Violations of Standards of Excellence and Preference in Utilitarian Art

In August of 1965, I headed for southeastern Kentucky in search of a chairmaker named Chester Cornett. Warren Roberts, from whom I had had a folk art course my first year of graduate study at Indiana University, had seen a brief article about him in the Louisville Courier-Journal. Aware that one of my undergraduate degrees was in art history, he urged me to find out more about this craftsman and the chairs he made.

I had no knowledge of and little interest in utilitarian art forms. My previous research had concerned painting, sculpture, and photography as art. But the weeks I spent interviewing and observing Chester at work, as well as locating chairs he had made earlier, convinced me that there was much creativity in the use of traditional tools and techniques to construct practical things. Whether or not a chair "sets good" and "rocks good" depends as much on aesthetic concerns, imagination in designing, and skill in construction as on utilitarian considerations.

I returned to southeastern Kentucky in November of 1965, again in August of 1966, and yet again the summer of 1967. I spent time with a dozen chairmakers, among whom Chester seemed both the most innovative in the range of designs he made and the most traditional in his choice of tools and techniques. I talked with customers, noting not only what they said about the chairs and chairmakers but also where they kept the chairs and how they treated them. My questions for research focused on why the chairs exhibited particular features of construction and design, what the craftsmen's conceptions of themselves were (especially in regard to the activity of making chairs), how craftsmen and their works were viewed by other people (including customers), and what the specific circumstances were in which various chairs had been made.

On the basis of my earliest research on the technology that Chester used to make settin' chairs and rocking chairs, I published a descriptive piece called "A Traditional Craftsman at Work" (1967c). Feeling that the study of folklore in art deserved attention (e.g., the paintings and lithographs of Thomas Hart Benton that were based on traditional songs and stories), and convinced that folk art vied with

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so-called high art in its complexity of analysis and in what it revealed about the human condition, I wrote “Two Directions for Folkloristics in the Study of American Art” (1968).

In between these articles I published several reviews and also an essay called “The Study of Traditional Furniture: Review and Preview” (1967b). The latter sets forth a theme that was to recur for several years. At this time, most publications on folk art concentrated on museum specimens surviving from the past; they did not consider contemporary craftsmen who had been interviewed or observed at work. This object orientation, particularly in regard to “country furniture,” was often accompanied by an attitude of condescension, and it led to incorrect statements and false impressions. Country joiners and cabinetmakers were said to be mere imitators of high-style examples and their works were considered simple, unsophisticated, and even crude. There was no investigation of the context of manufacture and use of objects, process was neglected in deference to form, the human component was ignored, and American folk arts and crafts were said over and over again to be a thing of the past.

As a consequence, I found myself reading widely in the anthropological literature, paying particular attention to the writings of Boas (1927), Bidney (1967), Bunzel (1972), Crowley (1958), Firth (1929; 1936), Gerbrands (1957), Himmelheber et al. (1963), Merriam (1964a; 1964b), Ray (1961), Sieber (1965), and Sayce (1963). I also drew on sociological writings including works by Barnett (1958), Becker (1952), Gotshalk (1962), Maclyver (1964), Morris (1958), and Nash (1956–57). The difficulty was that of not attempting to become an anthropologist or a sociologist. As important as the constructs of culture, society, group, and institution are, they do not and should not dominate folklore studies, a discipline that focuses on traditions and expressive forms whose origins, nature, and purposes depend on a multiplicity of historical, sociocultural, psychological, and behavioral factors.

After surveying the then-current approach to country furniture in my article reviewing and previewing the subject, I described the kind of research that was needed in future. A study of traditional furniture making would begin with information about the cultural, economic, and social circumstances of craft production in the area. This would provide a framework within which to summarize the origin and development of the craft. Next would be a treatment of the technical aspects of furniture construction, including a taxonomy of items, the tools and techniques of construction, materials, and the process of making an object. The artist also was to be considered—his experiences, values, and self-concept among other matters. There would be a focus on the creative process and the artist’s imagining forms, implementing designs, revising his conception of the form, self-criticism, and so on. Another area of inquiry would be art production as a business, because the process of attraction and stipulation affect the nature of the product created. This would lead to a treatment of style, the relationship between artist and consumer, and the question of aesthetics and taste. Throughout the article I suggested techniques to use in fieldwork to obtain this information.

The article guided much of my own research, resulting in the completion of a thousand-page dissertation. Called “Chairmaking in Appalachia: A Study in Style
and Creative Imagination in American Folk Art" (1970a), my dissertation elaborated all of the areas previewed in the short article of 1967. It also contained the seeds of many papers and articles that I was to write during the next few years.

"'I Bet That's His Trademark': 'Anonymity' in 'Folk' Utilitarian Art Production" (1971b) took issue with a characteristic often cited as a criterion of "folk" art. It challenged the propensity in folklore studies at the time to focus on diffusion of texts and objects, ignoring the individual artist. It also questioned the success of some anthropologists who were just beginning to write about "individual hands," "tradition and creativity in tribal art," and "the individual in society."

At the time I wrote "'There's Gotta Be New Designs Once in Awhile': Culture Change and the 'Folk' Arts" (1972b), I wanted to counter the prevailing notion that folklore is dying out and offer an antidote to most commentary by anthropologists and museum personnel that art forms affected by tourism are degenerate atrocities. This issue was addressed more thoroughly later by Nelson H. H. Graburn in a book he edited called Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Culture of the Fourth World (1976).

On a related theme is my article "Folk Craft Production and the Folklorist's Obligation" (1970b). Based on my personal experiences conducting fieldwork among craftsmen of the Cumberlands, I argued that folklorists had the obligation of assisting those who gave them information. For craftsmen this might take the form of assistance in marketing their products. I was influenced in part by Nelson Graburn's essay, "The Eskimos and 'Airport Art,'" (1967), in which he describes his helping Eskimos market soapstone carvings. With the growth of public sector folklife and applied folklore, the issue has become a dominant one. It was addressed recently by Rosemary O. Joyce in "'Fame Don't Make the Sun Any Cooler': Folk Artists and the Marketplace" (1986a) and also in a double issue of New York Folklore (1986b) edited by Joyce.

Whether craftsmen construct objects and then seek consumers attracted to the forms and designs they have made, or whether they make things according to customer stipulation, has a significant impact on what they produce and why these objects possess certain traits. Because economic matters may be crucial to understanding the nature of traditional crafts, I published a three-part article called "'If You Make a Simple Thing, You Gotta Sell It at a Simple Price': Folk Art Production as a Business" (1972, 1973). A more extensive treatment of the effects of economic factors and varied consumer influences is given by Charles Briggs in The Wood Carvers of Cordova, New Mexico: Social Dimensions of an Artistic Revival (1980).

In many of my essays at this time I quoted a craftsman or customer in the title. This was in part a reaction to the then-fashionable functionalist analysis, which held that only the researchers (not the subjects) could infer the sociocultural meanings and functions of things or acts, and to the dominant assumption in writings by museum personnel that folk art was simple and the artists unsophisticated. Also, I often put the word "folk" in quotation marks, feeling ill at ease using a term that still carried negative connotations in many circles.

My concern in "'They Made Them for the Lasting Part': A 'Folk' Typology of Traditional Furniture Makers" (1971c) is how residents of an area conceptualize
craftsmen’s motives, abilities, and commitment, and therefore how this information can generate in the researcher greater understanding of and appreciation for a craft and its craftsmen.

In "The Useful and the Useless in Folk Art" (1973a), I devoted several pages to local craftsmen and consumers’ conceptions of “art.” I also examined the practical and aesthetic as integral components of utilitarian folk art, distinguishing the interrelated elements to which users respond and remarking on aesthetic principles. At about this time I published a series of three related articles: "The Concept of ‘Aesthetic’ in the Traditional Arts" (1971a) and ‘‘For Myself I Like a Decent, Plain-made Chair: The Concept of Taste and the Traditional Arts in America’’ (1972a) were the first two. The third (1973b) is reprinted below. I have shortened the introduction and added headings as well as four illustrations.

“Violations of Standards of Excellence and Preference in Utilitarian Art” (1973) draws on many of the other articles I published during this period. It brings together ideas regarding “aesthetics” and “taste,” the importance of folk art as a business, the local typology of craftsmen based on motivation and commitment, the relationship between craftsmen and consumers, creativity, and “folk.” Although not intended to be a summary of my earlier work, it is cumulative in a sense. It also marks “the end of an era,” for in 1973 I ceased writing individual papers based on my studies of craftsmen of the Cumberlands and instead began work on a book. Published two years later, it was called The Hand Made Object and Its Maker (1975).

I wrote the article below because of a curious situation. A museum director had declined the opportunity to purchase some of Byron’s chairs for the museum’s collection; they seemed to be too refined and to exhibit too much finesse. He thought Chester’s unsanded and unvarnished chairs epitomized folk things. In contrast, the owner of a bookstore and gallery of folk art chose not to purchase Chester’s chairs; the sophistication of design and utility of Chester’s work did not correspond to her notion of what folk craft objects ought to be. She bought the chairs of someone else less committed to craftwork. Both people were seeking something degraded; they differed in regard to whose works were sufficiently debased to be folk.

At this time the literature on primitive art tended to eulogize the objects (with the exception of “airport” art). It seemed as if all makers of masks, canoe prows, or carved poles in a meeting house succeeded equally in perfecting these forms. The literature by some museum personnel, however, considered examples of American folk art and craft naive, unsophisticated, and imitative of high-style works; at best, these objects were complimented for being “honest” and “forthright.”

My research on contemporary chairmaking in southeastern Kentucky indicated that there was a range of construction quality in objects and design versatility among craftsmen. There were also many standards of excellence and varied reasons for preferences. Different customers had their values. Even an individual craftsman might violate his own standards sometimes. In this article, therefore, I examined several instances in which somebody’s (whose?) standards were violated in some way (how? why?).
The interrelated problems of the violation of technical and aesthetic standards in an American traditional utilitarian art form and the nature of taste and aesthetics are aspects of artistic creativity that have not been examined in the depth and detail that their complexity warrants. The phrase "violations of standards" may even suggest that certain individuals lack both technical skill and artistic talent. The present topic, therefore, might appear incongruous when associated with concerns about "creativity" as that term is usually used in reference to material art forms, namely, the ability to fashion an object in adherence to established artistic principles in order to generate an aesthetic experience in the percipient. As I shall demonstrate, however, such violations may not always be attributed to an absence of creative vision or a lack of technical mastery, nor must the producer always be held solely responsible for the breach of technical and aesthetic standards. In addition, and perhaps more significantly, alleged violations may be of great importance to the researcher in gaining insights into taste, creative processes, and the network of social relations in which art is produced, for matters of taste among various consumer publics and standards of preference and excellence exert pressure on the manufacturers of utilitarian art products, thereby influencing the nature of the product.

Researchers' Attitudes toward "Primitive" and "Folk" Art

An inquiry into the violations of taste in any art tradition, despite its potential significance, has been neglected. Some investigators do not perceive infractions in the established rules of creativity, because such a possibility cannot be entertained, as the ultimate aim of many recent works on primitive art is to convince the reader that the art is of high quality. In addition, while products made after culture contact with the West owing to the impetus of tourism are disparaged as inferior to the "imposing remnants of a marvelous past," they are not critically examined even when the researcher is directly responsible for the production of such allegedly debased work (Jones 1969). And native evaluations of the objects have not been systematically recorded and analyzed to determine that which members of the group find indecorous. Even Franz Boas, in the seminal work on primitive art more than 40 years ago, sought to demonstrate that American Indians created objects of high quality satisfying artistic and aesthetic impulses. Although a defensible thesis in the main, it does not consider native standards of taste or the degree to which specific objects adhered to or deviated from the social canon of perfection. (See, for example, Crowley 1958; Boas 1955; Gerbrands 1967; Thompson 1968.)
Many, perhaps indeed most, commentators on "folk art" historically assume that such products are simple, crude, and naive, qualities that are used to define folk art or to differentiate between the superior works in an elite tradition and the mean products of the folk. Not infrequently, still lifes of young seminary ladies; the early works of Earl, West, and Copley; portraits of itinerant limners; and the decorative motifs on utilitarian objects made by Pennsylvania-German folk craftsmen are treated as phenomena of the same order owing solely to the common characteristics of (alleged) simplicity and naïveté. Folk utilitarian objects are considered inept in execution, crude in construction, and lacking meritorious qualities because the craftsmen have been only the fortuitous inheritors of formal styles emanating from urban centers, which they copied with varying lack of success. To scrutinize violations of technical and aesthetic standards in folk art is perforce a task of supererogation, for all forms of traditional, conventionalized modes of behavior, are, by definition and common consent, base.

The folklorist may view such a contention with skepticism, since it is based on an examination of a few extant objects made by unknown individuals under unspecified circumstances at a time and place that can be conjectured only; it is predicated on the assumption that the folk never invent, or create, or discover, but are merely passive agents or depreciators of the achievements of an elite stratum of society; or it is based on the false assumption that no one who communicates by means of traditional, conventionalized modes of expression can do so creatively. But owing to this conception of what has been called folk art, the few apologists find themselves in an embarrassing position: How does one justify the study of defective or debased things? Apparently, if precedent will serve as a guide, one accepts the proposition that folk art and folkloric artistic expressive modes are imperfect, but then one argues that the objects possess inherent virtues absent in the elite art from which they descend, qualities such as spontaneity, unself-consciousness, democracy, and genuineness. These attributes, therefore, render the objects worthy of a furtive glance. (See "What Is American Folk Art? A Symposium" 1950; "Country Furniture, a Symposium" 1968; Hauser 1963:277–331 and passim.; Jones 1967b.)

There is no reason to suppose, however, that all works of art are consummate, or that all utilitarian products serve as a paragon of the requirements of useful design. It is questionable also to contend that all art forms in a particular tradition are transgressions of a paradigm of excellence established external to that tradition. An approach more revelatory of folk art and its production would involve the temporary suspension of the observer's judgment and the collection of data concerning attitudes of group members toward the products created in their community. It is obligatory, then, in an
investigation of this kind, that the researcher determine what are the standards of whom that are being violated by whom in what manner. It is this problem that serves as the focal point of the remainder of this essay. It should be noted now, however, that the standards of excellence and preference are not limited to the artistic and aesthetic aspects of folk art production, but encompass the technological as well, for much of art is made for active use rather than passive contemplation.

-Causes of Imperfection

It will be seen that violations of technical and aesthetic standards in utilitarian art production may be attributed to the craftsman on some occasions, but also they may be attributed directly or indirectly to consumer influence. These infractions of the requirement of useful design may result from an absence of technical ability or creative vision in the producer, as in the early works of a craftsman who is only beginning to learn the craft but who later masters the necessary skills, or in the works of a craftsman who seeks to create an object in a style outside his cultural tradition whether owing to personal reasons or to direct or indirect consumer influence. Standards of preference may also be transgressed by the individual amateur craftsman who has never felt compelled to learn the skills of the craft, or by a specialist who does not really have the ability to excel in his chosen line of work (see figs. 1.1, 1.2, 1.3).

Many Appalachian chairmakers, however—at least those who “make 'em to sell”—are aware of the requirements of appearance and use in manufacturing their products, perceive the technical and aesthetic properties of the raw materials which are manipulated in the production of useful objects, and take creative pleasure in the mastery of tools, techniques of construction, and raw materials. How can the best, the most creative craftsmen be guilty of negligence in manufacture or of the production of indecorous objects? It is obviously impossible to appease the taste of everyone, since standards of preference are conditioned by association and personal values having little to do with technical or aesthetic excellence. In addition, many violations of technical and aesthetic standards may be attributed to consumer influence, as in the case in which the customer stipulates the manufacture of an object evincing certain characteristics that do not correspond to the producer's values; or the necessity of the craftsman to take shortcuts in production, thus diminishing the quality of the product, because the price is insufficiently remunerative; or because of an inundation of orders that the craftsman cannot easily fill while maintaining his usual high standards of quality in production.
Figure 1.1. Rocking Chair Made by Chester's Brother

Figure 1.2. Rocking Chair Made by Nonspecialist for Personal Use
Some works seem to be of inferior quality because the craftsman did not possess the requisite skills and imagination, the objects were produced early in the maker's career, or the products were intended only for the maker's own use. All of these factors account for the rocking chair in figure 1.1—made by the brother of the chairmaking specialist Chester—and for the chairs in figures 1.2 and 1.3—made by a nonspecialist for his use only. These and similar works offended the sensibilities of traditional craftsmen in the area who spoke of the crudeness of construction and the similarity in design to "factory-made" chairs.
Whose Standards?

Before we can examine more fully each of the above ways in which standards of excellence have been breached, it is necessary to answer the question of whose technical and aesthetic standards are involved. Are the paradigms of excellence those of the craftsman, the consumer, or the researcher? In point of fact, the values of all three individuals must be taken into account, undoubtedly compounding the difficulties of analysis.

To take the category of the craftsmen first, there are some differences in the standards of those with the greatest skill and artistic vision in contrast to the values of craftsmen who are specialists but who possess less skill and talent. The former tend to examine the objects more objectively on the basis of a greater number of criteria, and their standards include criteria of both fitness for use and visual appeal. Then, of course, there are the rank amateurs, those "who jest prank around with it," whose standards of excellence tend to be lower than those of the most highly skilled specialists. From the local consumer's point of view, however, the nonspecialists are relieved of some of the responsibility of making structurally sound and visually pleasing objects, for it is recognized that—as the expression "jest prank around with it" suggests—they are not specialists with the concomitant skill and knowledge to produce works of highest quality.

For heuristic purposes, the consumers may be divided into several subgroups as well. There are the local consumers, consisting of individuals on a low socioeconomic level with a modicum of education, and those individuals of higher socioeconomic status and a greater degree of education and experience in the arts. The former tend to evaluate a product largely in terms of fitness for use, to reject ornamentation as superfluous, and to neglect attention to aesthetic standards in their evaluations. On the other hand, my experience with most of the wealthier local consumers is that there is a range of response from an occasional concern only with the technological excellence of the product to a greater emphasis on visual appeal to a general disregard for the object at all (because it reminds them of the surrounding poverty and subsistence way of life that they themselves are seeking to escape).

A second general group of customers consists of individuals who live outside the local area, all of whom are urbanites. Their preconceptions affect the standards of excellence against which they evaluate the products. Most of the urbanite consumers have an attitude toward "folk-made" things that is favorable to the point of nostalgia. Some tend to evaluate the products only on the basis of an aesthetic standard of excellence, not a technological one. In this group, also, are those individuals who think that folk-made things are inherently technically and aesthetically inferior; hence, they do not really
Violations of Standards of Excellence

criticize an object for its violation of some technical or aesthetic principle, because it is assumed in advance that the object is inferior. Since these individuals expect, demand, and purchase crude things, the objects that may violate the standards of other consumers or the craftsmen themselves are really in accord with the expectations of these customers. Thus a violation of their expectations (if not standards) would be the discovery of structurally sound and aesthetically pleasing objects made by folk craftsmen, which such customers would dismiss as not “folk” at all because the products are not sufficiently debased.

Finally, there are the standards of the researcher, who may also be a customer, who approaches the materials with or without either a positive or a negative bias. The investigator also may emphasize one criterion of excellence over another, or, as has happened so often, he may have the preconceived idea that folk-made things are always aesthetically and technically inferior. Therefore there is no need to examine the problem of violations, because all works must be derelict.

We have, then, a situation of *quot homines, tot sententiae*—many men, many minds—that militates against easy generalizations and prevents complete treatment of all factors. I cannot possibly separate the responses of all groups of individuals to the products, or even present what I think are all the examples of alleged violations for each group. What is possible, however, is to survey a few of the objects in order to indicate the most obvious transgressions of the most typical standards, as revealed in critical comments by those who have judged folk art products, be they craftsmen, consumers, or museologists. Primarily, however, the remainder of my comments will be addressed to the many art historians and museologists who have assumed that folk art must necessarily be of inferior quality.

**Violations and Responses:**

**The Interrelationship of Construction and Consumption**

In the first place, one should not mistake simplicity in design, or the absence of ornamentation in utilitarian art objects, for a lack of aesthetic sensibility in the craftsman or an inability of the producer to create objects that possess more elaborate decoration and evince greater complexity of design. Chairs with much ornamentation are often designations of socioeconomic status and are made for wealthier clientele, but they are not produced for the craftsmen or local consumers because such objects are incongruous with their lifestyle and values. One commonly finds chairs of the most simplistic design; but the same craftsman who made such objects was, in many cases, capable of producing much more imaginative works if he had the consumer public to whom complicated, ornamented, and innovative works would appeal.
Financial Considerations

Related to this point are several other aspects of consumer influence on the nature of the product that may result in the transgression of someone's standards of preference. Because of an inability of most craftsmen to sell chairs that require much time and patience to make, owing to limitations in clientele and the amount of compensation that the craftsmen can expect to receive, they often produce chairs that are structurally sound, but they may not necessarily be aesthetically satisfactory from the point of view of the craftsman or the outside investigator. The rule would seem to be, in the words of the chairmaker Edgle, "If you make a simple thing, you gotta sell it at a simple price," although the reverse is also true—if a craftsman is unable to command a high price for an object, he must make it as simply as possible in accord with the requirement of economy. Thus another chairmaker named Chester was critical of the chairs made by his kin, because, while the objects were structurally sound, they were neither comfortable nor particularly attractive, in large measure because the price of the chair was too low to warrant more than minimal attention in manufacture (see figs. 1.4, 1.5).

Them days, they made 'em awful small. They just barely made 'em big enough you could set in 'em; then you'd be settin' partly on the rounds. . . . The rockin' chairs they made in them days you couldn't rest in one hardly—they didn't space their backs in 'em, they didn't put the right bend in 'em to rest your back. . . . They couldn't get more for a rockin' chair or a settin' chair them days like they can these days. . . .

Customer Stipulation and Attitude

In addition, a chairmaker must sometimes make what he considers an ugly or inferior chair because of the consumer's stipulation, in which case the rule that "the customer is always right," even though he is wrong, would seem to apply. This is the situation that applied to Byron several years ago when a woman crippled with arthritis demanded that he make a chair with four slats instead of three, a very high seat, and only one arm so that she could use the chair easily in her crippled condition. To Byron, however, the chair was the ugliest one he had ever seen made by anyone and represented a faulty aesthetic of the customer.

A craftsman often manufactures objects according to his knowledge of the customer and how he will probably treat the product. As Byron said, quoting another chairmaker from whom he learned the craft, whenever he made a mistake or took a shortcut in manufacture, "It's not very good, but it'll do for the man I made it for." The discriminating customer, whom the craftsman knows personally and likes, will get a better product, a chair that the craftsman intentionally makes more satisfying aesthetically and structurally (see figs. 1.6, 1.7, 1.8).
Another example of this point is a chair with eight legs and four rockers that Chester was commissioned to make in emulation of a similar chair that he manufactured three years before (see figs. 1.9, 1.10). Aesthetically, as Chester realized, the copy is inferior to the original, as Chester took many shortcuts in manufacture and did not lavish the same amount of attention on the object. The reason is that the copy was made on demand in order to pay a debt to a funeral home for the use of its ambulance to transport the craftsman's injured son to Lexington for medical help. Chester did not want to make the chair, he did not have the time to create such a fancy work because he had many other orders in advance to fill, he was behind in production owing to his son's illness, and the charges for the ambulance service were far less than the expense entailed in making an exact copy of the original chair (which would require three months of work in exchange for $160 worth of ambulance service). Therefore, Chester took many shortcuts so that the finished product is not comparable to the model on which it was based. Although Chester violated his own aesthetic standards in the creation of this chair, he has complied more fully with consumers' technological standards in this particular chair than he did in the original version. Several people who commented on Chester's "two-in-one" rocking chairs, with eight legs and four rockers, objected to the middle rockers, which bark one's heels, and the tops of the front posts, which rest uncomfortably behind one's knees. As another craftsman said, "I like ever'thing about that chair 'cept it oughtta had two rockers left out of hit. Fella could hurt hisself with them posts in front." Chester admitted that he had had many people complain about the front rockers "bitin' their heels," and so "that's the reason on the last chair I drew them posts in a lot."

Other instances of the consumer's indirect responsibility for the aesthetic or technological failure of a particular object result from the fact that, because the craftsman sells many items according to specific order, he may be unsuccessful at his first attempt to produce an object corresponding to the customer's verbal description or rough sketch. The best example of this point is Chester's first "California rocker" and a subsequent copy of it (figs. 1.11, 1.12). The craftsman had difficulties in realizing a satisfactory form incorporating elements suggested by the customer but still within his own style, and there was the additional problem of trying to work with sawed, kiln-dried red oak using nothing but an axe, drawing knife, and pocket knife.

The second chair of this design is more satisfactory technically and aesthetically than the first one, as Chester was well aware. He pointed to the latter rocking chair and said that, of the two chairs, "I like the way that one's balanced." He said that he thought the stretchers on the second chair, which are bulbous in the center, are more sound technically and look better than those on the earlier chair. On the second chair, Chester gave up entirely the notion of trying to make the posts eight-sided, although he did bevel the
Figure 1.4. Chair Made by Cal in the 1920s
The manufacturer may be capable of producing higher quality objects, but if prices are low, as they were in the 1920s when Cal made the chair in figure 1.4, there is a tendency for craftsmen to take shortcuts in production—or at least not to lavish a great deal of time on constructing the chair. Cal's grandson Chester made the chair in figure 1.5 (the top slat is now missing owing to rough treatment) in the early 1920s, having worked with Cal; other craftsmen who looked at the photographs selected it as the better (more comfortable and attractive) of the two chairs. Committed to chairmaking regardless of remuneration, Chester usually has given greater attention to comfort and appearance. However, when pressed for time or disinterested in a particular job, he does violate his own standards in production.
Figure 1.6. Earlier Rocking Chair Made by Byron

Figure 1.7. Later Rocking Chair Made by Byron
Like Byron, the craftsman might in retrospect find some of his works unsatisfactory. Byron dislikes the chair in figure 1.6 which he made four years earlier than the chair in figure 1.7; most disturbing are the vertical panels and the simplicity of design, characteristics which he thinks render the chair “too much like a factory-made chair.” He also was not pleased with the arms on the dining chair in figure 1.8, which he had borrowed from Chester’s recent works. But the customer wanted flat arms even though Byron had always made barrel arms; the customer seemed satisfied with the chair although Byron criticized the lack of integration of the arms into the overall design. Other craftsmen found Byron’s work in figure 1.7 appealing, although Chester would have preferred a “spool” on the back posts below the arms (Byron objected, contending it would weaken the chair; moreover, it looks fine the way it is, he said). Standards of preference and excellence thus vary from one person to another; they depend on not only aesthetic sensibility but also opinions about usefulness and strength as well as associations and assumptions. For example, one museologist refused to buy Byron’s chairs for the permanent collection on the grounds that were insufficiently crude to be “folk” (although Byron, like other chairmakers, learned the craft first-hand from others and used traditional designs, tools, and techniques of construction).
Figure 1.9. Two-in-One Rocking Chair
Chester claimed to have spent 356 hours making the two-in-one rocking chair in figure 1.9. He sold it to the owner of an automobile franchise for $75. About four years later, the owner of a funeral parlor across the street insisted that Chester make one exactly like it for him as in-kind payment for transporting Chester's son (who had slipped on ice and broken his hip) to Lexington for treatment. Under pressure to make other chairs, and feeling this order was not justified, Chester simplified the design and construction of the "duplicate" chair (fig. 1.10). He did, however, make one concession to criticism of this kind of design: he drew in the middle posts in front to increase the comfort of the sitter.
Figure 1.11. "California Rocker"
The "California rocker" (fig. 1.11)—named for the state in which the customer lived—owes its design in part to the customer's influence. The customer, unaware of the exact nature of chairs that Chester made, sent the craftsman a sketch of a chair with a cane seat and asked if he could make this. Although he did not have experience with caned chairs, Chester created this design using woven hickory bark. The customer claimed to be pleased with the chair. When Chester made a second version of the chair later, however, he altered the design of the slats and the stretchers in order to better integrate them in the overall design of the chair (fig. 1.12). He did this because he said he was not entirely satisfied with the first version of the chair—a matter, then, of his standards being violated because he was working with a new design (and one he did not completely understand).
edges, because "hit wouldn't look right to have eight-sided posts with this seat." Chester directed my attention to the slats of the two chairs and said that the slats in the second chair "look better" than those in the first chair. Actually, the customer of the first chair had requested slats rather more like those in the second chair; Chester, however, prefers, under ordinary circumstances, the "shaped" slats—those that are peaked in the center—so I suspect that at the time of making the earlier chair Chester was unwilling to relinquish this usual stylistic feature, and he did not perceive its aesthetic shortcomings in this context until after the chair had been constructed. The customer had requested arms on the first chair, but Chester refused to use such arms on either chair because "they wouldn't look good; only them curved arms look right." Again, then, a design element suggested by the customer offended the craftsman's aesthetic sensibilities to the extent that he refused to accept this specification. Finally, the second chair is more successful visually as an integrated whole than the earlier chair; of this quality Chester was aware, because he said that he thought the second chair generally "looks better" than the first, and specific elements in the latter chair (such as slats and stretchers) were more pleasing to him than were those in the first. Thus, the chairmaker himself was critical of the earliest example of a particular design which, he later realized, transgressed his usual standards of quality. But, as Chester said, "Like everybody else, chairmakers make mistakes."

Meeting Demands and Fulfilling Expectations

There are other obvious examples of indirect customer influence resulting in the breach of the technical and aesthetic standards of craftsmen. First, the craftsman may have attempted to imitate models external to his previous experience because the taste of the consumers has changed from traditional objects and designs to factory-produced goods which folk craftsmen sometimes emulate in order to sell their own products. A rocking chair of swamp willow, made by Chester in the early 1960s, is a copy of a factory chair and is not entirely successful in appearance. It has one disquieting technological feature as well; namely, it squeaks when the wood dries out so the owner hoses it down with water periodically. Chester is very much distressed by chairs that he or other craftsmen make that squeak, so he avoids using pine and makes certain that the joints of chairs are tight.

Another example of indirect customer influence causing violations of the craftsman's standards is a series of chairs made by Chester in the early part of 1966, when he was inundated with orders that he could not properly fill. About eight chairs made at this time were hastily created without the usual attention to structural details or aesthetic concerns. Chester did not cook and bend the chair slats, in some cases he did not bend the legs, he reduced the
number of pegs in each chair, and he created a design in which the slats, stretchers, and pegs extended completely through the chair posts, all of which reduced the amount of time and effort involved in construction. Chester was embarrassed later when I talked to him about these chairs, because they were below his usual standards. In these examples, then, we have chairs that might violate the aesthetic standards of many art historians, but that also violate the technical and/or aesthetic standards of the craftsmen themselves. In each case, much of the responsibility for negligence or infractions must be placed on the direct or indirect influence of the consumer.

Use and Abuse, Service and Repair

There are other circumstances of use, rather than manufacture, that account for the allegedly debased nature of many objects preserved in museums—objects that serve as a basis for most analyses of folk art production. The museum specimen may have been badly treated by the original owner long before it was salvaged for the museum, thus appearing to be technically and aesthetically inferior. An example is two chairs that are part of a set of four identical sassafras chairs made by Chester about 1955 and sold to the owner of a local grocery store (see figs. 1.13, 1.14). The customer kept the first chair but sold the other three to a neighbor. The difference in condition of the chairs results from the different kinds of treatment that the chairs received in the dozen years after they were made. The first chair was varnished and then placed in a corner of a bedroom where it was never used, but the others were coated with blue barn paint and used continually indoors and out. It is, however, the second chair that is typical of the few products preserved in museums—products that appear rather crude to the investigators of folk art who rely on the kitchen middens and dumps of the past for their specimens. It would be typical to conclude that the craftsman who made the second chair lacked adequate technical skill and artistic vision, as the chair is rickety and rough in appearance, but a comparison of this chair with its well-preserved and unused mate suggests a different interpretation. Interestingly, I was unable to buy the better preserved of the two chairs and had to settle for the second chair, which is now a permanent acquisition of a museum.

An additional point is that repairs of objects are often not done by the original craftsman, but by another individual who may well be of lesser talent or conceptualize the work differently. This is particularly true in instances in which folk-made chairs have had new "bottoms" or seats put in. Often the owner of a chair will replace the original seats of hickory bark splints with strips of rubber inner tube which are less satisfactory technically or aesthetically. Or an individual might use bark splints that are of a different,
Figure 1.13. Chair Made by Chester, Varnished by the Owner
Sometimes the works of traditional manufacture found in museums have been salvaged after much abuse; it is on the basis of these objects that inferences might be made about a craftsman's skill (or lack of it). Chester made the chairs in figures 1.13 and 1.14 in the mid-1950s as part of a set of four. The chair in figure 1.13 was lightly sanded by the owner, then varnished (suggesting it was not quite up to his standards in its earlier condition), and virtually never sat in. The owner of the chair in figure 1.14 used it every day—indoors and outdoors—subjecting it to the disintegrating effects of weather and continuous use. I was able to purchase the second chair for a museum, but not the first; thus, the superior artistry of the producer will remain unknown to museum-goers who will see only the weathered chair. (Many of the other chairs I was able to purchase as museum specimens were in a similar state of disrepair: paint-splattered from having been used as a ladder, missing slats, and so on.)
and incomparable, width, as Chester did when he repaired the seat of a rocking chair made by his uncle Grant half a century earlier. Other chairmakers who looked at a photograph of the chair thought the chair was satisfactory, but "the bark's too wide for the chair"; that is to say, only a seat of narrow hickory bark splints would be properly integrated aesthetically into the total design of the chair. Probably many other chairs have been altered in this fashion, because, as the chairmaker Vince said about those who specialize in reweaving seats, "most don't know how to do it. They don't weave the bark underneath—just let it hang—so the seat sags."

A third point in this connection is that the object may have been for the craftsman's own use, not for sale, in which case it is probably makeshift, for the craftsman did not want to spend the time or use the proper materials and construction methods on objects for his own use when he could get money for the product. All of the full-time chairmakers admitted to this practice, as did Byron who explained about a rather crude stool that "it ain't no account; I just made that to take fishin' with me." The proverbial expression that "a chairmaker never has a chair to sit on" may sum up the attitude of the traditional craftsman toward his own furniture.

Conclusions

These examples are not intended to gainsay the importance of the craftsman himself as a factor responsible for the violation of somebody's standards of excellence in folk art production. Obviously, many such failures do occur owing to the craftsman's lack of requisite skill and aesthetic sensibility, as in the case of a chairmaker who has not yet learned the essentials of his craft or is a rank amateur. In every case that the specialist who has the physical dexterity and mental skills to produce great works is offended by these objects and criticizes them because they are shabby in construction or imperfect in appearance, and, in some cases, because they were made without imagination but simply in emulation of commercially produced objects.

By way of conclusion, I would repeat that the craftsman's artistic ability, creative vision, and sensitivity to aesthetic principles are not always apparent in a given work. Usually it is the craftsman whom commentators on folk art blame for the manufacture of what they take to be inferior products, but in most instances the violations of standards involve the customer as well, and these violations of the craftsmen's and researchers' standards may be attributed directly or indirectly to the consumer's influence. Traditional craftsmen do, in fact, have technical and aesthetic standards themselves in the production of utilitarian art objects which they may transgress for a dozen reasons, only one of which is really an absence of skill or talent. Finally, it should be apparent that the conceptions, values, and attitudes of various
individuals, networks, and groups are revealed by means of an examination not only of successes in art, but of failures as well. An emphasis on violations of standards dramatizes the interrelationships between taste and the creation of utilitarian art products, and serves as a way of ascertaining why so many commentators on American folk art have treated the material as inferior or debased works.

Notes

1. It is not possible to present all illustrative material demonstrating this and other points in this essay, but the reader is referred to Jones (1970a), especially pages 594–667.


3. For two illustrations of these chairs and a complete history of their manufacture, see Jones (1970a), illustrations cliii and cliv, pp. 751–56. All of the data in the present essay were taken from Jones (1970a), which in turn was based on three summers of field work in 1965, 1966, and 1967; during the field research, special attention was given to a dozen chairmakers in southeastern Kentucky. Biographical data about Chester, Byron, Edgle, and other craftsmen mentioned in this essay are given in Jones (1970a: 433–80, 481–532, and 538–93); other violations of technical and aesthetic standards in this utilitarian art form are described in the data on the production and consumption of 125 objects in Jones (1970a: 684–856).