Exploring Folk Art

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Modern Arts and Arcane Concepts: Expanding Folk Art Study

I was invited to give a paper in March, 1980, at “A Midwestern Conference on Folk Arts and Museums,” which was sponsored by the University Gallery of the University of Minnesota. For several years I had been documenting everyday examples in contemporary American life that illustrated Franz Boas’s statement (1955:9): “All human activities may assume forms that give them esthetic values.” I had taken photos of landscaped yards, ways in which people decorate rooms of their homes, the organization of images in family photo albums, and even arrangements of utensils in kitchen drawers, boxed and canned goods on cabinet shelves, and foodstuffs inside refrigerators.

Although to many commentators “art” was painting and sculpture by a few individuals, it seemed to me that the aesthetic impulse is pervasive in the lives of all of us. The structure and order of arrangements, the economy and efficiency of motion, the perfection of form that results from the skillful manipulation of raw materials in the making of pleasing and useful objects contribute to our physical survival by helping us function. We also derive intellectual pleasure, and sometimes a sense of self-worth and self-esteem, from our ability to perfect form. And contemplating a well-made object or beautifully executed performance (whether a meal, a party, a fair or celebration, an interaction or verbal exchange at work) can be spiritually elevating and enriching to our lives no matter how fleeting the moment or seemingly “ordinary” the object or activity. It seemed to me that while easel paintings, duck decoys, and quilts might indeed be art, the aesthetic impulse—a feeling for form and a desire to perfect form—is apparent in dozens of subtle ways in the things we make and do during the course of daily interaction, problem solving, and the accomplishing of tasks.

In addition, I had long been dissatisfied with conceptions of “folk” and the use of the word “folk” as noun or adjective. I had expressed my uneasiness several years earlier when I put “folk” in quotes in titles to articles about chairmakers and chairmaking in southeastern Kentucky. I finally confronted some of the issues in a
paper at the American Folklore Society meeting in 1972 called "The Well Wrought Pot: Folk Art and Folklore as Art," which was published later (Jones 1974) and also incorporated into the first chapter of The Hand Made Object and Its Maker (1975).

To some museum personnel, "folk" as an adjective denoted naive, often anonymous painting and sculpture. To many anthropologists, "the folk" were peasants in Latin America or Europe. To some folklorists, "the folk" were culturally or geographically isolated populations who preserved the old ways of doing things that had survived from earlier periods. To yet other folklorists, "a folk" was any like-minded group defined ethnically, regionally, or occupationally who had some traditions peculiar to them. I had contended in the "Well Wrought Pot" (1974:86) that "folk does not mean backward, poor, or illiterate people" nor "'group' either, 'like-minded' or otherwise." For while "a 'group' has at least one factor in common . . . , not everyone who interacts with other people conceives of himself as thus belonging to a 'group.'"

The conceptual problems generated by definitions and the use of the terms "the folk" (as an isolated, homogeneous and integrated group of peasants) and "a folk" (as any isolated, homogeneous and integrated group) are numerous and complex. Some alternative ways of conceptualizing traditions have been proposed by Beth Blumenreich and Bari Lynn Polonsky (1974) and by Robert A. Georges (1983).

Suffice it to say that when I was invited to give a paper at the conference on folk arts and museums I was doing research on contemporary, urban examples of the aesthetic impulse which called into question some of the prevailing assumptions about both art and folk. Hence, I titled the paper "Modern Arts and Arcane Concepts." The subtitle, "Expanding Folk Art Study," suggested my hope and desire.

In my own presentation at the folk arts and museums conference, I chose as examples of tradition and the aesthetic impulse the arrangement of trash cans in my neighborhood in Los Angeles. More recently I have included slides of trash-can arrangements in several lectures and classes on folk art to demonstrate that even (or perhaps especially) in regard to the chaotic and displeasing aspects of our daily functioning the desire to perfect form might be evident, and to illustrate how a tradition may develop.

I have photographed many more trash-can arrangements since the late 1970s, and have given two conference presentations on them—one called "Untitled No. 1" at the UCLA conference on Aesthetic Expressions in the City: Art, Folk Art, and Popular Culture (1982), and the other called "Suburban Lore" at the annual meeting of the California Folklore Society (1985). In both presentations I went beyond remarking on these behaviors as examples of tradition and the aesthetic impulse to consider creativity, processes of conceptualizing form, psychological functions, and ramifications for understanding suburbia.

* * *

In light of recent research, some assumptions and conceptions from the past, although still popular, appear to be of limited use. I have in mind most conceptions of art as an isolable phenomenon consisting of a particular class of objects and activities. I am thinking also of the word "folk" as a noun referring to a particular population. On the other hand, some ideas have withstood the test of time, and perhaps are even more appropriate and useful today than when they were first expressed. Among these are the phrase "perfection of form," articulated by Franz Boas in his book on primitive art in 1927, and the word "folk" as an adjective as it was begun to be used by Joseph Jacobs in 1893.

**Arcane Concepts**

Many conceptions of art have been set forth, some of them serving to guide studies of the so-called folk and primitive arts. Whether a notion of art stresses the expression of emotion, the intent to create something aesthetic, the production of things that are in no way of practical use, the addition of a quality to craft products transcending their utilitarian nature, or the creation of major monuments scarcely matters. For the basic assumption is the same. The element that most conceptions of art have in common is that art is restricted to a limited sphere of activity, and therefore art is the domain of only a few individuals. A venerable history lends this assumption support, from the coining of the expression "les beaux arts" in the eighteenth century to the insistence on "art for art's sake" in the twentieth.

This is not to gainsay the right of human beings to make and do things for aesthetic satisfaction alone, or to diminish the monumental beauty of some
objects and activities generally recognized as being great achievements. I do intend to suggest, however, that conceptions of art based on the assumption of "limited domain" do a grave disservice to humanity. For these conceptions exclude from consideration—and thus from appreciation—most of the activities most people engage in most of the time.

The "Arts" and a Feeling for Form

Telling in this respect are remarks by James West in his study of a small town in Missouri that he calls "Plainville." West had to abandon most notions of art as they excluded the behavior of these residents. And yet West felt intuitively and correctly that the word "art" should be used in reference to many of their activities. "Gossiping amounts really to an art," for example, he writes, "an art practiced as vigorously as it is condemned by most Plainville adults. The art of gossiping," explains West, "is to retail gossip in such a way as to entertain listeners and condemn victims without risk of getting into trouble as a scatterer of gossip." To do this requires skill in phrasing and innuendo. It also demands full knowledge of social relations of the listeners "so that nothing said can be carried in definite form to the subject of the gossip or the subject's family." West also observes, "People admire a well-kept house, freshly painted, neat indoors, and well-maintained without." Men, he writes, "admire a straight furrow better than anything else in the world." Women "like pretty dresses, are interested in hairdos, and sometimes take an aesthetic pleasure in the labeling and arrangement of glass jars of canned fruit"; they "dress up" on Sunday, and they concern themselves with "make up." Finally, West observes that the people of Plainville pay considerable attention to the forms of behavior of fellow residents (their "manners"), basing social distinctions on how—and how well—people dress, cook, talk, and act (West 1946:270, 298, 302 and passim).

It was not West's intent to reassess conceptions of art on the basis of these and other observations. Nor does he explain quite why he felt that residents' behavior should be spoken of as art. But two decades before West published his study in the mid-1940s, Franz Boas had coined a phrase that West might have found especially fitting to his needs. That phrase is "the perfection of form."

Early in his book Primitive Art (first published in 1927), Boas states, "All human activities may assume forms that give them esthetic values" (1955:9). He does not contend that all human activities are in fact examples of forms perfected, nor does he suggest that only a few activities may be perfected by a limited number of people. Any human activity can have aesthetic value if an individual is aware of and manipulates qualities that appeal to the senses in a rhythmical and structured way so as to create a form ultimately serving as a
standard by which its perfection (or beauty) is measured. Sometimes these forms elevate the mind above the indifferent emotional states of daily life because of meanings conveyed or past experiences associated with them, but they need not do so to be appreciated. Perfection of form is enough to satisfy; if the forms convey meanings, that adds to their enjoyment but it is not essential (Boas 1955:9–12).

One ramification of this notion is that tools and other practical things, which are not made or done principally or at all for aesthetic reasons, may have aesthetic value, and they may be appreciated for their formal excellence. Another is that any action, not just an object, may be given form and found satisfying. This includes the technique of making something as much as it includes the objects constructed; the way someone constructs a fence, for instance, may be as pleasurable in its form as is the completed structure.

Boas observes further that many of the formal qualities contributing to our enjoyment of objects or activities are correlated with the physiological condition of the human body, sensations experienced physically, and techniques of production. Such features as symmetry, surface evenness and smoothness, and rhythmical regularity seem to result from the way the body functions physiologically as people make and do things (Boas 1955:15–63). But this is insufficient, he implies, to explain why people strive to perfect form, and why formal excellence is so often appreciated.

To account for these two aspects of the perfection of form—success in achieving perfected forms and satisfaction with forms that have been perfected—Boas makes two additional statements. The first is that “we cannot reduce this world-wide tendency to any other ultimate cause than to a feeling for form. . . . “ People have an aesthetic impulse prompting them to emphasize the form of objects they make. Second, art is “based upon our reactions to forms that develop through mastery of technique” (Boas 1955:58, 62). Boas did not elaborate on these two pronouncements. But he seems to be suggesting that fundamental to all human beings, as a condition of their being human, is a feeling for form compelling them to give a degree of order and structure to some of their activities at least part of the time. He seems to suggest, too, that all living, functioning human beings have the capacity, again as a condition of their being human, to master and control their actions, to develop skills with which to order materials into something having both shape and substance.

These assumptions that fundamental to being human is a feeling for form and a capacity to master technique have far-reaching ramifications. For Boas’s pronouncements open up, rather than restrict, areas of inquiry, making it possible for researchers such as James West to investigate heretofore neglected aspects of everyday life with a view toward understanding human
behavior more fully. Whereas many other commentators have restricted art to a limited domain involving a few individuals engaged in a particular type of activity, Boas stresses and the observations of West demonstrate that art in the sense of striving to perfect form—with the attendant appreciation of formal excellence—is universal among human beings and is an essential element within the continuum of human experience. It is not a readily isolable phenomenon. It is not a quality to be added to or deleted from products of human manufacture. And it most certainly is not the sole pursuit of a few individuals, having little to do with everyday existence. Quite the contrary, for many forms and the process of perfecting form satisfy us for what they help accomplish in our daily struggles, often in a practical way (ordering phenomena, facilitating the completion of tasks, and otherwise aiding in day-to-day survival), and they please us for what they represent, including our ability to master techniques.

"Folk"

Although Boas was speaking mainly of what he called "primitive art," and at times he seemed on the verge of assuming that somehow primitive or folk peoples constitute a distinctive class of humanity, his pronouncements about art call into question various notions of "folk." The number of researchers challenging the use of the noun "folk" has not been great, although concepts of "a folk," and especially of "the folk," occasionally have been criticized. Among the few critics is Joseph Jacobs (1893), who implies that the word "folk" might not distinguish a group of people at all. If the word must be employed, one infers, perhaps it would be put to better use as an adjective rather than as a noun. And at a time when others were commenting on peasant customs and savage myths, Jacobs spoke of "our" folklore, suggesting that the continuities and consistencies in the behavior of other human beings, even the cultured British of his day, might be appropriate subject matter for investigation.

As in Jacobs's era, most notions today of the folk assume the existence of a particular class of people with traits distinguishing them from us. A principal trait often cited is their alleged conservatism. This quality presumably accounts for why they are sources of lore, which in turn is a survival inherited as part of the cultural legacy bequeathed by virtue of group membership. Even more recent notions of a folk assume that selected populations constitute distinctive groups of people whose behavior is similar by virtue of their being bound together by some unifying factor(s). A common identity allegedly explains why they have lore, and their lore in turn provides unification.
Jacobs was rather harsh in his comments, writing that "the folk" are "a fraud" and "a myth." Contrary to the opinion of many folklorists, contends Jacobs, the folk are not sources of lore in a collective sense at all; only individuals create and express themselves. In addition, notes Jacobs, the assumption that only the folk as an isolated conservative group possess lore is in error. Finally, while according to this assumption folklore should disappear in time as geographical isolation and cultural distinctiveness diminish, it does not; at most it is different. In regard to the notion of a folk, one could repeat some of Jacobs's remarks about the folk. People who are lumped together in the same category do not behave quite the same way or for the same reason(s), despite some similarities in the behavior of some of them. They could not simply be the fortuitous inheritors of a culturally distinctive body of lore. It is always specific individuals, Jacobs reminds us, who are expressing themselves and creating forms as they interact and communicate with other individuals.

The use of the word "folk" as a noun to refer to people collectively does seem to point to some of the factors involved in the generation of folklore, at least implicitly. For it directs attention to human beings who make and do things in the course of their day-to-day existence. It suggests that these human beings have shared some experiences by being together in one place at one time. It implies further that these common experiences involve interaction and communication. It suggests therefore that these interactions include behavior, both verbal and nonverbal, which often results in some output, whether the making of an object, narrating, joking, or playing a game. Finally, it implies that there might be similarities in behavior or outputs of behavior; interaction and communication require, just as shared experiences often result in, continuities and consistencies behaviorally. If the word "lore" directs attention to forms that appear to be continuous through time and consistent at a particular place in time, then the word "folk" could serve to emphasize the interactional and experiential basis of these similarities.²

Modern Arts

A new conceptual framework, then, would emphasize the study of continuities and consistencies in behavior or the outputs of behavior having an experiential and interactional basis. This would make it possible at last to defend conceptually the inclusion in our research of many activities we feel intuitively ought to be included but which we cannot justify on the basis of most currently employed concepts developed in the past. Examples of some of these activities are building sand castles, decorating a tree and stringing lights around the grounds at Christmas, customizing an automobile, land-
scaping a yard, remodeling a house, decorating the interior of a home, embroidering designs on denim clothes, narrating about personal experiences, having block parties, giving house-warming gifts, and so on. These are not cultural survivals, nor do those who engage in them constitute the folk or a folk comprising a particular group whose unification accounts for the existence of these behaviors. But there are similarities in space and through time. This can be attributed in part to the fact that people tend to some degree to model their behavior after the behavior of other human beings with whom they interact. The existence of behavioral similarities also stems partly from the fact that when experiencing an event together, individuals to some extent generate forms of behavior embodying and reflecting this sharing of experiences.

To give one modest example illustrating attempts to perfect form in day-to-day existence in which there are continuities and consistencies in behavior, I would cite the arrangement of trash cans in the area of Los Angeles in which I live. Before moving here three years ago, my family and I had not made the selecting and arranging of refuse containers a priority in our lives. Perhaps this was so in part because the cans were kept in the alley; hence, out of sight out of mind. In the area where we now live, however, there are no alleys; refuse collection takes place on the street in front of the houses. Many of our neighbors sometimes devote time and energy to arranging their refuse in pleasing ways. Aware of various visual and tactile qualities of both containers and the trash contained therein, they manipulate these materials in rhythmical ways to produce structures constituting forms that serve as standards by which their perfection (or beauty) is measured.

My neighbor to the north, for instance (fig. 4.1), has a matched set of plastic containers. He places them in a perfect line along the edge of the curb, lids in place to contain the trash neatly, and the handles exactly aligned. Even when on one occasion this fall, after having raked fallen pine needles from his yard, he had too much trash for his set of containers (fig. 4.2), he lined up the cans as usual and behind them—using a single type of container of the same size and shape and color, just like his plastic cans—arranged paper bags filled with needles. A neighbor across the street usually lines his cans with plastic leaf bags, and arranges the four cans in the shape of a square. Another homeowner whose driveway is bordered by a low wall, and whose mailbox is near the entrance to the drive (fig. 4.3), places his trash cans to either side of the mailbox in a visually balanced arrangement. One day he solved the problem of what to do with nonconforming items like a stack of newspapers by placing them between the cans and under the mailbox, which filled a gap visually in the arrangement of containers. Even empty cans are sometimes neatly arranged after refuse collection (fig. 4.4), awaiting their return to the backyard.
This is not to say that everyone including me attempts to achieve perfection in the arrangement of trash or its containers. But some people do. Thus some of the behavior of several individuals at a particular place in time exhibits consistencies. There are also continuities. My family and I, having moved to this area, now find ourselves tending to model our behavior after that of some of our neighbors, to the extent that we have gotten rid of our dilapidated and mismatched containers and replaced them with a matched set of cans that we often arrange with the lids on rather than off, in a square or other form (figs. 4.5, 4.6, 4.7).

This single example of similarities in behavior involving a striving to perfect form among people who interact and who experience an event in common demonstrates that some notions from the past are not very useful today, while other ideas propounded long ago can be developed as assumptions and concepts of greater service now than when proposed. Combining some of the ideas of, say, Boas and Jacobs, or following through on their implications, is not as difficult as it might at first appear. The consequences justify the effort, for if only part of a conceptual foundation can thus be laid, using some of the materials from the past, future research will benefit. While some people soon tire of reviews of conceptual matters and attempts to develop methods corresponding more closely to contemporary knowledge and interests, it must be as apparent to them as to others that some assumptions and concepts relied upon now are inappropriate and inadequate. Hence, further discussion is mandatory, which is the purpose of this conference.

An issue for consideration, as I have suggested throughout this essay, is that what we as folklorists document, describe, and try to explain the origins of is folk art and the folk arts not only as objects but also as activities. Though seemingly we delineate a subject matter by giving it a name, the behavior or behavioral outputs so designated are not in reality isolated from the continuum of human experience. When studying the folk arts, we focus attention on the striving to perfect form in day-to-day existence, primarily in situations in which people interact and communicate face-to-face. And further, we examine the appreciation of formal excellence in types of behavior exhibiting similarities through time and in space as they relate to the shared experiences of human beings in the course of their daily affairs.

By emphasizing that as folklorists studying the folk arts we do research on similarities in the ways in which individuals attempt to perfect form in everyday life, I am making several assumptions about human nature. These suppositions grow out of and lend support to the conception of the folk arts posited here. And they extend ideas set forth long ago which subsequent research demonstrates to have been feasible then and applicable now. On the one hand, following the lead of Boas, I am assuming that fundamental to
Figure 4.1. The Trash Can "Handle" Arrangement

Figure 4.2. The "Overflow" Arrangement
The first two views are of the trash cans belonging to my neighbor to the north. All four depict carefully planned arrangements of cans. Figure 4.1 illustrates the precise alignment of the handles on the curb side. Figure 4.2 illustrates how, even when my neighbor had nonconforming trash, and too much for the cans, he maintained consistency in the choice and arrangement of containers, which suggests (in Boas's words) that “all human activities may assume forms that give them esthetic values.” In figure 4.3 another neighbor has effectively used the stack of newspapers to fill the gap underneath the mailbox. Figure 4.4 shows an orderly arrangement of even empty cans.
Figure 4.5. Lack of Attention to "Displaying" Trash

Figure 4.6. The "Matched Set"
Containers we had brought with us from another area when we purchased this house did not seem in keeping with many (but certainly by no means most) containers in the neighborhood to which we had moved. In the old neighborhood, trash cans were left at the back of the lot on an alley. There was no alley in the area where we moved; rather, containers were placed in front of houses. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that what once had been "out of sight, out of mind" became more of a conscious presence, leading to the purchase of a set of matched containers and, often, their arrangement in a pattern rather than haphazardly. Such is the way some traditions—repeated acts evincing continuities and consistencies in behavior—develop.
human beings, as a condition of their being human, is a feeling for form; further, human beings have the innate capacity to control techniques in order to perfect certain forms generated in their interactions with one another. I am supposing, too, on the basis of a suggestion by Jacobs, that all human beings exhibit continuities and consistencies, as well as uniqueness, in their behavior; the similarities are interactionally and experientially based rather than determined by the imposition of a common label on an aggregate of people.

Conclusion

Given the conception of the folk arts and the assumptions about human nature discussed here, the study of folk art can be expanded in regard to subject matter and analysis. Forms already documented can be examined from a new perspective addressing different questions. No longer is it necessary in publication or museum exhibit to leave readers or viewers of objects on their own to ponder how and why certain forms have developed or how they were responded to; to restrict publication and display to objects; or to dwell on alleged survivals in the culture of a bygone era. Other kinds of behavior heretofore neglected or newly generated can be included in our research and exhibits. I have in mind, for instance, not only some of the forms mentioned earlier but also the topic of working as art and of the arts of work. While we are familiar with the expression "works of art," and appreciate the effort required to produce them, we are less knowledgeable about the art and play involved in working, especially in today's factories and offices. Examining this matter, however, has the potential of adding the human element to current attempts to reconceptualize the principles and practice of management, and thus to apply inferences from folkloristic research to the solving of contemporary social issues. Whether this area of inquiry is explored or not, my point remains [see chapter 7]. Such a topic can be examined, and can only be studied, through a broadening in the conceptual underpinnings of research of the folk arts. In turn, attention to the continuities and consistencies in the behavior of all human beings, and to any activity by people which can assume a form having aesthetic value, provides a basis for refining concepts and methods that we employ in our research. Presumably others at this conference will pursue questions of methods or will describe phenomena leading to the development of new methods, or both.
Notes

1. I have prepared a handout which I use sometimes in the course Folklore 118: Folk Art and Technology. It contains 37 statements suggesting conceptions of folk and primitive art specifically and art generally. Some of these statements are taken from Haselberger (1971), and include her remarks as well as those by other people appended to her article. Some of the statements are from the comments in "What Is American Folk Art? A Symposium" (1950). Others concerning "art" are taken from Munro (1967). Yet others are from books and articles by folklorists and museum personnel. I mention these sources only as a guide; it seems that the specific sources scarcely matter, for conceptions tend to be similar.

2. The experiential and interactional basis of folklore is discussed in Blumenreich and Polansky (1975). I have remarked upon conceptions of folklore and folk art in several publications, among which are The Hand Made Object and Its Maker (1975), "In Progress: 'Fieldwork—Theory and Self'" (1977), and "L. A. Add-ons and Re-dos: Renovation in Folk Art and Architectural Design" (1980c).

3. Approximately 135 slides and about 30 pages of narrative regarding trash-can arrangements (along with 5,000 other items) are available on a laser videodisc called "Varieties of Expression," which was produced by the UCLA Office of Instructional Development and the Folklore and Mythology Center.