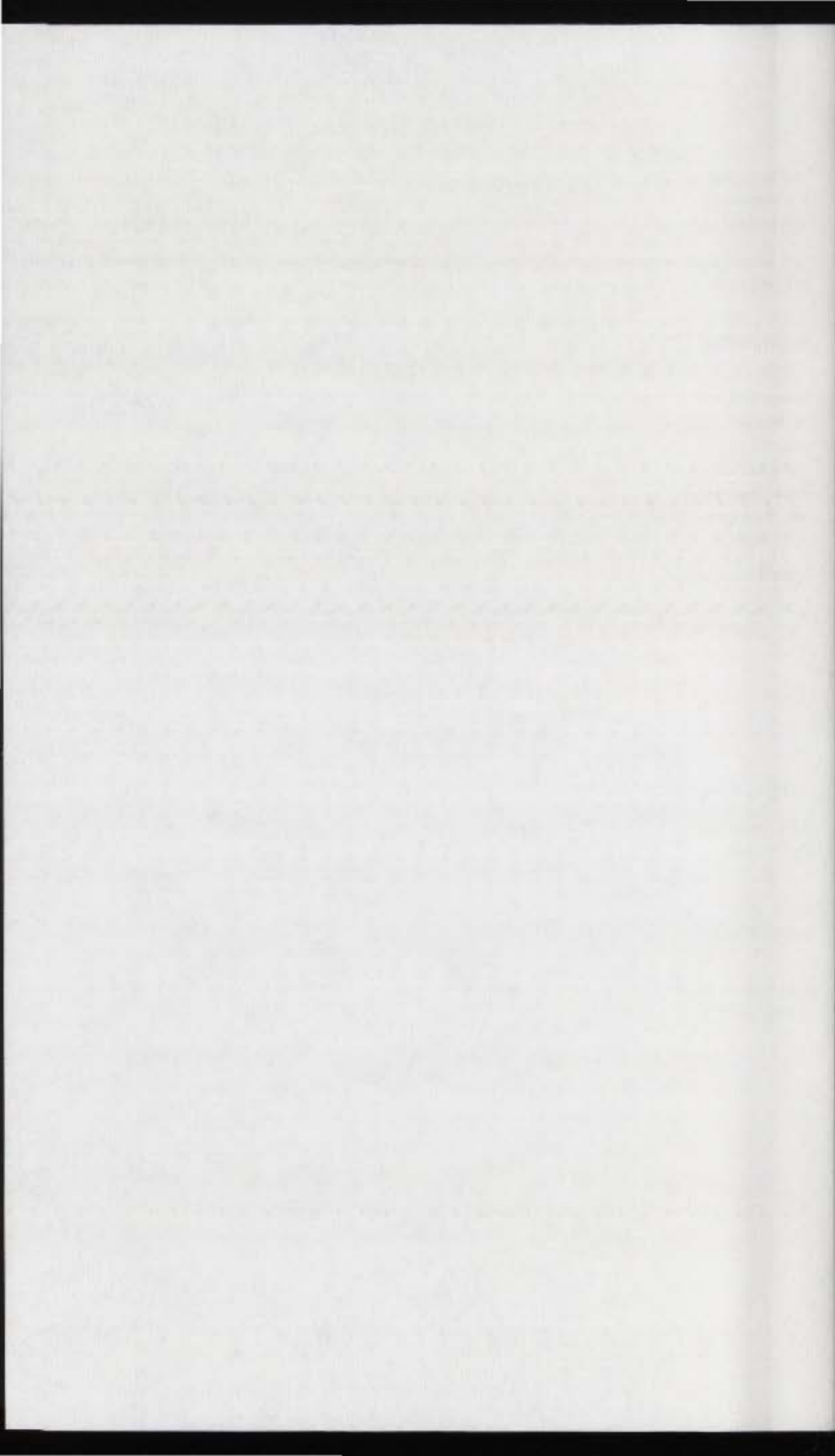
These developments make it clear that awareness of the problem of the cross-cultural use of traditional ethnic or tribal arts is on the increase. This alone is a significant change. As we have seen, the issues are challenging and complex, but creative responses are beginning to emerge. These are encouraging signs.

Notes for Chapter 10

1. Barre Toelken, "Native Arts and Public Policy," in *Native Arts Issues 81/82*, ed. Suzi Jones (Anchorage: Alaska State Council on the Arts, 1982), p. 42.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
3. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977, p. 152, emphasis added.
4. *Ibid.*
5. "Foreword" in Herbert M. Cole and Chike C. Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* (Los Angeles: UCLA Museum of Cultural History, 1984), p. ix.
6. Interview by Susan Fair, March 31, 1981, emphasis added.
7. Karl Hutterer, "The Sharing of Anthropology Collections," *Council for Museum Anthropology Newsletter* 4(5): p. 7. See also Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976); Pamela Israel and Maurizio Gnerre, "The Amazon in Plexiglass," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 6 (1982): pp. 15-17, and Jonathan Stevens, "Museums and Indigenous Peoples: Through Display Glass," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 6 (1982): pp. 38-39.
8. Nelson Graburn, "The Dynamics of Change in Tourist Arts," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 6 (1982): pp. 7-11.
9. Susan W. Fair, "Eskimo Dolls," in *Eskimo Dolls*, ed. Suzi Jones (Anchorage: Alaska State Council on the Arts, 1982), p. 71.
10. "The Dynamics of Change in Tourist Art," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 6 (1982): p. 7.
11. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977, p. 69.
12. Jim Schoppert, "The Alaska Native Artist in the 80's: 'Give It Eyes and Teeth and I'll Buy It,'" in *Setting It Free, An Exhibition of Modern Alaskan Eskimo Carving*, ed. Dinah Larsen and Terry Dickey (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Museum, 1982), p. 62.

13. Edwin L. Wade, "The Ethnic Art Market and the Dilemma of Innovative Indian Artists," in Wade and Rennard Strickland, *Magic Images: Contemporary Native American Art* (Norman, Okla.: Philbrook Art Center and University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), p. 10.
14. Rosita Worl, Affidavit C.A.A. No. J 76-12. In the United States Court for the District of Alaska, January 1978.
15. "From the Spoken to the Written Word: Alaska Native Oral Literature," in Jones, *Native Arts Issues*, p. 48.
16. There have been further developments in this case. A tribal council has never been assembled, and in April 1985, the Whale House artifacts, valued at more than two million dollars, were secretly removed from the Whale House and shipped to Seattle for temporary storage while a buyer could be confirmed. To date, the artifacts are still in Seattle where they will remain until the Alaska courts and other legal authorities determine ownership and the identity of the individuals involved in their removal and attempted sale.
17. "The Kaguanton Shark Helmet," *The Museum Journal* (University of Pennsylvania) 20 (1929): pp. 339-41.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 343.
19. Personal communication from Peter Corey, November 1983.
20. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 94-95.
21. *Turtle Quarterly* (Spring 1983): p. 7.
22. "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *Art in America* 73 (1985): p. 215.
23. "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction" in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. William S. Rubin (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), Vol. 1, p. 41.
24. "Discussion of 'Anthropology as Artifact'" in *Consciousness as Inquiry: Ethnology and Canadian Realities*, ed. Frank Manning, Canadian Ethnology Service Report No. 89 E (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1983), p. 277.
25. Alan Jabbour, "Folklore Protection and National Patrimony: Developments and Dilemmas in the Legal Protection of Folklore," *Copyright Bulletin: Quarterly Review* 17 (1983): pp. 10-14.

Afterword



The Idea of Folk Art

Henry Glassie

Come into the gallery and there you will find objects carefully selected and tastefully arrayed. Extract a definition of folk art from those objects, then return into the American world, letting its shapes and colors break upon your senses, and you will find your definition shaking, shifting, abandoning you to confusion. Now let yourself drift backward in time, pausing to ponder a Byzantine icon, or swing free in space to meet a Turkoman carpet or a Kwakiutl mask, and confusion will increase until you arrive at the first conclusion in the study of folk art: a universal definition of folk art will never be derived from collections of objects assembled to meet the sensibilities and needs of the modern Western bourgeoisie.

Our obligation is to start afresh. Begin not with artifacts that are precious because we covet them, but with a human being in the instant of creation. By natural right, the creator interferes with the universe. Driven by the wish to destroy some part of the world to improve it, toppling trees that should be chairs, breaking rocks that should be sculpture, the creator makes things from which he or she can step away, leaving behind an emblem of the creative act. If it is art, it embodies the human condition in terms of these realities: all people are alone, they are individuals; all people exist in association, they are members of societies; all societies exist in the world, they are surrounded by forces that swirl beyond their control.

Into that unknowable universe the individual intrudes, reordering some scrap of it in pursuit of a project. If the project engages the senses, demanding and gaining the total involvement of the person, it meets aesthetic needs. The word "aesthetic" often troubles us, but

we use "anesthetic" easily in our common language to mean that which deadens the nerves. The aesthetic is the opposite. It enlivens the nerves, and when the nerves are excited, when the senses are seeking their own pleasure, leaving no room for boredom, preventing any feeling of alienation, an act is aesthetic and it has met the first requirement of art. The result of artful action is a work that can be sensed by others. It becomes a communication. As a communication, the work is an element in a cooperative action within which the creator discovers the nature of responsibility and the creation becomes a social fact, an aid to the construction and betterment of the creator's community. Now the second requirement of art is met: it is aesthetic, and it is ethical. Then out there beyond puny human efforts to control little bits of the universe looms amused the larger force that some describe by scientific mechanics and others name divine will, a force that escapes creativity but toward which a project gestures to meet art's third requirement. Gathering the individual into its creation, arriving as a communication among people, referring beyond to the all, a project claims the power we have built into the word art. Art presents our triple reality: it is personal (aesthetic), social (ethical), and aware of human limitations (teleological).

Few cultures circumscribe by name the category of deep action we call art, but within all cultures conventions have been developed through which people struggle to present statements on the human condition. The effort is universal, the conventions vary tremendously from group to group. In the place I know best, Ballymenone in Northern Ireland, the good night ascends through exchanges of warming drink and witty talk to music. Through music—the gift by the creator to the self, the other, and to order—runs Ballymenone's finest idea of art. At the far limit of my experience, in Anatolia, art seems to abide in textiles, in knitting and embroidery, in kilims and carpets that delight the fingers and eye, help the body, and urge the mind to meditation upon first principles. Back home in Philadelphia, in the region below South Street, where the mood is dominated by people of Italian descent, food attracts thought. A market for fresh produce marks the community's center. Small shops fill with savory fragrance. People gather at home or in restaurants for long dinners. Consider the Easter cake, a sweet ring studded with dyed eggs. Its making occupied its creator's attention. It is a gift, and idea received from others, given to others. It is a celebration of Resurrection, a reminder

of sacrifice and the hope for immortality. This cake that was a pleasure to make, a pleasure to behold, to give, to eat, to think about—a cake with God as its topic—is a South Philly work of art.

All communities include people who use familiar forms to raise the deepest ideas. All traditions have their own peculiar way to say at once: I am capable, we are right, we are not the lone motive force of things as they are. But why do we call the products of some communities, the best works of only some traditions, "folk art"?

When a view from within a tradition is adopted, art separates from other activities, good art separates from bad art, but nothing separates folk and other art. Distinctions arise when we view the art of one tradition from the perspective of another. When that is done, it seems as though one's own tradition produces art, while the tradition of the other produces folk art. We can imagine an art in which a balance has been achieved between the needs of the self, the society, and the all. An art so in balance—the art of the early Middle Ages in Europe, the high art of Islam—generates excellence, but it strikes no single course through time. For art to progress, its unity must be dismantled so that certain of its aspects can be freed for exploration, while others shrink from attention. Our art, as described by its historians (and historians require narrative lines), as evaluated by its keepers (and connoisseurs need easy scales of merit), concentrates upon certain virtues. Folk art becomes its shadow. If we characterize our own art as more personal than collective, as filling with anguished expressiveness, as gaining its life and direction from innovative individuals, then folk art will appear to be more collective than personal: it will carry the social message, it will hold to the tradition. If our art centers through pictorial or psychological realism upon the material world, appearing to be at least secular, then folk art will center through abstraction upon the spiritual universe, appearing at last to be sacred.

These dichotomies—we are individualistic, they are communal; we are progressive, they are conservative; we are secular, they are sacred—sort well with schemes used by historians to separate modern from medieval eras, by politicians to separate advanced from underdeveloped nations, by anthropologists to separate complex from traditional, hot from cool societies, by folklorists to distinguish folk from elite cultures. And that follows. When the word "folk" was borrowed from folklorists for application to works of art, it carried with it a century of meaning developed by scholars who were intrigued by the

theory of evolution and who viewed those communities that did not fit their competitive, materialistic times as having survived from a more cooperative, more religious moment. The heads of nineteenth-century scholars filled with images of the medieval village, its houses clustered around a church tower, its unfenced fields and common lands spreading beyond, its people enacting nature's rhythms. The image inspired them to elaborate the contrast of the self and the other in terms of new versus old, progressive versus conservative, individualistic versus communal, secular versus sacred.

Contemporary folk art scholarship is naturally heir to such thought. It is built on those foundations. As thought has continued, other dichotomies have been erected. The original dichotomies were oversimplifications. Later dichotomies have simplified matters into falsehood. If our art is the product of an elite, then folk art must be the expression of the common man. In fact, the great artists of our tradition, despite exceptions like Degas, have not come from the ruling class, and the greatest flowering of Western folk art was a response to sudden prosperity, in England in the seventeenth century, in Germany in the eighteenth century, in Hungary in the nineteenth. Most of the major works of our tradition and of the traditions we call folk were produced by people of the middle class, and we can preserve our vision of humble, impecunious, anonymous folk artists only by knowing nothing about their communities. Here is another of our contrastive pairs: if our art comes of professional education, then folk art must result from amateur inspiration. In fact, among the stars of our tradition are many who lacked formal training (Paul Gauguin is such a one, or Winslow Homer), while many we call folk artists were trained in ateliers within tight apprenticeship systems. Stranger, but more revealing because it exhibits the error of viewing one tradition from the perspective of another, is the notion that our art is sophisticated, so folk art must be naive. It is true that from the perspective of the Royal Academy, the schoolmasters who drew Pennsylvania German *fraktur* were naive. And it is equally true that from the perspective of rural Pennsylvania, the painters in London were naive. It is all a matter of where you stand and where you look. Every tradition has its naifs, its unskilled practitioners, but it also has its masters who are not to be understood by ripping them from their natural scenes and denigrating them by association with the children or misfits of other cultures. Art, like etiquette or language, must first be appre-

hended in terms of its own tradition. The dichotomies we have built over the fundamental dichotomies developed by scholars in the last century do little to illuminate folk art, but even those that bear no truth can serve us rhetorically. If our artists get snobbish and commence to ape their patrons' ways, why not confront them with the excellence of the common man? If our artists become professionalistically smug, why not humble them by reference to talented amateurs? If our art gets tangled in the web of its own sophistication, why not draw together works by children, madmen, peasants, and savages, and throw the whole heterogeneous mix in the faces of those who claim the name artist but who have abandoned the obligation to speak to us about significant issues?

For us, folk art is a crucial category. It derives from a critique of our own situation and its maintenance serves as an important corrective. More social than individualistic, more sacred than secular, folk art provides us a way to seek balance through criticism of our own (too individualistic, too secular) culture.

Contemplating great works in folk art, stark icons, intricate quilts, the whole manmade landscape, we are forced to think anew about creativity. Creativity is not alone the province of privileged individuals who battle for self-expression and innovation. Signature and novelty are but the most obvious spoor of creative motion. Creativity is a fundamental human right, built into the genes (as any observant parent knows), that can serve love as easily as ego, that can strive for excellence and perfection and quiet with as much energy as it strives for revolution.

Arguing over definitions of folk art, assembling collections of folk art—these activities are central to our quest for understanding. They help us comprehend our own art and its limitations and thus they provoke us to knowing ourselves, our culture, our condition. But if we wish to learn what art is, if we wish to understand the things we call folk art for themselves and not as ciphers in the small system of our consciousness, then folk art demands a different context, not a context conditioned by Kandinsky and Picasso and shaped by dealers and scholars, but a context constructed by the people who made the art. In its own context, when the weaver sits at her loom, when the supplicant touches his forehead to the prayer rug, folk art is not a corollary or critique of modern art, it is a part of the experience of life. At life's center, in the midst of common work, people always

have found and always will find ways to create things that simultaneously enfold themselves, present their social affinities, and mutter about the enormity of the universe. In that context these things are not folk. They are art.

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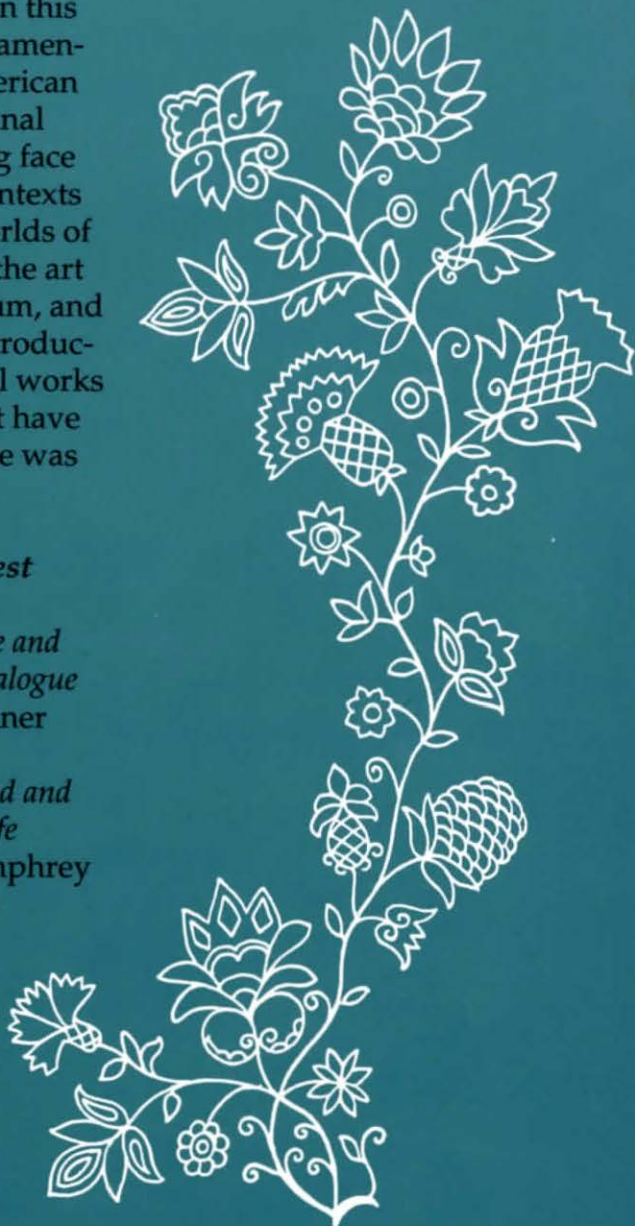
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