

Outside In: Deliberations on American Contemporary Folk Art

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The art world just isn't what it used to be. Modernism, postmodernism, feminism, multiculturalism, and pluralism have all, in differing ways, turned the American art world topsy turvy and spurred a plethora of academic debates about the nature and value of art. Many of these debates have focused on honorific distinctions and definitions of *art proper*. Of particular interest in this arena is the ascent of contemporary American folk art, both within and beyond the established art world. This article chronicles the growth of an American folk- and outsider-art establishment in America in this century and highlights art-world events and discourse that reflect a changing American aesthetic. The growth of a folk-art establishment in the United States affords us an opportunity to deliberate not only about the nature of art, but also about the nature of the art and culture industry, which includes, notably, journals of arts and aesthetic education.

A Condensed History of the Growth of American Folk Art Exhibition and Study in the Twentieth Century

Scholarly study and the exhibition of contemporary American folk art have grown dramatically in the past ninety years. At the turn of this century folk art collecting in the United States focused on American seventeenth- and eighteenth-century painting and craft traditions.¹ Collectors and historians viewed American folk art as primitively fashioned decorative objects and the handicrafts of naive Colonial artisans.² By the 1990s curatorial and scholarly interest in contemporary American folk and outsider art has become an established art-world industry replete with museums, galleries, dealers, historians, scholarly periodicals, and teachers.³ This shift is attributed, in part, to the interests of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century

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European and American modernist artists and, ultimately, to influences of multiculturalism, interdisciplinary scholarly practice, and postmodernist artistic and aesthetic impulses.

Emerging Modernist Aesthetics: Affinities with Folk Art

Some of the most well-known artists of the early twentieth century were fascinated with folk and native art. Gauguin loved the folk arts of Polynesia, Picasso and Modigliani studied West African masks and carvings, Klee was fascinated with children's art and the art of mental patients, Brancusi was interested in Romanian folk art and African sculpture, Kandinsky paid homage to Russian folk art, and the French Surrealists and German Expressionists studied the indigenous arts of Africa, Oceania, and North America.⁴ Lynda Hartigan tells us that it was the New York artists affiliated with the modernist movement who spearheaded the first folk-art rush in this country. These artists were struggling to develop a nationalistic art and cited eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century American folk art as an indigenous precedent.⁵ They also exhibited in galleries modern European paintings and tribal sculptures alongside their own works. New York museums and galleries followed suit, and exhibiting modern and indigenous art together soon became fashionable.⁶

American folk art began to receive more serious attention from curators, art historians, and art critics in the mid 1930s, after the Newark Museum in New Jersey and the Museum of Modern Art in New York exhibited the works of American folk artists. The MOMA show was particularly important, because the works were exhibited in a museum dedicated to modern art and thus were exhibited with a perceived affinity to the development of modernism in American art.⁷ The prevailing view at the time was that primitive, folk, and modern art were related in a fundamental way.⁸ Curators, following art-historical tradition, began to describe their folk objects in terms of materials, design, and aesthetic qualities.⁹ Spectacular publications also helped define and establish interest in contemporary American folk art, including Robert Goldwater's *The Primitive in Modern Painting* (published in 1938), Sidney Janus's *They Taught Themselves: American Painters of the 20th Century*, and Jean Lipman's *American Primitive Painting* (both published in 1942). Such art periodicals as *Art in America* and *Antiques* also began to publish articles about folk art.¹⁰

Interest waned by mid-century as the Abstract Expressionist movement gained momentum. The rise of Nazi Germany and World War II brought an influx of influential modernist European artists to the United States. Contemporary American artists were eager to establish themselves as part of the international art scene, and American folk art was generally viewed as unsophisticated and separate from contemporary art.¹¹ Nevertheless, a handful of self-trained artists, including William Edmondson, Morris Hirshfield,

Horace Pippin, and Grandma Moses, gained national and international notoriety during this time, and museums, collectors, and historians continued to acquire and study American folk art.

In the sixties and seventies, independently minded artists nationwide found alternatives (to the dominance of New York trends) that were reinforced as they discovered and collected contemporary American folk art.¹² Chicago Imagists were most notably interested in American folk and outsider art. They studied the indigenous arts of distant cultures at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, collected urban folk art, and often displayed their own works alongside the works of the outsider artists they championed.¹³ By the eighties, as a backlash against the impersonal minimalist, conceptualist, and formalist trends of the New York scene, young avant-garde Soho artists began to explore the works of untrained, indigenous, and other outsider artists, finding them refreshingly free of the stale doctrines of the establishment.¹⁴ The iconographic paintings and multimedia assemblages of many contemporary American artists reflect continuing interest in folk traditions, aboriginal archetypes, visionary iconography, and intuitive inspiration.¹⁵

Major American art museums and galleries have also been active in the collection and study of American folk art since the MOMA show in 1934, and a number of exhibitions have further confirmed the importance of contemporary American folk art. The opening of the Museum of American Folk Art in New York in 1961, and the publication in 1974 of Waide Hemphill and Julia Weissman's influential book *Twentieth-century American Folk Art and Artists*, signalled renewed curatorial and scholarly interest in contemporary folk art in America.¹⁶ The exhibition "Twentieth Century American Folk Art and Artists," which was opened in the fall of 1970 by the Museum of American Folk Art, and "Black Folk Art in America 1930-1980," which opened in January 1982 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, also contributed significantly to the recognition of self-trained artists.

Folk art publications, exhibitions, galleries, and organizations have continued into the 1990s. The exhibition "Made with Passion: The Hemphill Folk Art Collection," which opened at the National Museum of American Art in 1990, is particularly noteworthy. The National Museum of American Art, part of the Smithsonian Institution, not only displayed folk art in a museum founded as a traditional painting and sculpture gallery, but made substantial investments in research and public programming devoted to American folk art.¹⁷ The American Visionary Museum, opened in 1995 in Baltimore, has been declared by the U.S. Congress as the official national museum and educational center for American visionary and outsider art.¹⁸ The recent exhibition "Driven to Create: The Anthony Petullo Collection of Self-Taught and Outsider Art," mounted in 1993 by the Milwaukee Art Museum, and the publication of John Maizels's seminal *Raw Creation: Outsider*

Art and Beyond in 1996, have established worldwide recognition for important American folk and outsider art and artists and indicate an expansion of interest into the wider context of international self-trained art and artists.

From Artifact to Art

In the early 1900s American artists valued, collected, and exhibited folk and indigenous art as a means of establishing a new doctrine—their own—for art. As American museum curators began to take serious interest in American folk art, they viewed folk art as craft, utilitarian, and decorative objects.¹⁹ By the 1930s folk creations were viewed and exhibited in some museums as legitimate art objects.²⁰

In the 1970s and 1980s the recognition of contemporary American folk art differed dramatically from earlier years. The popularity of American folk art increased among artists, collectors, and scholars, and American folk art was viewed as a distinct and important American art form. Interest in folk art was coupled with scholarly interest in folk *artists*. As more states began coordinating folk-art shows representing their own artists and identities, many of these exhibitions were researched and organized by folklorists and ethnologists.²¹ Folklorists were as interested in the contexts of folk art and artists as they were in the formal aesthetic descriptions. They saw the folk object as a document and a link to understanding the lives, myths, and motivations of individuals living in particular times and places.

Jane Livingston, co-curator of the exhibition “Black Folk Art in America 1930-1980,” associates folk art with popular culture. For Livingston interest in folk art represents a turning away from the *pure art* of the avant garde, an art that, according to Livingston, is often viewed as a reductive and intellectualized dialectic about art, and a turning toward a “re-unification between the self and the object through the folk aesthetic.”²² For Elizabeth Broun, Director of the National Museum of American Art, American folk art represents an essential part of American visual heritage.

Deliberations—The Problem of Definition

Definitions, descriptions, and value statements about folk art coming from within the art world have undergone a remarkable transformation in this century, from viewing this art as primitive and simplistic a century ago, to characterizing it as refined, complex, and important. Despite decades of research, there has not been much agreement on what, exactly, folk art is. Scholarly and curatorial writings about folk art reflect differing values and research orientations.

Folk art encompasses a full range of subject matter, style, media, and processes. Folk artists cross racial, gender, religious, ethnic, political, class, and age boundaries. Many folk artists begin their careers late in life and work for years in isolation from the mainstream art world. Holger Cahill,

Acting Director of the Museum of Modern Art in 1932, established a definition for folk art as an "expression of the common people, made by them and intended for their use and enjoyment."²³ This view pervaded the thinking of curators, critics, historians, and collectors for several decades. At mid-century artist Jean Dubuffet stimulated interest in visionary, outsider, and folk art through his promotion of the iconographic, surrealist, and densely patterned visionary art of self-trained artists residing in mental institutions. For Dubuffet, these artists derived their subject matter, choice of materials, and styles from their own depths and not from the conventions of what he called "classical or fashionable art."

By the 1970s *Antiques* magazine and *Art in America* attempted to reconcile definitions that characterized folk art as a craft tradition with more contemporary views about aesthetic merits of folk objects.²⁴ By the 1970s, however, difficulties over defining folk art were exacerbated by contentions of competing scholarly disciplines that had become involved with the study of folk art. Art historians viewed folk art as a new aesthetic category to name and describe; folklorists interpreted folk art as folk material culture and preferred to describe it in the context of the culture that produced it.²⁵ Debates about definitions of folk art were compounded by debates over the best way to study, describe, and exhibit folk art and artists.

Folk art is now generally defined in the literature as art forms created by self-trained artists who, working with ordinary and recycled materials and working mostly outside of the art-world establishment, create functional and nonfunctional objects and environments for themselves or for members of their immediate social groups. But current writings about folk art also reveal interesting problems. Kristin Congdon observes that folk-art scholars often employ descriptors that facilitate understandings of how folk artists work or how folk objects function, but categories of fine, folk, and popular art are not clearly distinguished in publications about folk art.²⁶ The same object may be viewed as folk or tourist art in one context and as highly refined art in another. What seems to distinguish folk art, then, is not how it appears, but how and why it is made, by whom, and how it is understood by others.

Chuck and Jan Rosenak, avid folk-art collectors and writers, tell us that the term 'folk art' is applied to a wide variety of paintings, sculptures, and environments created by individuals who did not study art formally.²⁷ The Rosenaks classify folk art into environmental art, isolate art, memory painting, naive or naif art, outsider art, primitive art, and visionary art. Barbara Crate, Director of the American Museum of Folk Art, writes that the term 'folk art' now refers to many differing art categories, including naive art, visionary art, primitive art, and outsider art. According to Crate, the use of the term 'folk art' to refer to these distinct art forms, misleading and inadequate as it is, has become so widely accepted to include so large a variety of art forms as to make debate about what to call it moot.²⁸ Chuck and Jan

Rosenak warn that exact definitions for types or categories of folk art are controversial and overlapping.²⁹ Collapsing categories leaves scholars with such a wide and diverse array of art forms that the term 'folk art' could refer to almost any art created by someone who has not attended an "art school."

Contradicting Notions of Schooling, Cultural Influence, and Art-World Status

Defining folk artists as unschooled, isolated, and free of cultural influence is also misleading. Roger Cardinal, a leading scholar on outsider art and Professor of Literary and Visual Studies, observes that folk and self-trained artists do not necessarily work in isolation and ignorance of other art forms, noting that folk artists, while free of academism, may derive inspiration from vernacular arts of their region.³⁰ Scholars also differ in their understandings of how folk artists view themselves *as artists*. Andy Nassie maintains that folk artists do not identify the term 'art' as meaning what they do, and most have never visited an art museum.³¹ In contrast, John Maizels thinks that contemporary American folk artists are often fully aware that what they are producing is art, and they will do what they can to market themselves, their work, and their social standing in their own communities.³²

Finally, definitions of folk art as untainted by art-world tastes do not accommodate the realities of the folk-art industry. Although folk art is often defined as an art form created out of everyday materials by untrained artists, and although we are told that folk artists, more often than not, make their art without the sanctions of the art world, in recent years many folk artists have enjoyed remarkable success and recognition for their work: exhibitions in art museums and galleries, scholarly interest from mainstream art critics, historians, and academics, and a growing following among collectors and patrons.

The Destructive Impact of Success

Art-world success often dramatically changes how, what, and why folk artists create, and it does so in a way that counters accepted notions of what folk art is and how folk artists work. Chuck and Jan Rosenak note that when they started researching and collecting American folk art in the early 1970s, there were only two commercial galleries in the field. By the mid-nineties, "there were as many as ten thousand collectors of twentieth century folk art, and there was an army of pickers supporting more than a hundred galleries." Some scholars of folk and outsider art now write with great concern about the commercialization of folk art and the exploitation of folk artists.³³ Maizels tells us that, in the United States especially, artists have suffered by allowing overzealous and unscrupulous dealers and collectors to purchase a lifetime of work at low prices.³⁴ Responding to market demands, some contemporary folk artists have enlisted the help of family members, creating a family industry in the reproduction of their most

popular creations.³⁵ Roger Manley observes that some folk artists have found that their art has become a job, a production-line routine.³⁶ Growing enthusiasm for contemporary American folk art led to the formation in 1987 of the Folk Art Society of America (FASA) and the publication of its journal, *Folk Art Messenger*.³⁷ Concerned about the effects of exploitation on folk artists, FASA has distanced itself from the New York art scene and concentrates on the welfare of the folk artists themselves and on the exhibition of their work.

A Changing Aesthetic in America

Museum curatorial practice has greatly impacted both scholarly and public perceptions of folk art. Roger Cardinal highlights the importance of the discursive and pedagogic functions of folk-art galleries and museums, which, Cardinal argues, serve not only to anthologize the practice of collecting folk art, but also to define the genre, make a claim for its value and significance, offer varieties or samplings within that genre, and generate multiple readings (interpretations) of folk-art objects.³⁸ It would be difficult to assert that curatorial practice is solely responsible for changes in scholarly and public understandings of folk art. Rather, the establishment of folk art and the growing numbers of high-quality museum exhibitions and scholarly writings are evidence of a changing aesthetic in America. Writing about the 1990 Smithsonian exhibition "Made with Passion," Elizabeth Broun observes that the time was right for a new understanding of folk art, what with the decline of modernism, the rise of cultural anthropology, a post-Pop-art aesthetic, and the broadening of the art market.³⁹

Art is increasingly being used by new sectors of society, outside the confines of museums and galleries. Coffee-shop galleries, rural and urban craft fairs, community-based pottery and weaving guilds, urban graffiti, growing scholarly attention to child art, programs encouraging the creativity of homeless people, a revitalized art-cinema and animation industry, televised painting programs, poster and mural art appearing in cities and villages worldwide, and the rapidly changing art of the digital revolution all point to a more diverse role for art. John Maizels explores the currently wide public appeal of folk and outsider art:

The great avant-garde movements have faded into history and many feel that they are faced today in our museums and galleries with an art which has become increasingly obscure and inaccessible. It is no wonder that an art with immediate appeal and immediate responses, that needs little critical explanation to be fully appreciated, an art that has real meaning, that stems from the roots of genuine creativity, that is forever innovative and original and that truly reflects the individuality of its host of creators, cannot fail to touch an increasing and appreciative public.⁴⁰

Broun believes that folk-art objects reach out to a broad public "because they so forcefully engage life's fundamental aspects—family, politics, sexuality, work, nature, religion."⁴¹

Concomitant with popular appeal, the study of folk art sustains interest on many levels. Folk art transcends abstracted intellectualizations, for both maker and viewer, and reaches out to scholars as well as the public across aesthetic, ideological, ethnic, and political entrenchments. Art-world recognition of folk art provides opportunities to reflect on time-honored definitions, expectations, and practices, raising interesting aesthetic questions and recalling philosophical differences between idealist, realist, and pragmatic claims about the nature and value of art. Changing and contradictory definitions of folk art invite exploration. Historical and biographical accounts of the lives of folk artists give rise to new fields of inquiry and scholarly study, including but not limited to folklore. These accounts also raise moral questions about the art and culture industry. Some involved in aesthetic education may find calls for the study of folk art in school art programs self-contradictory and disorienting. Acceptance of folk art as art proper would certainly require what one might call an expansive and contextualist orientation. Broun recognizes this problem for those who would claim, "If anything and everything can be called art, then surely the word has lost all meaning."⁴²

But for many others involved in art study, exhibition, and teaching, folk art offers an opportunity to utilize varying value systems and disciplinary orientations. They would bring to bear art-historical, anthropological, and folklorist interests in forms, functions, and personal histories in particular times and places, along with formalist aesthetic interests in innovation, design, and universal human themes and qualities. Folk art has emerged as an essential and important component of the American aesthetic heritage, along with the indigenous arts of Native Americans, the art of women and ethnic minorities, and the finely made works associated with the new craft movement. Folk art merges distinctions between art and craft, between fine art and popular art, between high art and low art, and offers an art that anyone who wishes to do so can create and anyone who wishes to do so can appreciate. Such endeavors are not untutored, naive, or against tradition; rather, they flourish and enrich our visual heritage when facilitated by an art world geared toward sensitive, thoughtful education and patronage.

NOTES

1. John Maizels, "Contemporary Folk Art in the U.S.," in *Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), p. 112. See also Barbara Crate, "Folk Art Comes of Age," in *Museum of American Folk Art Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century American Folk Art and Artists*, ed. Chuck and Jan Rosenak (New York: Abbeyville Press, 1984), p. 13.

2. Maizels, "Contemporary Folk Art in the U.S." p. 112; Crate, "Folk Art Comes of Age," p. 13.
3. Many writers describe the remarkable growth of folk-art scholars, critics, and museums in this century. For a more concise description, see Crate, "Folk Art Comes of Age," pp. 13-16. For more lengthy discussions, see Maizels, "Contemporary Folk Art in the U.S.," and Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, "Collecting the Lone and the Forgotten," in *Made With Passion: The Hemphill Folk Art Collection in the National Museum of American Art* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), pp. 1-70.
4. Roger Cardinal, "Introduction," in *Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond*, p. 8; Hartigan, "Collecting the Lone and the Forgotten," pp. 9-10.
5. Hartigan, "Collecting the Lone and the Forgotten."
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. David Curry, "'Rose Colored Glasses: Looking for Good Design in American Folk Art,'" in *An American Sampler: Folk Art from the Shelburne Museum* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1987), p. 25.
9. Ibid.
10. For discussion of some of the publications that impacted attitudes toward contemporary American folk art, see Hartigan, "Collecting the Lone and the Forgotten," pp. 18, 24, 39, 50-51; see also David Curry's "Timeline," in *An American Sampler: Folk Art from the Shelburne Museum*, pp. 200-210; and Douglas Blandy and Kristin Congdon, "An Interdisciplinary Response to a Folk Art Exhibition in a University Fine Arts Setting," *Journal of Multicultural and Cross-Cultural Research in Art Education* 7, no. 1 (1989): 69-81.
11. Maizels, "Contemporary Folk Art in the U.S."
12. Hartigan, "Collecting the Lone and the Forgotten."
13. For discussions of Chicago Imagists' interests in outsider, folk, and indigenous art and artists, see Victor Musgrave's Introduction in *Who Chicago* (Sunderland, U.K.: Sunderland Arts Centre, 1980), pp. 12-13; Dennis Adrian, "Critical Reflections on the Development of Chicago Imagism," in *Chicago Imagism: A 25 Year Survey* (Davenport, Iowa: Davenport Museum of Art, 1994), pp. 11, 14-15; and Andy Nassie, "Aspects of Visionary Art," in *Baking in the Sun: Visionary Images from the South* (Baton Rouge, La.: Baroque Printing, 1987), p. 10. Musgrave writes that the Chicago Imagists were the first loosely associated group of artists to adopt some of the varied approaches of outsider artists, and the first group of artists to attempt to convert Dubuffet's *Art Brut* into a "gutsy, socially functioning, rule-breaking art of their own." Nassie notes the subsequent impact of Chicago Imagists' interests in outsider and folk art on art critics, gallery owners, and collectors.
14. Nassie, "Aspects of Visionary Art," p. 10.
15. Peter Frank and Michael McKenzie, *New, Used, and Improved: Art for the 1980s* (New York: Abbeyville Press, 1987), pp. 101-10; Nassie, "Aspects of Visionary Art," p. 10.
16. Maizels, "Contemporary Folk Art in the U.S.," p. 113.
17. Elizabeth Broun, "Foreword," in *Made with Passion: The Hemphill Folk Art Collection in the National Museum of American Art*, pp. ix-xi.
18. John Maizels, "Postscript: Outsider Art and the Future," in *Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond*, p. 228.
19. Curry, "Rose Colored Glasses: Looking for Good Design in American Folk Art."
20. Maizels, "Contemporary Folk Art in the U.S."
21. Curry, "Rose Colored Glasses: Looking for Good Design in American Folk Art."
22. Jane Livingston, "What It Is," in *Black Folk Art in America 1930-1960*, ed. Jane Livingston and John Beardsley (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1982) p. 18.
23. Curry, "Rose Colored Glasses: Looking for Good Design in American Folk Art," p. 198.
24. Hartigan, "Collecting the Lone and the Forgotten," p. 50.

25. See Curry, "Rose Colored Glasses: Looking for Good Design in American Folk Art," and Blandy and Congdon, "An Interdisciplinary Response to a Folk Art Exhibition in a University Fine Arts Setting."
26. Kristin Congdon, "Toward a Theoretical Approach to Teaching Folk Art: A Definition," *Studies in Art Education* 28, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 97.
27. Chuck and Jan Rosenak, "Describing Folk Art," p. 24.
28. Crate, "Folk Art Comes of Age," pp. 14-15.
29. Chuck and Jan Rosenak, "Describing Folk Art," p. 24.
30. Roger Cardinal, "A European Anthology," *Driven to Create: The Anthony Petullo Collection of Self-Taught & Outsider Art* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 1993), pp. 11-18.
31. Nassie, "Aspects of Visionary Art."
32. Maizels, "Contemporary Folk Art in the U.S."
33. Chuck and Jan Rosenak, "Describing Folk Art," p. 3.
34. John Maizels, "Postscript: Outsider Art and the Future," p. 226.
35. Roger Manley, "Separating the Folk from their Art," *New Art Examiner* (September 1991): 25-28.
36. Ibid.
37. Maizels, "Contemporary Folk Art in the U.S.," p. 124.
38. Cardinal, "A European Anthology," p. 13.
39. Elizabeth Broun credits Lynda Hartigan for this conclusion. See Broun's "Foreword," p. ix; See also Lynda Hartigan, "Collecting the Lone and the Forgotten," pp. 24, 46, 51, 62, and 70.
40. Maizels, "Postscript: Outsider Art and the Future," p. 228.
41. Broun, "Foreword," pp. x-xi.
42. Ibid., p. ii.