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Exploring Folk Art

Michael Jones

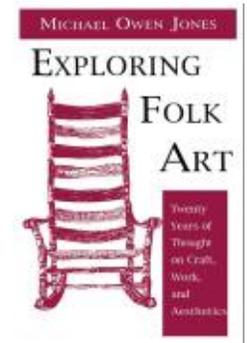
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Foreword

In the forest of studies on American material culture and folklife lie a few giant redwoods that consistently provide inspiration for generations of students. Books that offer an appreciation of the “masters” who have planted these redwoods and have had much to do with shaping the scholarly landscape have been lacking in the field of material culture studies, although it boasts its own cast of leading men and women. Several interdisciplinary conferences on material culture studies during the 1980s pointed up the need for collections of essays that would allow students to appreciate and analyze the contributions of the field’s leaders and their disciplinary homes. With the end of the twentieth century in view, there is also a sense of closing a productive chapter in interdisciplinary studies on art and artifacts. The period from the 1960s through the 1980s witnessed a tremendous surge of colleges, museums, institutes, and endowments devoted to the study of American material culture and folklife studies. With a new generation of students and a learned public eager to move forward, the object lessons gained from this period deserve, indeed demand, renewed attention.

The Hand Made Object and Its Maker (1975) by Michael Owen Jones is one of those redwoods that students look up to. Coming at a time of preoccupation with reconstructing the past through artifacts, his book broke new ground by bringing study back to the present. It asked exciting questions of the relations between craftworkers and their products and communities. Observing living craftsmen at work and recording life histories, Jones showed art and creativity, and indeed tradition, to be dynamic processes requiring reexamination of previously held assumptions. Since he introduced his ideas, Jones can lay claim to a long list of books and articles in material culture studies informed by his perspectives.

Yet the celebration of his book can obscure the contributions he has made to other areas besides crafts—foodways, workers’ lore, medical belief, language, play, organizational culture, and fieldwork technique. This volume allows Jones to integrate some of these studies, to view their underlying themes, to comment on their development. He brings his philosophical and historical perspective to bear on his unifying concern for “Exploring Folk Art.” Consistently throughout his essays one finds an

interpretation of life and art bound together and examined as expressive behavior.

For many, the main contribution of this volume will be easy access to the master's work. The essays included in the volume are often difficult to find; they are drawn from conference papers, regional journals, *festschriften*, and symposium reports. Some have been published earlier; many have not. But each represents an important contribution. The author himself may wonder why he once said what he did in some of his essays, but he has preserved the integrity of the originals to allow readers to see that scholarship, like art, is subject to change. Some alterations to correct errors or to smooth out phrasing have been made, but the essays generally stand as originally written. Adding to the value of the essays in this volume, however, are Jones's headnotes, in which he explains what led to the writing of the essays and the ideas that they contained. Indeed, as he has been devoted to understanding kinds of artistic behavior in context, so he has put his writing—his expressive behavior, one might say—in the context of the organizations and endeavors of which he has been a part.

The gathering together here of these papers certainly does not signal the end of Jones's scholarly production, but it does allow him, and us, to take stock of a distinctive period of scholarship leading up to this pivotal point of American material culture and folklife studies. It also allows a chance to look once more at an interesting array of behavior—from crafting a “strange rocking chair” to arranging the trash—and ask anew about meanings in material culture.

Simon J. Bronner
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