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## Exploring Folk Art

Michael Jones

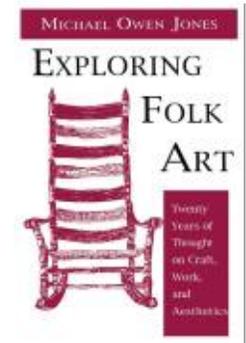
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## Prologue

Several years before I began exploring folk art, first as a graduate student in folklore at Indiana University and later as a professor of history and folklore at UCLA, I was an undergraduate student (1960–64) at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. During the spring semester of my freshman year I heard about a class being taught by someone named Stith Thompson, who was a visiting professor from Indiana University; the course concerned “folklore.” Although intrigued, I could not take the course because it was an upper division one; in addition, I had begun an art major which absorbed my attention.

When I was a sophomore at the University of Kansas, I met someone who told me excitedly about this class he was taking on “folklore.” It was being taught by someone named Butler Waugh, who was completing his graduate work at Indiana University. The folklore course sounded interesting; however, I was still taking art courses and had just started a history major as well.

By my third year at the University of Kansas I had completed most of the requirements for my history and art majors and also had begun taking courses for a third major in international relations. One day somebody mentioned an exciting course on “folklore” that he was taking. The instructor was Alan Dundes, who had recently completed graduate work at Indiana University. Vowing then and there that I would take the folklore course my senior year, I made an appointment to talk with Dundes.

I vividly recall walking up the several flights of stairs in old Frazer Hall to reach Dundes’s office in one of the towers (the building was razed later as unsafe, and replaced with a modern edifice more or less reminiscent of the original building in outward appearance but having none of its charm and sense of history). I explained to Dundes that during the years I had been majoring in other subjects I had heard about a course on “folklore.” I was anxious to take the course, I said, and looked forward to seeing him in the fall. He wouldn’t be there, he told me, since he had just accepted a position in the

Anthropology Department at the University of California at Berkeley. I was crestfallen. After having heard about this course for three years, and looking forward to taking it at last, I was apparently too late.

Fortunately for me, the course would be offered by Dundes's successor at the University of Kansas, Robert A. Georges, who was just completing his Ph.D. degree in folklore from Indiana University. I knew nothing about Georges or the Folklore Department at Indiana University. My concern at the moment was that in my last year at the University of Kansas I would be taking that much-talked-about introductory folklore course in fall semester, 1963. After the first lecture, I knew that the wait had been worth it. I began to realize why I had taken several majors; I was seeking something. What I had been looking for I now had found: folklore studies. In spring semester I took the only other course on folklore that was offered, a graduate-level class on the folktale taught by Georges. And I applied, and was admitted, to the graduate program in folklore at Indiana University, later earning an M.A. in folklore and a Ph.D. in folklore and American studies.

Stith Thompson had founded the Folklore Department at Indiana University. After earning his Ph.D. in folklore, Butler Waugh accepted a teaching position in the English Department at the University of Florida (he became editor of *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, in which I published several essays in the late 1960s and early 1970s). Dundes remained at Berkeley. In 1966, Georges accepted a position in the English Department at UCLA to teach folklore courses exclusively. Later, one of my classmates at Indiana University—Robert J. Smith, a specialist on festivals—was hired by the University of Kansas to teach anthropology and folklore courses. In 1968, I was offered a position in history and folklore at UCLA, where I began teaching courses on fieldwork, American folklore, and what was then called the folklore of material culture (a course rarely taught but considered by others to be my specialty, which is one reason I was hired).

I mention this experience not only to pay tribute to those who inspired me to take up folklore studies, the discipline from which I derive my professional identity and to the development of which I have dedicated my efforts for the past two decades, but also as a reminder that inquiry is a matter of personal choice and conviction. Set within the general framework of material culture studies and research on folklore, my explorations of folk art have been affected both by the works of others and by my own beliefs, assumptions, and concerns. It seems appropriate, therefore, not simply to publish essays that were penned over the past 20 years but to suggest something of the disciplinary and personal contexts in which they were written.

### Material Culture Studies and Folklore

During the past quarter of a century many scholarly fields, subfields, and specialties have developed that either did not exist when I was an undergraduate student or were so new that I was unaware of them. One of these is American material culture studies. A loosely knit group, material culturists include representatives of (among other specialties) cultural geography, art history, American studies, the history of science and technology, architectural history, popular culture studies, historical archeology, and folklife studies and folklore research. They publish articles in journals in their respective disciplines, of course; but there are also two periodicals whose titles testify to the existence of material culture studies as a distinct subject of study. One is *Winterthur Portfolio: A Journal of American Material Culture*; the other is *Material Culture: Journal of the Pioneer America Society*.

Obviously the term “material culture” focuses attention on things, objects and artifacts. Writes Simon J. Bronner: “Material culture is made up of tangible things crafted, shaped, altered, and used across time and across space. It is inherently personal and social, mental and physical. It is art, architecture, food, clothing, and furnishing” (Bronner 1985a:3). Twenty-five years ago one art historian complained about “the bristling ugliness of ‘material culture’” (Kubler 1962:9), but the term persisted and now dominates. Perhaps this is because no other name more completely embraces the totality of the objects studied. It also might be because the term does not require treating objects only as aesthetic phenomena (art), exclusively as products of industry (science and technology), or principally as the built environment (architecture, cultural geography). Rather, “material culture” is general enough to allow research combining all of these conceptions and foci.

The label “material *culture*” directs attention to something else, which might also account for the popularity of this appellation. Writes Thomas J. Schlereth: “A second axiom is the belief that a link exists between material and culture” (Schlereth 1985b:4). Continuing his definition of material culture, Bronner writes: “But more so [than just including the objects mentioned], it is the weave of these objects in the everyday lives of individuals and communities. It is the migration and settlement, custom and practice, production and consumption that is American history and culture. It is the gestures and processes that extend ideas and feelings into three-dimensional form” (Bronner 1985a:3). “Material culture,” then, seems to be a shortening of the expression “material manifestations of culture” (Jones 1970a:47–48). Certainly many researchers use the culture construct,

connecting the objects they study to other aspects of social life. As Jules David Prown defined it, "Material culture is the study through artifacts of the beliefs—values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society at a given time" (Prown 1982:1 and 1985:77).

A fundamental tenet of material culturists is that objects do not exist in a vacuum. Made and used by people, artifacts relate to human values, concerns, needs, and desires both past and present. They may reflect the spirit of an age, the beliefs of a society or a subgroup, or the experiences of an individual. They can embody notions of how to survive in the physical world, serve as indexes of social relations, or be forms of projection that express longings, fantasies, and feelings, thereby helping people cope or adjust emotionally. Their use may be wholly instrumental and utilitarian, sensory and aesthetic, or symbolic—or a combination of these. Thus, both the manufacture and use of artifacts are rooted in historical, sociocultural, and psychological conditions and processes.

Early research on objects in several fields was largely descriptive. Then artifacts were used as supplementary data and corroborative evidence of ideas derived from an analysis of other sources of information. Eventually man-made objects were viewed as links to socioeconomic structures and cultural values. To some scholars now they are symbolic expressions (Mayo 1980:597; see also essays in Schlereth 1985a). The value of studying objects is suggested by such phrases in recent article titles as "learning from looking" (Lewis 1985), "the power of things" (Upton 1985b), "the stuff of everyday life" (Ames 1985), and "visible proofs" (Bronner 1985b). "Whatever else they might be, artifacts are at the deepest level expressive forms," writes Dell Upton. "The manufacture of an artifact is an act of creation equal to, rather than reflective of, the manufacture of a social system or an intellectual concept," he continues. "All are part of the symbolic process that continuously recreates the world by imposing meaning and order on it. As a primary phenomenon equal to social structure and intellectual reasoning, the artifact must be questioned on its own terms" (Upton 1985a:87).

As objects were given more attention in understanding history, society, culture, and cognition, and examined in their own right, the range of artifacts broadened and now includes the plastic and graphic arts, applied arts or utilitarian art forms including the decorative arts, modifications of the environment, personal adornment, machinery and technology, forms of diversions or entertainment, and the accoutrements of human subsistence (see Prown 1982:3). More importantly perhaps, the scope enlarged to embrace not only (or principally) avant-garde and upper-class aesthetic objects and major inventions but also "traditional" material culture (Roberts 1985) and the "ordinary things" in "the daily lives of ordinary people" (Vlach 1985:82). There is, writes Schlereth, a "new populist emphasis . . . on vernacular,

commonplace, and mass-style objects, as opposed to that which is unique, elite, or high-style . . . " (Schlereth 1985b:25).

The "democratization of American objects studied" (Schlereth 1985b:25) owes much to the "new social history" emphasizing minority populations, laboring classes, "common men and women," and others ignored previously (Vlach 1985:82) in combination with the use of photographic materials, oral history techniques, and similar resources that help fill in gaps in the written record (Mayo 1980:595; Wise 1979:323). Paralleling these trends in historical research is a movement away from the overarching "myth-and-symbol school" in American studies to microcosmic studies at the local and regional level (Schlereth 1985a:xiii; Berkhofer, Jr. 1979). Contributing also is the development of research on objects in folklore studies. Once ignored in favor of verbal genres, folk art and material culture now hold their own in American folkloristics.

### Folk Art and Material Culture

"The folklore of material culture is one of the most neglected fields of American folklore study," observed Wayland D. Hand in his presidential address to the American Folklore Society in 1958. Later published in the society's journal, his address was titled "American Folklore after Seventy Years: Survey and Prospect," *Journal of American Folklore* 73 (1960):1-9. Elaborating on the neglect of material culture research, he wrote: "This work has fallen largely to museum people, who follow it as a collateral interest; and the society has been notably backward in supplying leadership in this important field" (p. 4).

Two years earlier, in a paper entitled "Folklore of Material Culture on the Rocky Mountain Frontier" presented at a meeting of the Philological Association of the Pacific Coast, Austin E. Fife speculated about the reasons why "the folklore of material culture has been neglected." According to Fife, "It derives from the fact that the pursuit of folkloric research has largely been an appendage to literary and linguistic studies. This means that the folk tale, the folk song and ballad, the proverb, and many other forms of literary folklore have made first demands on our interest." He continued: "Engineers, architects, farmers, domestic economists, artists, etc. have remained peculiarly uninterested in the historic or folk aspect of their respective domains" (Fife 1957:110).

The past three decades have witnessed an astonishing growth in folklore studies in research on objects and their makers and users.<sup>1</sup> Indicative of the increasing importance of objects, material culture, and folklife is the fact that at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in 1986 nearly 60 people spoke on the subject in a dozen forums and sessions of papers. Some of

the range of interests is suggested by session titles, e.g., “Building a Place,” “Verbal and Visual Art,” “Maritime Folk Life,” “Folk Design,” “Heirloom Gardening,” “Folk Art in Texas: A Preliminary Assessment,” and “Folk Art, Emblems, and Iconization.” (This listing does not include sessions on foodways or individual papers on folk art in other sessions on organizational folklore, the physical environment, native American traditions, and so on.) One set of papers called “Social Aspects of Material Culture” concerned ways in which rugs, buildings, and mailboxes express identity, values, and lifestyles. A forum explored “The Dynamics of Folklore and Urban Planning.” Participants in “Coming to Terms with ‘Urban’ ‘Folk’ Art,” “Beyond the Boundaries of Folk Art,” and “Rethinking the Study of Folk Architecture” challenged longstanding assumptions and grappled with basic concepts and methods.

Once there was a dearth of research; now there is a plethora of papers. But many of the same issues of yesteryear command attention today. How do you study folk art? That is, what are the essential concepts, the most defensible assumptions, the appropriate questions to ask? How are forms generated and why are they perpetuated, altered, or abandoned? What do forms and designs mean or symbolize? How do various objects (or the making of them) function for the individual who constructs or uses them or for the network of people among whom they are manifested? Why study traditions and the aesthetic impulse in everyday life?

These questions persist for several reasons. First, they typify concerns in the field of folklore studies. If you examine textbooks or a few volumes of folklore journals, you will see that authors define folklore, delineate the characteristics of one or another genre (by style, structure, or content), posit solutions to problems of origins, raise questions about continuity or change over time and space, suggest meanings and functions of forms, and review concepts and methods of folklore study. Second, members of each new generation of researchers pose questions asked before as part of the process of forming their identity as folklorists and because they have unique contributions to make to an existing body of literature. Third, established folklorists sometimes take stock of the field, reflecting on directions of which they have been a part and speculating about what the future holds.

### **The Personal Element in Scholarship**

A couple of years ago Martha Teall Oyler wrote to me requesting a current bibliography and a vita. “I am a graduate student in American Studies/Museum Studies,” she began her letter, “and have recently been introduced to your work through a course with John Vlach at the George Washington University.” She had read two of my books, *The Hand Made*

*Object and Its Maker* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), and (with Robert A. Georges) *People Studying People: The Human Element in Fieldwork* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1980). Because she was preparing a paper on contemporary methods in folklore studies, she asked for my bibliography and vita. She added, "I would be interested in your revealing those writings, scholars or experiences which you feel have directly or indirectly influenced your thoughts."

I contemplated which people and publications inspired my earlier work through positive or negative example, recalled situations or experiences that might have influenced my beliefs, and considered why I had addressed some of the issues that I had written about during the past 20 years. I sent Martha Oyler a 3,300-word summary of my reflections, in which I remarked on folk art study, fieldwork, and other research topics including folk medicine, architecture, foodways, and work life.

While I have written about different forms of expressive behavior and various circumstances in which those forms are manifested, "there is a thread of continuity through my research and writing," I wrote to Ms. Oyler, "one of concern, of philosophy and of focus."

Developing the methods of folklore studies has been a principal concern. Although folklore research is closely related to such disciplines as anthropology, psychology, sociology, and literature or art history, the field of folklore studies has its own concepts, assumptions, and issues. Identifying these is not always easy because of the interdisciplinary nature of our field and the changing emphases over the past 175 years. A result of doing so, however, is to extend the application of folklore studies to other areas of inquiry. This is one reason that I have written about a behavioral history, a behavioral architecture, and the relationship of folklore studies to management and to behavioral and organizational science.

I believe we should apply hypotheses and inferences from our research about the human condition to improve the conditions in which human beings act and under which they must function. "It should come as no surprise, then," I wrote to Ms. Oyler regarding some of my papers, "that I suggest ways in which a study of folk medicine, traditional architecture or expressive behavior at work can enhance the quality of professional therapy, housing and urban design or organization development." I concluded my letter to Martha Teall Oyler with the statement, "Whatever the subject, my focus has always been on the aesthetically satisfying and on quality-of-life matters in celebration of what human beings can achieve."

More recently, Simon J. Bronner, editor of this series, asked me to take part. I was flattered to be considered. I was also perplexed. What would I include? There are more than 30 articles and review essays and a dozen

unpublished papers on folk art from which to select—not to mention many essays on other topics. Dating back 20 years, some of the articles reflect my present concerns or represent my current research while others do not. Moreover, what is the purpose? Is it sufficient simply to make available unpublished essays or works printed in sources now difficult to locate? I think not.

Some scholars reprint earlier articles, perhaps adding new works, revolving around a particular subject, perspective, or idea. Essays might have been novel when first published, influential later, or still provocative today. Or together they might provide a well-rounded examination of a topic or the initial statement, elaboration, and final summing up of an interpretation. Or they might demonstrate changing viewpoints and the evolving understanding of an issue. Whatever the nature of the volume, a question raised for some readers (but answered by few authors) is that of why the essays were written initially.

I have prepared this volume with the personal element in scholarship in mind. Introductions to the 11 articles give some of the background on the reasons for writing a paper, the issues it addressed, or its relation to my research interests as they developed over time. Although brief, these introductions suggest the scholarly and personal contexts in which the essays were originally prepared and highlight some of the matters that have interested me most.

### **Themes in This Volume**

A major concern in many of my writings is that of methods. How do you study folk art; and why document and interpret aesthetic forms? I believe that the field of folklore studies, which includes the documentation and analysis of objects, has its own methods. Were this not so, then there would be no journals of folklore, no college degrees in folklore (or folklore and mythology, folk studies, or folklore and folklife) and no American Folklore Society with its centennial celebration in 1987–88.

I am also convinced that a craving for tradition and an aesthetic impulse inform our lives. Familiarity vies with novelty for our attention and appreciation. And even the most prosaic of utilitarian forms can be, and often are, imbued with aesthetic value.

I believe there is more to the study of folk art than a preoccupation with the objects or an attempt to set the makers within a cultural context as simply transmitters of tradition. It is individuals who make things. Why do they make the things they do? How do they conceptualize form? What experiences affect their creativity, the way they proceed in construction, the forms they

produce? What do the items—and the making of them—mean, express, or symbolize? What values inform manufacture, selection, and use; why?

Finally, I think the answers to some of these questions cannot be found by focusing on objects—or even by studying the making and use of objects. Rather, we need to take into account other manifestations of the aesthetic impulse and the craving for tradition. Hence, some of the examples in this volume are of expressive behavior instead of only material outputs of behavioral processes.

To conclude, I want to thank Martha Teall Oyler for having asked me to contemplate “those writings, scholars or experiences which you feel have directly or indirectly influenced your thoughts.” And I appreciate Simon Bronner’s urging me to set forth those reflections in this volume, focusing them on particular essays I wrote over the past two decades as I explored folk art. These papers on craft, work, and aesthetics—together with the introductions to them as well as the epilogue—set forth some of the issues that I considered important earlier and that I believe will require attention in future. Answers to these questions may change over time; the problems themselves, however, are probably perennial.

#### Notes

1. Among the many researchers in recent years contributing to folklore studies of objects and their manufacture and use are: Elizabeth Mosby Adler, Thomas Adler, Kenneth L. Ames, Simon J. Bronner, Peggy Bulger, Hal Cannon, Thomas Carter, Jennie Chinn, Varick Chittenden, Kristin G. Congdon, C. Kurt Dewhurst, Elaine Eff, Deirdre Evans-Pritchard, Susan Fagan, Sara Selene Faulds, Burt Feintuck, William R. Ferris, Henry Glassie, Verni Greenfield, Mary Hufford, Joyce Ice, Margaret Johnson, Louis C. Jones, Suzi Jones, Yvonne Lockwood, Marsha MacDowell, Robert S. McCarl, Eugene Metcalf, Steven Ohrn, Daniel Patterson, Gerald L. Pocius, Leslie Prosterman, Warren L. Roberts, Brian Rusted, Amy Skillman, Paul Smith, Nancy Solomon, David Taylor, Robert Teske, Gerald Thomas, Dell Upton, John Michael Vlach, Don Yoder, M. Jane Young, Charles Zug, III, and Egle Victoria Žygis.

