Exploring Folk Art

Jones, Michael

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Aesthetic Attitude, Judgment, and Response: Definitions and Distinctions

In the early 1970s I published a series of articles on aesthetics, a concept essential to folk art and material culture. It is also vital to work life and organizational settings, I realized later.

Over the years I have given papers and published on various matters regarding methods, concepts, and perspectives in the study of different aspects of folklore. In 1976, for example, I published "The Study of Folk Art Study: Reflections on Images" (1976d). In 1977 I gave a paper called "Ask the Chairmaker" at the meeting of the American Studies Association. And in 1983 I read a paper at the American Folklore Society meeting titled "Researching Folk Art: Matching Questions with Conceptions," later published (revised and coauthored with Verni Greenfield) as "Art Criticism and Aesthetic Philosophy" (1984). Obviously, all of these works concern folk art and its study.


Elsewhere in this volume I have mentioned papers and publications on perspectives in the study of eating habits. I also wrote about fieldwork. Among the works are "Alternatives to Local (Re-) Surveys of Incidental Depth Projects," given at the California Folklore Society meeting and then published (1976a); "In Progress: Fieldwork—Theory and Self" (1977); (with Robert A. Georges) People Studying People: The Human Element in Fieldwork (1980); and "Folkloristics and Fieldwork" (1985a).

I gave the paper below at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in 1980. Despite the existence of an ever-growing body of literature in folklore studies on aesthetics, it seemed to me that several related terms often were not

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This article is a revision of a paper originally delivered at the American Folklore Society Meeting, held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, October 16–19, 1980.
defined or distinguished from one another. My intent was to characterize both the negative and the positive aesthetic response, to differentiate attitude from reaction, and to suggest that matters of taste affect judgment.

One of the ways I have dealt with these concepts in classes on folk art is to show students a set of slides, telling them at the outset that these images are simply there to look at. But I also instruct the students to be aware of and to note how they or others in the room react to the photos and the subject matter. Among the visuals are photographs of stained glass windows and lamp shades, corn husk dolls, arrangements of kitchen utensils in drawers, clothing, scarecrows, knots, quilts, owner-built or -remodeled houses, and chairs.

To some students the chair in figure 9.1 seems rather simple but nevertheless pleasing for its organic quality: the front posts curving outward, and the back posts curving both out and back. The eight-sided posts (and stretchers) suggest greater strength and almost invite grasping. When looking at the curved slats and shaped arms, one can imagine sitting in the chair; the tactile sensation becomes vivid. And one can almost feel the rocking motion of the chair (the haptic experience, or the memory of this experience and appreciation of it without having to actually experience it in the present). Students also notice the narrow space between rockers at the back, contrasted with the much greater distance in front (a matter of 4 inches or so versus 18 or 20 inches).

Chester Cornett made the chair in the mid-1950s. The man who was using it in the 1960s could not speak highly enough of its comfort. He remarked several times about how you could rock backward with no fear of tipping over. He demonstrated, rocking vigorously. He invited me to sit in the chair and challenged me to try to tip it over.

The chair typifies Chester's style. A characteristic mode of construction was to shape posts and stretchers eight-sided with a drawing knife (or even ax or pocket knife) rather than to turn them on a lathe. The seeming "organic" quality was a distinctive and characteristic mode of presentation of Chester's work resulting from bending the component pieces (posts and slats) by driving them into a press in which they dried in curving forms. This quality grew out of Chester's concern about making a chair that "sets good." His distinctive and characteristic manner of execution, I realized on examining nearly 100 of the chairs he had constructed, was that of focusing on some aspect of chair design, construction, or purpose and developing it—as a concept—on one or another chair.

In regard to this chair, for example, he dwelt on the concept of rocking, imagining how to improve the design of a rocking chair so that there is no possibility of tipping over backward (which in turn enhances the user's positive aesthetic experience—or anticipation of it—by eliminating any fear of accident in use). One of his early chairs (see fig. 9.2) has many different kinds of turnings on the front posts, the back posts, the stretchers, and the arms. Rather than settling on one form and repeating it throughout the chair as other craftsmen did, Chester experimented with variations on a theme, exploring the concept of turnings. Some chairs are short, their seats close to the floor and their balance (achieved by controlling the height of the back and the extent of thrust of the back posts backward and outward) such that they can be tipped back by the sitter with virtually no effort and held in that
Figure 9.1. Chester's Favorite Chair
This chair, made in 1954 or 1955, was made with an ax and a hatchet. Pegs, arms, outward curve of front posts, and outward and backward flare of back posts are typical chair traits Chester manifested throughout his career. Owing to the narrowness of the space between the rockers at the back, it does not tip over backward. It is one of many examples of Chester's approach to chairmaking, that of experimenting with some aspect of design, material, construction technique, or use.
The last chair Chester made before being drafted was of white oak. As in most other chairs that he made, he focused on one of many aspects of what a chair is or can be—in this case, it is that of "turnings." Rather than simply repeating a single design throughout the chair as chairmakers tended to do, Chester created a series of variations in turnings and spools, each set reminiscent of and yet different from every other set.
position (or even rocked on the feet of the back posts). Yet other chairs are taller with higher seats and balanced more vertically; these epitomize the concept "dining chairs," as opposed to the "settin' chairs" (see fig. 9.3).

My point is that Chester's style was "conceptual." Dedicated to craft work and committed to making a good chair, he took into account not only decorative qualities, use, and usefulness, but also tactile, kinesthetic, and other sensations. When reacting to and judging utilitarian art forms, we are affected in subtle ways by these considerations.

When many of the students see a photograph of Ukrainian Easter eggs, they gasp. Some of them, they say later, are inspired by the vividness of colors and complexity of designs; their eyes linger on the screen, and they begin to think of related matters—how to incorporate these colors or designs into their own art work, how they wish to touch or to have some of these decorated eggs, and so on.

Many of the students laugh when they see a photo of a bald-headed man contest in France, the winner seated in a chair with someone to his left inspecting his head with a magnifying glass.

Reactions to a photo of a chicken-plucking contest in the United States are mixed. It strikes some people as funny, others as "gross." It brings back memories to some who in youth had watched a family member clean chickens or who had participated themselves. These memories might be pleasant or, when students remember the smell of the chicken feathers (or entrails), they might be unpleasant.

One photo is of a tattoo artist standing bare-chested in the doorway of his parlor. His upper arms are covered with his art. Reactions are mixed, but most students seem to cringe physically when they realize he has a metal ring in his right nipple, which is pierced.

The forms that seem to evince amazement—even spontaneous "ooohhhhs" or "aaahhhhs" when students see several slides in sequence, are small figures made of cement (e.g., figs. 9.4, 9.5, 9.6). Oscar Gunnarson, of Lindsborg, Kansas, made his living in construction by pouring concrete foundations, driveways, and sidewalks. For personal pleasure and as a hobby, he constructed miniature scenes of funerals, weddings, elderly men playing checkers, and other activities out of the materials used on the job. Students are struck by the incredible life-like quality of the figures and the expressiveness of their faces. Eyes "glued" to the screen, students seem almost lost in reverie and are truly appreciative of the forms that Gunnarson created. Just as the figures appear to be real people frozen in a moment of time, time seems to stand still for the students as they look at the screen.

The same cannot be said of other slides that I show. The photos are of a house ill-cared for during the last weeks the tenant lived there. She had brought in cats and a dog, but then left for several days. One photograph of the bedroom floor shows gray tufts in black lumps and circles—cat hair trapped in feces and urine stains. Another photo is of a refrigerator, the door having just been opened after the refrigerator was left unplugged for six weeks—foodstuffs in it all the while. Clouds of insects swarm around a piece of pizza covered with mold an inch thick. Brackish water fills the dehydrator drawers, a stalk of blackened celery protruding from the lumpy, rotting mess. "Ugh!" say some of the students, who squeeze their eyes together. "Yuck!" They begin fidgeting. They move their heads, looking
Figure 9.3. Examples of “Settin” Chairs
These chairs show the range of Chester's designs: (left) chair with single pegs (ca. 1960); (center) redbud chair with black walnut double pegs and slats notched at ends (ca. 1961); and (right) sassafras chair with black walnut pegs (November 1965). The last chair is more of a dining chair because of its higher seat and back—another example of Chester's experimentation with design and use in order to extend the concept of what a chair is and how it can function.
In the 1940s and 1950s, Oscar Gunnarson, a construction worker in Lindsborg, Kansas, made many figures from concrete. The attention to detail, the lifelike quality, and the fact that they are made from the materials of their creator's job often provoke "ooohhs" and "aaahhs" from those who see these figures. Time seems to stand still for viewers who are drawn into the world that Gunnarson created.
Figure 9.5. Detail of Concrete Figures

Figure 9.6. Detail of Concrete Figures
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elsewhere—anywhere other than at the screen. They become "chatty" in a nervous sort of way, looking at and talking to one another or me about anything except what is related to the photograph, and even intruding on or disrupting each other's remarks. Time seems drawn out. There is visible relief when I advance the carousel, showing slides of less disgusting and more pleasing things.

We analyze the experience. Students describe the physiological sensations of pleasure or disgust that they had; characterize attitudes, feelings, and emotions; and refer to associations. I show other slides I have made from ads in magazines. My purpose is to develop ideas about the aesthetic experience as either positive or negative and as a unique configuration of physiological condition and intellectual state, to illustrate some of the verbal and physical responses that express the aesthetic experience, and to examine how taste and context affect response or judgment—matters addressed below.

* * *

Several people have written about aesthetic matters in regard to the traditional arts. Among them are Franz Boas (1955), Ruth Bunzel (1972), Alan Merriam (1964a, 1964b), Robert F. Thompson (1968), Dan Crowley (1966), Tom Burns (1974), Roy Sieber (1959), Bill Ferris (1975), Robert Bethke (1974), Michael Jones (1971a), Barre Toelken (1969), and others. Essays by these individuals are, potentially, of great importance. Yet there is the likelihood that misunderstandings will arise and that research findings will not be appreciated. The reason for this is that certain terms are used similarly but with different meanings; that different terms are employed for what seems to be the same phenomenon; and that in most instances it is up to the reader entirely, with little or no assistance from the author, to infer what is meant by a term.

Used variously, and usually without definition, are such words as aesthetics, the aesthetic, and an aesthetic. In addition, the word "aesthetic" also is used as an adjective, qualifying some phenomenon—such as attitude, judgment, or response—but it is not always clear just what that phenomenon is. Confusing matters even more is the use of the word taste. For some it seems to be the equivalent of the aesthetic, for others aesthetic judgment, and for yet others the word taste is an object of loathing and should not be included in discussions of aesthetics at all.

One example of an area of confusion and source of debate is chapter 13, "Aesthetics and the Interrelationship of the Arts," in Alan Merriam's book, The Anthropology of Music. For the most part he is concerned with the aesthetic and with whether or not it exists among selected populations—the Basongye in Africa, and the Flathead Indians. By the aesthetic, Merriam seems to mean a complex or system comprising a well-developed philosophy and verbalized principles regarding form, its excellence and appreciation. In much of the
chapter, Merriam refers exclusively to *the aesthetic*, reviewing his testing of whether his subjects have a concept of "aesthetic," a philosophy of form, and a set of verbalized principles (they have none of these, he concludes). Confusing to many readers, however, is that in the first page and a half and then again toward the end of the chapter Merriam speaks of *an aesthetic*. On page 269 he uses both *the aesthetic* and *an aesthetic* in the same sentence. This passage has been the subject of debate since the book was published in 1964. It reads as follows:

> We may pose the crucial question, then, of whether AN AESTHETIC exists if it is not verbalized; the answer seems clearly to be that it does not, at least *if we use the Western concept of THE AESTHETIC, which is exactly what has been done in these pages.* [italics in original; other emphasis added]

In the writings of Sieber (1959), McAllester (1960), and others, *an aesthetic* appears to signify some particular kind of response to form. Does it mean the same to Merriam? The question gains poignancy when one reads the sentence that follows the passage quoted above, in which Merriam acknowledges that people produce art, evaluate objects, and judge performances, but nevertheless he insists that without verbalization of philosophical principles they do *not* have *an aesthetic*. The research of Crowley (1966), Bauman (1972), and others indicates that people do in fact perceive and react to form within the context of performance or production, even though they have no philosophy comprising *the aesthetic*. How could that be? What is an *aesthetic response*, or *judgment*?

To put to use some of the findings of various researchers, then, clarification of terms is required. Fortunately, enough writers appear to share implicitly a sufficient number of conceptions that it is possible to propose some concepts. I offer for further consideration and testing, as hypotheses, the following distinctions. The term *the aesthetic*, as Merriam's work suggests, refers to a system of philosophical discourse and articulated principles regarding form; it is rarely found in regard to the traditional arts. This does not mean that there is no perception of form or that there is no concern for formal excellence. There is in fact an *aesthetic attitude* comprising an ability to perceive form and a willingness to have an aesthetic experience. *An aesthetic response* (reaction, experience) is a unique configuration of intellectual state and physiological condition that occurs usually without a philosophy of "the aesthetic" and is accompanied by rudimentary expression rather than articulated principles. An *aesthetic judgment* is an evaluation of form, based on a response and expressed through physical acts or (usually) limited rather than elaborate verbalization. *Taste*, that is, likes and dislikes, affects in fundamental ways *aesthetic attitude, aesthetic response, and aesthetic judgment*. *Aesthetics* is the subject for consideration. It need not
include the aesthetic at all; it does, however, consist of discussions of aesthetic attitude, aesthetic response, and aesthetic judgment, but figuring most prominently is taste. Having made such distinctions, it is necessary now to discuss the terms as they relate to folklore studies.

The term the aesthetic tends to be employed when one is referring to the systematization of knowledge, perception, and principles of form. It is a favorite term of "the aesthete," whose preoccupation, understandably, is constructing criteria of evaluation, verbalizing principles of formal excellence, and formulating a philosophy of the beautiful. The classic discussion by Merriam should disabuse anyone of supposing that the aesthetic has much relevance to the folk arts. For as Merriam demonstrates, there is no evidence that people involved in the traditional arts respond solely to a song or an object abstracted from the context of performance or of manufacture and use; that they conceive of themselves as engaging principally in art for art's sake; or that they articulate principles as an essential part of their judgment of form. But in regard to activities and objects encountered daily and routinely, many individuals do in fact function in terms of an aesthetic attitude and have an aesthetic experience as signaled by an aesthetic judgment, all of which is affected by taste. How can this be?

"All human activities," writes Boas (1955:9) "may assume forms that give them esthetic values." While a word or a cry or unrestrained movements and many products of industry seemingly have no appeal, he observes, "nevertheless, all of them may assume esthetic values." What is required is a manipulation of the sensuous qualities of materials in rhythmical ways to produce a structure serving as a standard by which its perfection is measured. Throughout his book he speaks of "the perfection of form"—both striving to achieve formal perfection and the appreciation of formal excellence. He writes that "we cannot reduce this world-wide tendency [to perfect form, and to appreciate formal excellence] to any other cause than to a feeling for form . . . ." In other words, people have as a fundamental feature of their being human the impulse to emphasize the form of objects they make and the activities they engage in, as well as the compelling need to take pleasure in the achievement of formal excellence.

Whether articulated or not, and whether subject to philosophical discourse, people have an aesthetic attitude. For fundamental to being human is a feeling for form: an ability to master techniques to perfect form, and the capacity to appreciate formal excellence. Sometimes the forms produced 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 meaning, that adds to their enjoyment but it is not essential. What is crucial is that there is a feeling for form fundamental to
being human; without this quality there would be no "perfection of form." Because of the existence of a feeling for form in all human beings, however, serving as the basis of an aesthetic attitude, human beings have in the course of their daily activities an aesthetic response.

An aesthetic response is a reaction to form that one perceives. That this response exists is apparent in the writings of Sieber (1959), Bauman (1972), Ferris (1970), Burns (1974), and others. Precisely what this response is, however, remains to be ascertained. As a working hypothesis, I propose that an aesthetic response consists of a unique configuration of intellectual state and physiological condition in reaction to the perception of form or to some aspect of the generation of form. Although positive experience always is emphasized in the research literature, there is also a negative reaction. When positive, physical sensations of muscular tension and of release mark the aesthetic experience (response, reaction), along with a heightened awareness of form, the subordination in importance of other stimuli, and the suspension of time. In combination, the physiological condition and intellectual state have as their outcome a feeling of well-being, sometimes even a sense of "oneness" or unity of self with the object of attention and/or with others in the event. Hence, not only is an aesthetic experience enjoyed when it occurs, but also the conditions precipitating it often are cultivated so as to trigger the response. Remarked one woman about going to folk dance clubs for many years: "The reason I went to so many ethnic events throughout a lifetime is because of the possibility of that happening. It's so exciting when it happens. It's worth it for the event and for the memory—for that...highly...heightened...something happening!" Another person described to me with much enthusiasm a performance she had just seen. When asked to analyze her response, she insisted several times that it was principally "a gut reaction." Both statements suggest that people perceive and respond favorably to some forms of expressive behavior, that they cultivate a situation hoping to trigger in themselves a certain kind of response, and that the experience they have is marked by actual physical tension and then release ("a gut reaction") and also embraces a certain intellectual state of intense involvement.

But reactions also might be intensely negative. The word "aesthete" is from the Greek "aisthētē," one who perceives form. The word does not mean one who perceives good or pleasing form only, or one who necessarily likes the form that is perceived. A negative response, like a positive experience, is a unique configuration of intellectual state and physiological condition; but they are of a different nature and result. The tension created in a negative aesthetic response goes unrelieved. The intellectual state is one that welcomes, indeed cries out for, other stimuli to distract attention, and time is drawn out rather than suspended. The result is not a feeling of well-being at
all, but of doubt, loathing, or even disgust. Examples come readily to mind, making further discussion unnecessary.

The term \textit{aesthetic judgment} tends to imply expression of opinion—a verbalization that testifies to the existence of a reaction to form. But this judgment, when expressed, rarely is manifested as the articulation of principles of performance or production informing one's reaction. Rather, the judgment usually is intuitively based, seeming to spring forth without conscious consideration or effort. The judgment may be signaled by a simple action—choosing one item rather than another, or applauding spontaneously, and so forth—or by some simple expression. Commonly a respected narrator is said to be simply “good,” an effective cadence caller “experienced,” an object “nice.” Some events, performances, or objects are reacted to, judged pleasing, and complimented by rudimentary vocalizations, such as the exclamations “ooohhhhh” and “aaaahhhhh.” That such kinds of involuntary expressions of \textit{aesthetic judgment} are archaic and fundamental as well as probably universal helps account for why reference to them has proven successful in advertising. In 1977, for example, General Motors published in magazines an ad for several Buick models that was captioned at the top in large type: “Oohs, Aahs and MPGs.” More recently, Pizza Hut has been airing commercials showing happy, smiling people consuming thick slices of pizza, their actions punctuated by exclamations of “ooohhhhh—mmmmmmmmmm—aaaaahhhhh!”

Because of the fact that \textit{aesthetic judgments} often are expressed in this way, the topic of \textit{aesthetics} could easily and profitably be referred to as “the ohhh-ahhh/ugh-yuck complex.” If you’ve ever been to an elaborate and well-rehearsed fireworks display, you know what I mean by the “ohhh-ahhh” aspect of the complex. On the other hand, if you have had the experience of surveying your well-kept, manicured front lawn, spying in the middle of it a pile of fresh droppings from the neighbor’s dog, you will appreciate the “ugh-yuck” dimension of the complex.

Yet to be considered is the matter of \textit{taste}. The term refers to preferences based on associations and involving reactions to some aspects of the context of performance or production. In some writings, especially those in which \textit{the aesthetic} is the focus, the word \textit{taste} is used pejoratively; referring to something inferior, it is insignificant to our studies. In fact, however, as suggested by reports by James West (1945), Dan Crowley (1966), and others, the matter of \textit{taste} is crucial to understanding the nature of \textit{aesthetic response} and \textit{aesthetic judgment}. As such, \textit{taste} should be the primary concern in discussions of \textit{aesthetics}.

\textit{Taste} is a matter of likes and dislikes—which is generally acknowledged. There is some dispute over what exemplifies “good taste,” however, and what epitomizes “bad taste.” But one thing is certain: Everyone has preferences,
and these preferences are not standardized as norms of beauty. The uniqueness, rather than consistency of preferences, is so widely recognized in everyday activities that it is even expressed in a Wellerism: “‘Everyone to his own taste,’ said the farmer as he kissed a cow.”

The reason that this topic is so important to our studies is that *taste* serves as the framework within which an individual responds to form—whether positively or negatively—and expresses a judgment. It includes associations, relates to the context in which form is generated or experienced, and considers such matters as appropriateness. Affected by values, beliefs, and experiences, *taste* determines the nature of *aesthetic response* and *judgment*. If one finds nudity morally offensive, for example, then one is not very likely to exclaim “ooohhhhh” or “aaahhhhh” while thumbing through a recent issue of *Playboy*. If one disapproves of ostentatiousness, then this attitude will affect one’s response and judgment, as it did one chairmaker who told me, “I like a *decent*, plain-made chair”; in his opinion the ugliest chairs he had seen were those with turnings and finials made by another craftsman in the area. Some other people, however, found these ornamented chairs more appealing than unornamented ones.

It behooves us in our research and writing, then, to take seriously and to consider the implications of such a statement as “I may not know what art is, but I know what I like.” For *taste*, which is affected by experience, sensibility, and values, establishes an assumptive framework within which form-in-context is perceived, reacted to, and sometimes commented upon. “My favorite song is Stardust,” remarks one man. Why? “Because the band was playing it when I met the woman who later became my wife.” On the other hand, the same person might say, “I hate the song Stardust.” Why? “Because the band was playing it when I met the woman who later became my wife.” In the first instance a certain pleasant association endears the person to a particular form, and this association, related to the context of performance, is instrumental in producing an *aesthetic experience* signaled no doubt by some such expression as “aaahhhhh.” In the second instance, the *judgment* is likely to be “yuck!”

According to Carpenter (1969), Schneider (1956), and others, in many societies there is no concept of “art” or of “aesthetic.” Even in our own society, in regard to what people make and do in everyday life applicability of the notion “art” is severely restricted. Just walk into someone’s kitchen and ask if the well-ordered, neatly arranged cans and boxes and bottles in a cupboard, or utensils in a drawer, are a form of art: You’ll be laughed out of the room. Nevertheless, James West (1945) observed that some residents of a small town in Missouri took “aesthetic pleasure” in the labeling and arrangement of jars of home-canned goods on a shelf. But so loath were they to speak of “beauty” that when admiring the countryside they were inclined to say
simply, "Them hills ain't hard to look at." Obviously, then, a philosophy and an articulation of principles of form are not necessary for people to have an aesthetic response or to make aesthetic judgments. What is required, and what all of us possess as a fundamental feature of our humanity, is a feeling for form affected by multiple experiences and expressed in varied ways.

By way of conclusion, it is sufficient to repeat that if indeed, as Boas suggested and as the most desultory observation confirms, human beings possess, by virtue of their humanity, a feeling for form, then it is no surprise that there is an aesthetic attitude—a predisposition to give form to many activities of human endeavor, and to appreciate the achievement of formal excellence. Nor is it surprising that success in perfecting form may stimulate an aesthetic response, a unique configuration of intellectual state and physiological condition, or that an aesthetic judgment might be expressed as some simple physical act or rudimentary vocalization. If there is any surprise at all it is that this feeling for form is directed toward so many humble and commonplace activities in our day-to-day existence: the way we dress, prepare and serve and eat food, decorate our homes, interact with others, celebrate events, and so forth. The task of the folklorist, then, is to document and analyze some of these many instances of aesthetic attitude, response, and judgment, as all are affected by taste, for otherwise the field of aesthetics will be incomplete, preoccupied as it has been with the aesthetic.