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Displaying American Tradition in Folk Arts

The twentieth century was the era of the great folk art exhibition and festival in America. Blockbuster folk art shows such as *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932 and *The Flowering of American Folk Art* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1974 inspired countless collections, books, and commentaries harping on the essential national spirit of America found in its folk art. They also had their detractors who wanted to use the eye-catching forms of folk art to different social and aesthetic purposes. *The Arts and Crafts of the Homelands Exhibition* of 1919 publicized a contrary definition of America as a pluralist society composed of immigrant groups, and it must have held appeal for its attendance topped the magic one million mark. Staged outdoor events from the 1960s to the 1990s organized on the pluralist theme, such as the Festival of American Folklife, National Folk Festival, Newport Folk Festival, and Kutztown Folk Festival, became mass entertainment.

Exhibition and festival share the designation of displaying, indeed elevating, folk tradition as *art*. In so doing, they formed arguments for the proper roles of Americans as viewers, producers, and consumers of tradition. By installing artifacts or presenting performances to attract popular notice, they mounted varying social visions of traditional creativity within modernized existence. This chapter explores these social visions with special reference to folk art exhibitions alternately advocating national unity and cultural pluralism and to the uses of folk arts in festival and other display events to realize a behavioral perspective of performed tradition.

Although to this point in the book my emphasis in analyzing folk tradition in the discourse of American culture has been on the written and spoken word, the debates that folk art exhibitions have inspired in America lead me to consider how
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Social concepts became presented in tangible ways and became supported by cultural rhetoric. As an invented term for a class of objects, folk art brought together potentially opposed ideas. While problematic, the term also significantly drew attention to itself for marking the changing role of tradition in modernizing society. Its formation begged the question of the groups that properly held an authentic claim for producing a distinctly American culture. Yoking folk to art especially brought into question conceptions of social class in the American experience. Art had European associations with aristocratic taste as well as embodying beauty and skill unattainable to the lowly masses. In literary usage, it conveyed originality and genius. It meant change. It announced the future. Folk meanwhile represented the stable past steeped in the tradition of groups and classes without power.

With the insertion of folk” between “American” and “art” to describe objects in galleries, curators invited reflection on the cultural characterization of American society. Showing beauty and originality among artists drawn from ordinary circumstances implied a national tradition united by the spirit of individual expression that left behind the hold of European culture and led to the future. It was a future prefiguring the strength of American nationalism and its catapult into modernity. Problems of defining this invented category of objects did not deter enthusiasm for its use in collecting and exhibiting, especially in the American art world center of New York City. From this center, folk art became a publicly recognizable term for crude work of the people admired for its boldness of color, line, and expression.

Natives and Immigrants in Folkloristic Presentation

A rival use of art outside the gallery world emerged that emphasized the functional uses of decoration in everyday lives of diverse communal groups. Otis Mason, curator of ethnological collections at the new United States National Museum in the Smithsonian Institution, first referred to a “folk fine art” in his presidential address to the American Folklore Society in 1891 (Mason 1891, 103). Eskimos, Indians, and Polynesians had their traditional designs heralded as art in extravagant expositions in London in 1891, Chicago in 1893, and Atlanta in 1895. In these exhibitions of arts that seemed exotic to Victorian viewers, folklorists and anthropologists collected objects that were divided between those that illustrated tradition and those that were traditional because of their use. They classified the latter as useful or decorative art. Often the prefix “folk” was not necessary since the assumption was that the objects came from traditional or “savage” societies. In such societies, there would not be distinction between folk and fine arts; everything was traditional. Alfred Haddon’s influential Evolution in Art (1895), explained that “the term ‘art’ now has a tendency to be confined to designate the Fine Arts as opposed to the Useful Arts; not only so, but instead of including personal decoration, ornamentation, painting, sculpture, dancing, poetry, music, and the drama, the term is very often limited to
ornamentation, painting, and sculpture." Art in a social sense meant broadly "a creative operation of the intelligence, the making of something either with a view to utility or pleasure" (Haddon 1895, 1). For the word folk at the time, the first editor of the Journal of American Folklore made the claim that it "was primarily invented to describe the unwritten popular traditions of civilized countries" (Newell 1888b, 163). Folklorists, especially European and American folklorists, applied anthropological concepts to complex, literate societies and "folk art" came into use to differentiate between the dominant "fine arts" of the elite and other arts of "lower classes" such as peasants.

Outdoor folk museums in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark established during the late nineteenth century symbolized the richly embroidered folk art of peasants as signs of continued nationalism in an age of industrial empire in Europe. Saving and celebrating the relics of the past as artistic, Danish folklorist Peter Michelsen observed, "served the cause of progress," by allowing a transition to the "radical changes in the entire material culture of the peasantry.... This cultural upheaval caused the relics of the earlier way of life to be ruthlessly swept aside, and gave the folk museums and open-air museums formed at this time a mission to fulfill" (Michelsen 1966, 227–28).

Books simultaneously appeared describing peasants' art as genuine folk art and associating it with the character-building daily round of a passing traditional life. Germans coined the word Volkskunst while the French referred to l'art populaire. German Alois Riegl brought out Volkskunst, Hausfleiss und Hausindustrie in 1894. F. Zell published Volkskunst in Allgau in 1902, and Scandinavian N. Nicolayson published Kunst og haandverk ha Norges fortid from 1881 to 1899. The rage for peasant art entered fashionable designs of the period and reached across Europe from England to Russia. For English-speaking audiences, The Studio published a series of books on the folk art of Sweden and Iceland (1910), Austria and England (1911), Russia (1912), Italy (1913), the Netherlands (1913), and Switzerland (1914). The International Folk-Lore Congress of 1900 held in Paris had as one of its main themes art populaire. The proceedings took up the relationship of folk art to fine arts, especially those established by earlier civilizations like the Greeks and Romans, and its implication for aesthetic systems existing within Western societies.

Several prominent American folklorists at the close of the nineteenth century noticed this artistic trend and its relation to culture. Daniel Brinton (at the University of Pennsylvania), Otis Mason (at the Smithsonian Institution), Frederick Ward Putnam (at the Peabody Museum), Washington Matthews (at the Bureau of American Ethnology), and Stewart Culin (at the Brooklyn Institute Museum) pushed for wider American appreciation of traditional art and material culture. At the 1893 Folk-Lore Congress in Chicago, organizer Fletcher Bassett made a special point of calling for the collection of objects, and listed "artistic and emblematic folklore" as a major heading of folk studies. Stewart Culin contributed by exhibiting Native American and American immigrant folk objects at Madrid in
1892, Chicago in 1893, Philadelphia in 1894, and Atlanta in 1895. Frederick Starr collected Mexican decorative masks and ceremonial objects which he displayed in London and about which he published a catalog under the imprint of the Folk Lore Society in 1899.

With the turn of the century, Stewart Culin made calls that presaged the twentieth-century move toward examining modern folk arts. He made comparisons of primitive art to modern-day aesthetics in essays such as “Primitive American Art” (1900) and “The Origin of Ornament” (1900). “When we examine the products of man’s handicraft,” he wrote, “as represented both by his prehistoric remains, as well as by the rudest effort of the existing savage, we everywhere find evidence of an aesthetic sense, of an effort, not only at mere utility, but at decoration and ornament, analogous to that which is universal among cultivated people at the present day” (Culin 1900a, 235). This examination was crucial, Culin and his crowd asserted, because of the changes that industrialization had brought to American traditional arts during the late nineteenth century.

Pennsylvania collectors such as Henry Mercer and Edwin Barber had gained notoriety for bringing out a legacy of regional folk art in America comparable to esteemed European peasant work. They published essays filled with the rhetoric of discovery on Pennsylvania-German fraktur, pottery, and ironwork. At the American sesquicentennial celebration in 1926 held in Philadelphia, an exhibition of Pennsylvania folk art installed by Hattie Brunner included decorated craft items such as illuminated manuscripts, papercuts, ironwork, pottery, and textiles. Brunner highlighted the significance of this ethnic folk art for its inherited techniques of handwork, cultural context of the object in an ethnic-regional tradition, and functions in daily community life. In a region touted as America’s first plural society, where German dialects still thrived, and where coal regions brought in a flood of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, an explosion of color and design burst forth. Brunner and other dealers showed brightly illuminated manuscripts and painted furniture from an immigrant culture of the colonial past maintaining its ethnic distinctiveness. When the furniture from the Mahantango Valley of Pennsylvania came into view at the sesquicentennial exhibition, the English-American unpainted version seemed weak indeed. This Pennsylvania painted furniture, one New York collector exclaimed, was the real “epitome of folk art” (Earnest 1984; see Reed 1987).

Pennsylvania art and culture did not fit well into a unified vision of America, and Pennsylvania writers promoted folklife approaches to the diverse communities within the region. The *Annual of the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society* ridiculed the rage for folk art coming out of New York galleries as “antiquarian” and “unscientific.” The folkloric interest in Pennsylvania was inclined less toward the visual, leisurely, decorative products, and more toward those of labor in communal societies, as existed in the Pennsylvania-German settlements. In this view of labor in community life, pottery, textiles, ironwork, and manuscript illumination
were rooted in traditionally learned crafts in which an aesthetic function was integrated with utility. They were the stuff of folk art related to folk life. Promoting this view, John Baer Stoudt published *The Shenandoah Pottery* in 1929, and his son John Joseph carried on with general studies of illuminated manuscripts (or fraktur) and iconography in *Consider the Lilies* (1937) and *Pennsylvania Folk Art: An Interpretation* (1948). Preston Barba wrote in the *Annual* that folk art should be tied to a social world of folklore, not to the "individual achievement" of the art world. He argued that folk art is a "result," not a "product." "It's a living link in the long chain of a people's social existence," he emphasized (Barba 1954, 4).

Edwin Barber and the Pennsylvania folklorists influenced some collectors in New York and New England, including Albert Pitkin, who used "folk" as an adjective for art with his *Early American Folk Pottery* (1918). His folk, he stated, was an "American Folk, as exemplified in the work of our English and European ancestors who were among the early settlers in this country. The Pottery made by aborigines will have no consideration, because it was unglazed ware, and because it belongs essentially to Ethnological study" (Pitkin 1918, 83). A similar rhetoric separating traditional crafts of early American settlers as folk art from the "ethnological" culture of aborigines was evident in Fanny Bergen's groundbreaking study of quilts as "The Tapestry of the New World" (1894). She concluded that "the interest which attaches to these old quilts is not only due to the light that they throw on the degree of artistic advancement (or lack of it) that characterized the household industries of our grandmothers, but the needlework itself is often extraordinarily beautiful, fine, and intricate, approaching in these respects the finest of the old tapestries" (Bergen 1892, 69).

Pitkin boasted of getting out of the gallery and into the field: he interviewed the "old potters, in their homes," who were threatened, he said, with extinction. With such research, a shift could be discerned from objects illustrating folklore of primitives or used in folk custom, to decorative objects of regional and immigrant groups in America. Their collected objects were not savage or primitive in the sense that Haddon had noted, but were still outside of "fine arts." As American society entered the twentieth century, a fear arose of mass society, a society governed by formal rules and tastemakers. Some ethnic and regional museums such as Henry Mercer's Bucks County Historical Society and the Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa, collected and displayed the arts of traditional communities to fulfill an educational purpose similar to that of the European folk museums. Industrialist Henry Mercer declared that industrialization was indeed progress, and therefore inevitable, but he called for saving the remnants of preindustrial life to appreciate the efforts of settlers in the building of the nation. He called his first major exhibition of his collection drawn primarily from Pennsylvania-German sources, *Tools of the Nation Maker* (1897) (see Mercer 1987).

The background of the *Nation Maker* exhibitions showing that America had a quickly disappearing "material culture" lay in social dilemmas tugging at the
nation around the turn of the century. Beside the promotion of industrialism as the great leap into the future of the twentieth century stood reminders of the upheaval that change had brought. Disruptive labor strikes, economic panics, and radical protests commanded headlines alongside news of the industrial splendor of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago and growth of American big business (see Trachtenberg 1982). Poverty spread while “conspicuous consumption” and affluence rose. There were reports on the plight, or curse, depending on the writer’s political persuasion, of immigrants and minorities. There was condemnation, or praise, of isolated rural regions in relation to the progress of the nation. The admiration for industrial modernism stood alongside an antimodern revival of older values, from religious fundamentalism to the aestheticism of the Arts and Crafts movement (see Lears 1981). Studies of old rural crafts and art abounded amidst a celebration of modern urban invention. Not that these dilemmas were new, but rather public attention to them was heightened by journalists, reformers, and photographers. Folklorists, whose studies gained public notoriety in the antimodern (and isolationist) trend, increasingly turned to “neglected” or “disappearing” subjects at home—regional and immigrant oral tradition. The research of American folklorists turned toward the nation’s heart, rather than, as it had before, outward to international studies of the primitive’s mind.

Reflecting this trend were Allen Eaton’s exhibitions of *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands*, first put up in Buffalo in 1919, and the *America’s Making Exposition*, opening in New York City in 1921. Eaton was trained as a sociologist at the University of Oregon and influenced by folklorists in New York City such as Stewart Culin. Eaton was born in 1878 in Union, Oregon, and became an art professor and state legislator before being asked to assemble an arts and crafts exhibition for the Oregon Building at the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. It was the only state building at the exposition that displayed crafts as part of the arts. Losing his bid for reelection and dismissed from the University of Oregon for anti-war activities, Eaton came to New York City in 1918 and found work with the Emergency Fleet Corporation, a division of the United States Shipping Board. In this work, he came to know hundreds of newly arrived immigrants. In 1920 he became associate director of the Department of Surveys and Exhibitions of the Russell Sage Foundation, established to improve social conditions in America. He earned the promotion by receiving tremendous notice for the *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands* exhibition, opening in 1919. He turned his attention to another social transformation in America when he began surveys of rural regions increasingly marginalized by industrialization and urbanization. His efforts culminated in 1937 with a major exhibition of rural arts for the United States government. His displays of tradition were more like festivals than galleries, and he invited groups to select the objects and performances used to represent their culture. As David B. Van Dommelen recalled, “Not only did Eaton accept for display all objects brought to him by working immigrants, but he decided that, in
order to illustrate a total integration of these gifts, dances, costumes, songs and foods from around the world would also be included” (Van Dommelen 1985, 36).

An example of the commentary that Eaton’s lively and sympathetic representation of America’s diverse folk cultures in the Arts and Crafts of the Homelands exhibition drew comes from the Portland Spectator:

These exhibitions of things made by unschooled but sensitive people who know not the rules of composition and color, but who felt strongly the impulse to create beautiful objects and responded to the impulse, will not only help us to appreciate more fully the folk culture of the many homelands from which America is made up, but they will give us a vision of what we may reasonably hope to see in a renaissance of all the arts in our country. Perhaps the greatest thing, however, this will do is to help us understand that art in its true sense, whether it be folk or fine, is the expression of joy in work. (Van Dommelen 1985, 36)

Eaton’s intention of showing the joy of the work came through in his display of woodcarving, embroidery, and egg decorating accompanied with performances by immigrant groups to bring life to the arts as a social creation. The Homelands exhibition and America’s Making Exposition confirmed the value of immigration to American life. Both shows traveled widely, and together they attracted well over a million viewers, resulting in a book by Eaton, Immigrant Gifts to American Life (1932).

Other exhibitions of immigrant folk art as a connection of the European peasant to the hyphenated American sprang up in Omaha, Minneapolis, Cleveland, and New York City during the 1920s. Curators following this folk art held the belief that immigrant groups would quickly become assimilated, so their folk arts arising out of their utilitarian craft traditions should be preserved and appreciated for contributing to the richness of American life. Some of these exhibitions and festivals had strong support from social service agencies including settlement houses and the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA). The YWCA sponsored International Institutes that produced almost 200 folk festivals and handicraft exhibitions during the 1920s (Eaton 1932, 93). The International Institute of St. Paul, Minnesota, beginning in 1919, presented ethnic arts in various displays and later produced the Festival of Nations, which led to the formation of the Folk Arts Foundation of America (Kaplan 1980). The International Folk Arts Society formed in Omaha in 1926, according to its bylaws, “(1) To encourage and foster friendly relations among the various nationalities of Omaha, and (2) To promote and enrich American art by exhibiting and cultivating that brought to us from other lands” (Eaton 1932, 96).

Eaton’s exhibitions presented American experience as a narrative of continuous immigration and cultural enrichment. They told the story of the great wave of immigration that came to America around the turn of the century as a dramatic but not unusual chapter in the story of America. Eaton insisted that immigrants
Three generations of women posing alongside a “family of wooden dolls from Russia” at the Russian section of the *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands* exhibition installed at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, in 1919. The participants demonstrated the “living” tradition of the textiles and the uses of folk art in the home. Typical of publicity photographs from the exhibition, this inclusion of young and old representatives of the ethnic group implied tradition passed down from one generation to the next. (Albright-Knox Art Gallery Archives, Buffalo, New York)

presented opportunities rather than threats to American identity. The *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands* exhibitions, he vowed, promoted the “conservation of the choice customs, traditions, and folkways of these various [foreign-born] peoples” toward a better America. The mix of visitors to the exhibitions provided testimony of a socially diverse America, for the exhibitions brought out members of ethnic communities and overall attendance for an art exhibition was astounding for the period. Eaton boasted that “undoubtedly one of the measures of the influence of an exhibition is the interest indicated by attendance. In Buffalo it was the opinion of many that it would not be possible to get large numbers of people to come to the Albright Art Gallery.... In the two weeks during which the exhibition lasted, the attendance amounted to 42,961 persons, the largest number on record for any two consecutive weeks since the gallery had been dedicated nine years before”
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(Eaton 1932, 63–64). Such numbers would set records even today in most galleries. Although counts were not kept at the Rochester and Albany sites, newspaper reports noted that the halls were filled to capacity. Encouraged by clamor for the displays and performances, promoters took the exhibition to additional sites in Syracuse, Utica, and New York City.

Eaton was not about to let the objects on display speak for themselves. He introduced extensive social education programs that became hailed as an innovation to art exhibitions. As Eaton reported, “Thousands of school children visited the exhibition and were instructed in the folk and industrial arts of foreign countries by the staff of the gallery or those in charge of booths” (Eaton 1932, 63–64). The repeated object lesson was the benefit, aesthetic and social, of an American ethnic pluralism. The picture of a door used as a frontispiece to Immigrant Gifts to American Life (1932) gave a compelling image of entry into a society enriched by its ethnic variety. Emblazoned on the page was the new ornate entrance to Saint Mark’s Church in Philadelphia. The caption informed readers that the magnificent church doorway had “iron work by Samuel Yellin from Poland; wood-carving by Edward Maene from Belgium; stained glass by Nicola D’Ascenzo from Italy.”

Eaton organized his exhibitions in large halls, such as the great rotunda of the New York State Educational Building in Albany and the Rochester Exposition Grounds, to suggest outdoor culture-scapes: the feelings of field and sea, community and participation. He created settings for work and performances including Greek fishing boats and dances featuring hundreds of Russian, Italian, and Ukrainian children in folk costume, thereby underscoring the link of environment to living custom. Encouraging demonstrators and performers ranging in age from young to old, Eaton broadcast the impression that one generation to the next pridedfully transmitted arts within ethnic families and communities and they could be appreciated by a wider public. In the world Eaton exhibited, arts, like the cultures they expressed, were alive, persistent, buoyant. Across from a striking photograph showing a “Czech father teaching little son to dance at the Buffalo exhibition,” Eaton cheered that visitors can observe “artists and craftsmen in native costume working at the wheel, the loom, the bench, the easel, and the frame, actually creating objects of art associated with the life of the countries from which millions of our citizens have come.” Impressing upon his public a continuum of tangible and non-tangible traditions as integrated “folk arts,” Eaton made sure to draw visitors to displays as “programs” involving “native music, songs, and folk dances.” For the immigrants already here, the exhibition “may develop opportunities for the gifted to live by their gifts.” It was an invitation to continue their culture. For non-immigrants, the exhibition promoted tolerance and the possibility of a peaceful simultaneity between multiple communities and the nation. Visitors were urged “to hear with their own ears, and to feel with their hearts this wealth that is ours for the caring.... But most of all we hope that it will bring about a better understanding between all the people;
Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish section of the *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands* exhibition installed at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, 1919. The exhibition was divided into sections representing immigrants’ countries of origin. In addition to representing such “homelands,” the sections had the look of rooms in an immigrant home. Costumed participants demonstrated “living” traditions of textiles and the uses of folk art in the home. (Albright-Knox Art Gallery Archives, Buffalo, New York)

and no matter how successful this undertaking may be we hope that it may be looked upon not as the end, but as the beginning of a greater co-operation among all citizens in appreciating and conserving the finest and best of our community and national life” (Eaton 1932, 34–35).

Set behind the background of progressive changes to American life that immigrants during the great wave brought, Eaton proposed a revision of the ways that America’s heritage was conceived. Eaton claimed that “our people are coming into a greater appreciation of their folk arts as they inquire into the many ingredients and influences that have gone into the making of America.” Making reference to the art world’s obsession with the emergence of the New Republic, Eaton offered a longer cultural view in an essay entitled “American Folk Arts”: “This quest goes back beyond the founding of a new nation on this continent, to the original American, the Indian, whose folk arts form the first part, chronologically, and a distinguished part, of American’s cultural heritage…. We are a nation of people
The Jugoslav String Orchestra and Singers at the *Arts and Crafts of the Homelands* exhibition installed at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, 1919. Performances of dance and music were regularly featured during the exhibition and culminated in a gala "All-American Night" on the last night. Twenty-two nations (mostly from eastern and southern Europe) were represented. In the finale, according to a press release, the "new Americans in the costumes of their homelands assembled in a striking pageant as loyal and patriotic upholders of Columbia, who will typify the spirit of the new land."

(Albright-Knox Art Gallery Archives, Buffalo, New York)

gathered here from every continent on the earth, and from a hundred homelands." Offering a pluralist summary borrowing Martha Warren Beckwith's rhetoric of spirited ethnic "strains," Eaton concluded, "There is considerable evidence that we are beginning to prize the folk arts of the many human strains that make up our population" (Eaton 1944, 201; see Beckwith 1931b, 64).

**Modernism and Nationalism in the Art World**

Eaton tended to use "folk arts" rather than "folk art" as an indication of the variety of everyday expression used by diverse "human strains" in American society. Eaton's exhibitions stressed a plurality of "arts" integrated into various cultures. Dance, song, dress, and even foodways became arts defined as activities functioning within the culture rather than objects evaluated for fitness outside culture. To
Eaton such folk arts, as expressions of persistent subcultures, were gifts of communities to the nation. In contrast, Holger Cahill, espousing the view of the New York art world, argued that folk art was a treasure of the self, mirroring the spirit of the republic. Cahill’s conception of folk art, which informs contemporary institutions such as the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, the Museum of American Folk Art, the Shelburne Museum, and the New York State Historical Association, celebrates the power of image. The type of folk art they collected is used to form a romantic narrative in images, of a pastoral America built on unity and harmony. Beginning with its usage by the art world during the 1920s, “folk art” separated image from process and community.

The impetus for this separation came from the rise of interest among art world patrons and artists promoting folk art. Displays of American art during the 1920s relied on a new breed of affluent art patron who broke with the status of purchasing European fine art by collecting the plain portraits and rough-hewn sculptures from the American countryside. Patrons equally of new vogues of modern art and folk art such as Electra Havemeyer Webb and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller bought much of their folk art material from New York and New England dealers who
Holger Cahill. (Archives of American Art)
scoured the large antique auction houses of central Pennsylvania. Working with museum curator Holger Cahill and art patron Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, New York's enterprising dealer Edith Gregor Halpert came regularly to Pennsylvania for purchases of folk art and in her downtown New York gallery offered the works for a new decorative purpose tailored to her clients' needs (Metcalf and Weatherford 1988). The folk art gracing the walls of Rockefeller's New York apartment retained the decorative and spirit-giving purpose of antiques. In fact, when Cahill installed folk art exhibitions in Newark and New York, he tried to preserve the positioning of Rockefeller's prized possessions, such as Peaceable Kingdom by Edward Hicks and Baby in Red Chair by an unknown artist, in her home in a decorative, almost living-room, setting (Rumford and Weekley 1989, 8–11). The objects were of a bygone era but moved to walls and pedestals that flattered patrons and gallery-goers even more than the often anonymous artists. With their collections of home-grown antiques meant to decorate their estates, these upper-class women announced their independence from a previous European-centered generation and elevated the American antique into art. Not surprisingly, the decorative forms they collected were typically larger and more select than the average craftswork of ethnic communities.

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (1874–1948) canonized her folk art and its connection to both modernism and nationalism by donating her extensive collection of paintings and sculptures in 1939 to Colonial Williamsburg and the Museum of Modern Art. She reflected at the time to writer Mary Ellen Chase on the driving themes of her collecting. She told Chase that the folk art she was attracted to recorded "those years in American history when, after the baffling problems of a new world had been solved by the colonists and after the War of the Revolution had finally shattered an earlier dependence upon the culture and learning of England, a new American people began for the first time to stand alone, to work out its own destiny as a nation" (Chase 1950, 148). She identified in this passage the unified lineage from Protestant England to a new American type. Then she elaborated on this era of the New Republic as a golden age of prosperity and harmony: "an era of relative prosperity, which followed the disturbance of war, and a more leisurely existence than had been possible in years of settlement were conducive to the development of art" (Chase 1950, 148). Described as a forceful woman with a combative personality who used art as ammunition for a "good fight" in defense of her nationalist cause, she wanted to create a stir in the art world as a way to reach America (Chase 1950, 131). While her management of the Museum of Modern Art mainly brought in art aficionados, she hoped that her folk art collection with her aesthetic and nationalist message would more widely reach common people. Thus she gave the bulk of her folk art collection to Williamsburg, which had a founding principle to recall the spirit as well as surroundings of the new nation (Freeze 1989).

Rockefeller had a home in Williamsburg as well as residences in Pocantico Hills, New York; Seal Harbor, Maine; and New York City, where she did much of her folk
art collecting. She had an appreciation for New England history and art from her youth in Providence, Rhode Island, where she received a classical education at a school for girls. She also respected the theme of a prospering nation grown from humble roots because of narratives from her father. He had risen from a lowly position of bookkeeper in a grocery firm to become a powerful United States Senator. He had encouraged her to travel to Europe as a youth, and she was attracted to art museums on her travels. It gave her an aesthetic education and a certain jealousy of the cultural capital and nationalism that European nations acquired through the encouragement and display of native art. The American art she surrounded herself with and later displayed to the public boosted the image of a rising nation as a narrative of her family's historic saga from modest middle-class New England roots to international prominence. Intersecting with her art and Protestant church associations, she joined the Mayflower Descendants, National Society of Colonial Dames, the Women's National Republican Club, the Colony Club, and the Cosmopolitan Club. She married John D. Rockefeller, Jr., son of the founder of the Standard Oil Company and, with a fortune behind her, indulged in philanthropy and support of American modern and folk art. Rockefeller had faith in the therapeutic value of art as well as its redemptive power for the nation. Together with another folk art patron, Stephen C. Clark (who supported the collection of the New York State Historical Association at Cooperstown), she organized the War Veterans' Art Center in 1944, which offered art classes to disabled veterans until 1948. She also created a model workers' home for employees of Standard Oil in New Jersey, whereby she tried to demonstrate the uplifting power of an aesthetic environment.2

Rockefeller enlisted support from credentialed curators for her aesthetic cause. With her power of the purse, she encouraged more scholarly attention to building a sense of American tradition in art to rival Europe's. She turned increasingly to Newark Museum curator Holger Cahill, who had experience with collections of Scandinavian peasant as well as European fine arts (Vlach 1985b). Holger Cahill acted as her expert agent in choosing prize items for her collection, and he was instrumental in adding southern colonial items to complement her New England material (Chase 1950, 149). He helped her realize her philosophy of celebrating rising individuality in the New Republic as the basis of an individually expressive modernism in America. She had aesthetic inclinations toward bold colors and unusual abstractions, and as Chase emphasized, she gave her staunchest support to their value as American art (Chase 1950, 139). As chair of the committee that organized the Museum of Modern Art and as folk art patron, she called for works expressing an American imagination and "freedom of expression" (Chase 1950, 136). She delighted equally in promoting "little known" American modernist artists or folk artists into something much larger, much more symbolic. Of folk art, Rockefeller believed that "although the paintings merely as paintings are sometimes amateurish and even crude, they emanate an honesty and integrity
not soon forgotten.” In a conclusion that trumpeted a brassy keynote resounding through major national events from Cahill’s *Art of the Common Man* in 1932 to Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester’s *Flowering of American Folk Art* (1974), Rockefeller expressed the sentiment that folk artists conveyed “not only the character and quality of their imaginations, but as well the spirit of a country” (Chase 1950, 150; emphasis added).

The objects associated with Rockefeller and Cahill’s art of the “common man” characterized a dominant white Protestant American stock and nationalized history. The usage came out of a potent combination of a modernist artistic movement and a post-war craze for American antiques collecting. Antiques collecting was partly in response to the lack of “European” art goods during the war and an interest by a new generation in locating power in America. The stress on antiques of the American colonial period carried over from the centennial of 1876 and Columbian Exposition of 1893 and the entrance of America into colonial rule and world prominence. Critic Virgil Barker commented on an exhibition of colonial paintings at the Whitney Studio Club in 1924: “The discovery of our artistic past which is now progressing with increasing rapidity satisfies more than the collecting instinct, for such paintings and miscellaneous objects as were brought together in this exhibition have the tang of reality” (Barker 1924, 161). Not being schooled but being old and domestic, the art objects—mostly portraits and occupational carvings—were considered antiques in the early twentieth century. They were the products of the colonial forebears, representative of a national history.

The celebration of colonial antiques as consumables for the home during the early twentieth century gave the domestic environment a feel of being a nurturing haven of rural tradition while rapid changes occurred in the factory and city. Broaching “The Superstition of the Antique,” the Newark Museum pronounced, “There comes a moment in the history of every civilization when it turns back to look at the ground it has covered, before crossing the pass and plunging down to new discoveries on the other side. On the threshold of a new age it experiences an overwhelming desire to build an artificial paradise out of the ruins of the past” (Hinks 1928, 10). Walter Dyer writing in *The Lure of the Antique* (1910) wrote of antique collectors, “we are a home-loving people, and the things of the homes, and our reverence for the past around the hearthstone of our forebears. Also we are for the most part descended from Europeans, and there is born within us a respect for antiquity. We have no Rhenish castles here; no Roman roads undulate over our hilltops. The oldest we have is just coming of age, but we are glad of that, and do our homage” (Dyer 1910, 4).

Much of the antiques craze after World War I reflected an attempt to rescue America’s country past as industrialization and urbanization appeared to cover over the landscape. The fondness in the antiques market for colonial New England material also suggested a nativist taste in opposition to new immigrant cultures coming into the country, mostly from eastern and southern Europe. Colonial
antiques promoted during the period primarily comprised domestic furnishings, china, implements, and decorative items. The antique spoke of a domestic American past, rugged in its texture, conveying harmony and New England purity and restraint (Stillinger 1980; Davidson 1970). The antique gave the modern interior an image of the domestic and domesticated past, a unified middle-class Americanized past. The prestigious Metropolitan Museum of Art supported this view with the opening in 1924 of the American Wing, an exhibition of decorative arts. From the exhibition came the book *The Homes of Our Ancestors*, which bemoaned the disturbance by southern and eastern European immigrants of an American sense of self growing out of the cradle of New England homes. Repeatedly calling the refined style of domestic tranquility in America's colonial settlement a gloried “tradition,” indeed America's true heritage, the curators announced that the museum's display of colonial New England furnishing was meant to offset intrusions of immigrant taste. They proclaimed, “Much of the America of to-day has lost sight of its traditions. Their stage settings have largely passed away, along with the actors. Many of our people are not cognizant of our traditions and the principles for which our fathers struggled and died. The tremendous changes in the character of our nation, and the influx of foreign ideas utterly at variance with those held by the men who gave us the Republic, threaten and, unless checked, may shake its foundations. Any study of the American Wing cannot fail to revive those memories, for here for the first time is a comprehensive, realistic setting for the traditions so dear to us and so invaluable in the Americanization of many of our people, to whom much of history is little known” (Halsey and Tower 1924, xxii).

As the curators of the American Wing acknowledged, it seemed to be a stretch to label furnishings once part of the antiques market as art. While exuding noble qualities of self-control, stability, and refinement, English colonial domestic furnishings appeared embarrassingly dull, devoid of color and design, especially in contrast to boisterous new immigrant traditions. To compensate for the “dullness” of New England antiques, their patrons claimed that furnishings and decorations collected as antiques were paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts. They were deserving of praise for their American authenticity, if not their vibrancy (see Wolfe 1997).

Antiquity and modernity came together in art at the *International Exhibition of Modern Art*, better known today as “The Armory Show” of 1913. The show was international in scope but critics especially heralded the arrival of American modernism. Works by artists such as Bernard Karfiol, John Sloan, and Stuart Davis were on display with Picasso and Kandinsky. The art was modern and yet it was primitive. Critic W. D. MacColl commented that the modern painters “achieve the first place by the force of a pure native power that is in them.” He observed that in showing the “progress of art” out of primitive power, the modernists had triumphed over “machinery” and continued a “classic tradition” (MacColl [1913]
1970, 179, 181). Other critics were less generous. Art critic Royal Cortissoz writing in the New York Tribune and Century equated modern art with the invidious influences of immigration, which introduced alien elements shaking the foundation of the nation (Cortissoz [1913] 1970).

Some American modernists replied that their designs had roots in the American soil. They were inspired by American primitives such as the "naive" painting and sculpture of the eighteenth century that showed abstraction of line, disregard for perspective, and boldness in color. "Modernism" called attention to the blandness of machine-built modernity. It sought roots and inspiration in the reality of the authentic primitive. Charles Messer Stow, writing in the Antiquarian in 1927 on "Primitive Art in America," reported, "Indeed, certain of the ultra-modern painters, whose work now and then comes to the attention of bewildered lookers, confide that they are endeavoring to return to the primitive in their art" (Stow 1927). An exhibition at the Whitney Studio Club in 1924 arranged by painter Henry Schnackenberg showed some of the primitives and their relation to modernism. There were many paintings and watercolors, pieces of pewter, woodcarvings, a brass bootjack, and a plaster cat. Stow wrote of the show, "In the midst of a sophisticated existence it is refreshing to turn to something that totally lacks sophistication. And these early paintings give that refreshment. Seeing them is like getting all at once a new outlook, a new viewpoint, a new approach to the world. By contrast their realism seems most attractive to us, even though it be crude" (Stow 1927). Wealthy New Yorkers, he observed, were impressed, and they drew connections of their present condition to that of the paintings. "They may truly be said to have retained their 'primitive' feeling. Many of them are products of that time of stress of the early nineteenth century, that time when the people of the new nation were forced, whether they like it or not, to take one of the forward steps in civilization" (Stow 1927).

Modern artists such as Robert Laurent and Bernard Karfiol amassed substantial collections of nineteenth century paintings and sculpture of anonymous itinerants and amateur artists from antiques shops. The connection among the objects they selected was the aesthetic of primitive line and color. This connection brought together a dominant native aesthetic overriding foreign or subcultural influence. As galleries took notice of the commodification of the "naive" aesthetic in the Museum of Modern Art and Newark Museum, they displayed objects formerly assigned to the antiques market as saleable art. Folk became a commercial term to separate a commodity from the fine arts above and antiques below. It was an art that challenged the assumptions of art schools and epicurean control of taste, yet it supported the system by using the fine arts as the standard of judgment. Because the collection of these objects grew out of a fine arts view, painting and sculpture were emphasized rather than the craft and ornament of the anthropological concern for use and the subculture from which the object came. Assembled together, the objects became "Americana," standing intuitively for a
lost bucolic American vintage, the art collectors claimed. The objects played up the commonality of America's predominantly small-town, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant past, and while patronizing ethnic and racial contributions, underscored the bourgeois New England or Tidewater roots of the newly dubbed folk imagery. The modernists, according to historian Jackson Lears, with their pre-modern objets d'art created "a surrogate religion of taste well suited to a secular culture of consumption" (Lears 1981, 192).

Modernist artists during the 1920s supported the categorization of folk art in the terms of highly valued, and consumable, fine arts. By using "folk," modernists added an emotional quality to the work. Seeking tradition for a break with the past, modernist sculptors such as Elie Nadelman constructed an art of the abstract based on so-called American folk art. Painters as well as sculptors admired the boldness of design, the removal of boundaries and restrictions, that characterized cultures able to express their inner feelings. American weathervanes and decoys used as wall decorations provided studies of American "primitives" in abstract form. Artists placed the objects on a wall or pedestal and noted that their lines and colors could be compared to the new abstract art.

It was important for the modernists to draw out the creation rather than the creativity of folk art. In this way, art could still be based on value and judgment rather than culture. The art world affirmed that art was an act of creation; it came into being where there was nothing before. It expressed the excitement, the genius, of Biblical creation (Mason 1988). During the 1920s, however, a new word mirroring "relativity," came into use. "Creativity," philosopher Alfred North Whitehead argued, emerges from tension in a plurality of forces, not from unity; creativity arises from everyday struggle with the past and present, with self and other (Kristeller 1983; Bronner 1992b). Thus anthropologist Franz Boas, a German immigrant to the United States and honorary chairman of the National Committee on Folk Arts as part of the International Commission on Folk Arts, drew notice by hailing primitive art not as creation, but as creativity fundamental to human existence. All humans, he argued, share a basic human impulse to perfect form coming from the life of people as part of their everyday traditions (Boas [1927] 1955). In contrast to this idea of tradition incorporating relativity and creativity, tradition in a nativist mode needed to be defined according to America's founding by New England Protestants and away from new immigrant groups. Those things worthy of consumption became tied to the nationalistic display of domestic production from the colonial period.

The boom of colonial Americana drew front-page attention from the Saturday Review in July 1926. The article led with the announcement, "The American Past has become a national industry." It continued, "There are almost as many 'antique' signs in Connecticut as gas stations, and it is impossible to guess at the millions which have been spent in refurnishing ornate Louis XIV houses and apartments with plain but far more costly American pine and maple." The cause, the Review's
editor Henry Seidel Canby declared, “is a change in the country itself.” He failed to give specifics of the change but summarized the feeling by saying, “An era ended in the decade that included the war, so that 1910 seems more archaic to our children than did 1870 to us.” The celebration of Americana projected into the complex twentieth century the desired stable image of nineteenth-century “Americanization,” Canby opined. Thus “vanity and an acuter sense of our history as a great common people are partly responsible for the vogue of Americana” (Canby 1926, 913, 916). To underscore the theme, the front page was balanced with an article on “American Folk-Lore” by Ernest Sutherland Bates. “One of the few indubitably good results of our recent patriotic movement,” he observed, has been the increased interest in days “when America was young”—twenty, fifty, or one hundred years ago, according to locality. We have begun to realize ... that we are just emerging from a most romantic and picturesque phase, rich in many of the raw materials of art” (Bates 1926, 913-14).

Although the gallery meaning of folk grew out of nativist and modernist forces of the period, it was given sanction by an attachment, as is so often the case with taste movements, to an intellectual figurehead—Holger Cahill. On staff at the Newark Museum, Holger Cahill had been exposed to the presentation of European peasant arts and showed an interest in what he thought might be an analogous nationalistic collection for America put together by the modernists (Vlach 1985b). Cahill was born in Iceland in 1887 and grew up in North Dakota and Manitoba, Canada. He came to New York City in 1905 and worked as a journalist and studied art history at Columbia University. Shortly before assuming curatorial duties at the Newark Museum in 1922, Cahill visited Sweden and was inspired by the outdoor folk museum Skansen, with its peasant arts, in Stockholm. He toured other folk museums in central Europe and reported his admiration for the Norwegian national museum Nordiska Museet. Upon his return to the United States he saw a connection between the Scandinavian exhibition of peasant folk arts and American antiques when he visited an artists’ retreat in Ogunquit, Maine, founded by artist Hamilton Easter Field. Field had decorated the fishing shacks turned into studios with local curios, including decoys and weather vanes. The objects were often used as inspiration for the artists’ paintings and sculptures. According to John Vlach, the artists “were fascinated when they discovered that there was ‘primitive’ art to be found in their own backyards. Furthermore, they were delighted that their modern abstractions could relate them not to exotic art from Africa or Mexico but to art from their native or adopted soil” (Vlach 1985b, 151).

In the early 1930s Cahill produced the exhibitions that set the fine art rhetoric for generations to come. He first produced a show in 1930 on American Primitives, which he subtitled An Exhibit of the Painting of Nineteenth-Century Folk Artists, followed a year later by one on American Folk Sculpture. The most significant exhibition came in 1932 at the Museum of Modern Art, entitled American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750–1900. Cahill had visited the collection of
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Art of the Common Man exhibition, 1932, directed by Holger Cahill and featuring objects from the collection of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, as installed at the Rhode Island School of Design. (Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center)

modernist Robert Laurent with gallery owner Edith Halpert, and, with contributions of sculptor Elie Nadelman and collectors Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Isabel Wilde, he created a gallery view of objects as art. For the folk sculpture show he included cigar store Indians, decoys, weathervanes, ship figureheads, and stove plates. He wrote in his introduction to the catalogue: “In grouping together these carven images which have previously been little known or studied other than for their interest as pleasant mementos of the past, the exhibit offers testimony that there has always existed in this country a robust native talent for sculpture, which has been capable of expressing itself spontaneously and with characteristics of its own” (Cahill 1931b).

Cahill legitimized folk art with his exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. He resolutely announced,

This exhibition represents the unconventional side of the American tradition in the fine arts. The pictures and sculptures in it are the work of craftsmen and amateurs of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who supplied a popular demand for art.... It is a varied art, influenced from diverse sources, often frankly derivative, often fresh and original, and at its best an honest and straightforward expression of the spirit of a people.
This work gives a living quality to the story of American beginnings in the arts, and is a chapter, intimate and quaint, in the social history of the country. (Cahill 1932, 3)

Although Cahill hedged some in the catalogue about what to call the material—considering provincial, primitive, and popular—he settled on folk art because he favored continuity with European national traditions. But in its American version, since peasants were absent, Cahill emphasized the abstract and "quaint" appearance of small-town artisans and un schooled artists. The qualities that marked gallery collecting for years are evident in his introduction and choice of objects. They constitute paintings and sculpture showing artistic abstraction—a boldness or crudity of line and color—produced by town artisans and homemakers and used by merchants of a rising middle class. In Cahill's words, "The quality of American folk art which first strikes the observer is quaintness" (Cahill 1932, 17). Further, it offered authenticity to the claim for a national American tradition, as Cahill indicated when he concluded his introduction to the Museum of Modern Art exhibition, "Their art mirrors the sense and the sentiment of a community, and is an authentic expression of American experience" (Cahill 1932, 28).

Invoking European Romantic Nationalism reminiscent of the Brothers Grimm, Cahill suggested that American folk art, as he recast it, "compares favorably with the folk arts of Europe. It is as rich as any, as fresh, as original, and as full of the naive and honest expression of the spirit of the people." But rather than based on folk as an adjective for learned tradition, this art was based on folk as a noun referring to the common "folks," especially those in an "increasingly affluent and status-conscious middle class" (Cahill 1931a, 39). The folk art he found to represent this class often derived from the early nineteenth-century and reflected the heritage of English Northeast colonial settlement.

Although Cahill referred to the middle-class connection to his selection of folk art, "common man" sounded more democratic, more in keeping with the myth of America as a classless society, and was a phrase frequently used in New Deal rhetoric of the 1930s. Folk art, Cahill wrote, was the "expression of the common people, made by them and intended for their use and enjoyment. It is not the expression of professional artists made for a small cultured class, and it has little to do with the fashionable art of its period." "Common people" compensated for the absence of a recognizable peasant class in America that could be romanticized. Necessarily vague as a social category, "commonness" appeared to be defined by what it was not—a patron elite or professional artist class known in New York's art world. Realizing the vagueness of folk art in terms of commonness, Cahill turned the defining process around and used the exhibition to establish a definition. He explained folk art "as it is defined by the objects in this exhibition, is the work of people with little book learning in art techniques, and no academic training" (Cahill 1932, 6). The objects are part of a dichotomy, between academic and nonacademic, educated and non-educated, and by extension, between upper and
lower classes. In effect, Cahill suggested that upper-class collectors use a definition based on their taste to select appropriate objects and then allow the objects to establish a folk art canon. Despite his circular reasoning, Cahill's definition, as Beatrix Rumford, former director of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection at Williamsburg, noted in 1980, "is still being quoted, and curators and collectors continue to regard the 1932 catalogue as an indispensable reference" (Rumford 1980).

With fine arts categories of painting, sculpture, and decorative arts as references in his exhibitions, Cahill emphasized appreciation of folk art away from its cultural context. The placement of the large objects allowed visitors to view them at a distance to observe their overall form. Cahill presented paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts as surfaces, celebrated for their freshness and originality. He encouraged quiet viewing of individual images apart from one another in the subdued exhibition interiors. His galleries offered a vision of the "creation" of America that challenged the "creativity" promoted by Eaton, whose exhibitions featured the intricacy of craftwork and thus encouraged viewers to examine the artifacts at close range while surrounded by references to the makers' communities.

A pattern among exhibitions in the United States emerged pitting Eaton's culturally diverse view of America against Cahill's unified aesthetic depiction. Eaton offered an image of a changing, adapting social mix in a country gaining strength from immigrant traditions and contributions of many cultural groups. Eaton's culturally diverse view drew metaphors from the new physics of relativity and the ethnology of culture in speaking of the dynamics of American plural cultures. Cahill's rhetoric came from art history tied to national history. It offered a view of a unified national tradition emerging from the background of early European settlement. It was a tradition of a common culture of middle-class vernacular characterized by free individual expression and nationalistic loyalty.

"Circles" and "Treasures" of Folk Art

A striking juxtaposition of the two rival social visions revealed in folk art was the staging of exhibitions in Minneapolis in 1989. While the two exhibitions simultaneously used the term "folk art" to present American traditions, they shared little else in common. Walking through the two galleries, one would hardly have known that they contained depictions of the same subject. Yet they shared a concern for the home-grown symbols that genuinely characterize America. In a heartland city more than a half-century after Cahill's and Eaton's exhibitions, the conflicts over defining America's tradition and its future became vividly apparent.

_Treasures of American Folk Art from the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center_, installed at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, presented portraiture, sculpture, and decoration drawn mostly from America's preindustrial heritage. The curators selected the works of artists "neither especially poor nor extremely rich but simply
the average citizens of America—'the common man.'” The result, the curators claimed, was “a fresh insight into the American past,” exposing “both particular and general social and cultural preferences” (Rumford and Weekley 1989, 18). The Americans portrayed in this exhibition had much in common, as producers and consumers, participating in a unified national tradition.

Unlike the historical unity of the Treasures show, Circles of Tradition: Folk Arts in Minnesota, installed at the University of Minnesota Art Museum (renamed the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota in 1993), offered works, mostly emerging from craft traditions, representing a variety of communities and traditional arts active in a single state. “Minnesota has the reputation of being a homogeneous enclave of Scandinavian Americans,” the museum’s director wrote, and “we hoped that a survey would reveal much more diversity…. And, after realizing the diversity of the traditional arts in Minnesota, we believed that the state could serve as a microcosm for developing new ways of looking at the traditional arts that were valid generally” (King 1989, viii). The Americans in this exhibition were a varied ethnic lot and the settings in which they work were diverse.

In their objectification of American tradition, these displays, distinguished from presentations of fine art, proclaimed the roots, the character, of the nation in its everyday customs and beliefs. Agreement on the nature of this tradition has been lacking, however, particularly in this century. For more than seventy years the conflict of American traditions that arose after a giant wave of immigration brought into question America’s historical unity has been especially evident in folk art exhibitions. Although the duality of exhibitions I focus on exists in many other cities, Minneapolis is especially appropriate because of its simultaneous reach to mixed audiences including academic and public organizations, art and folklife societies, and ethnic and civic groups. Earlier in this century, Minneapolis was home to Holger Cahill, inspiration for the “common man” approach in the Treasures show, and also headquarters for the Folk Arts Foundation of America, devoted to preserving and presenting the “diverse elements in our national life.” Recognizing the contrasting approaches to American folk art, the University of Minnesota Gallery and the Center for the Study of Minnesota Folklife in 1980 sponsored a “Midwestern Conference on Folk Arts and Museums” in St. Paul to bring squabbling sides together for discussion. As with other such attempts at conciliation, little headway toward agreement was made at this conference (Abstracts 1981).

My interest in this analysis of the two exhibitions in Minneapolis is in the underlying strategies and structures American folk art exhibitions use for their representations of traditions and what they imply ideologically when they do. I am asking about the significance of the argument over the objects properly constituting folk art not as a definitional problem but a rhetorical one related to social views. The argument rages, I believe, because implicitly it refers to one’s very conceptions of America’s past and of present social conditions. With a lack of agreement on national tradition, folk art has persistently been a tool of persuasion to
win over the public to a view of America as either culturally diverse or historically unified. The popularity of folk art exhibitions in this country, then, attests to the struggle to visibly define an American tradition with consolidating symbols.

Why is there this inextricable tie between folk art and national tradition? According to European Romantic philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in folk art lay the spirit and soul, the genius—indeed the unity of a people. These philosophers observed that in contrast to the division of countries under monarchies and aristocracies, a division of nations by culture should emerge. Folk arts expressing the life of the mass of ordinary people, especially peasants, reflected the claims of a group’s cultural integrity and, hence, nationhood. The political use of folk arts in Europe became enough of an issue after World War I that the League of Nations set up the International Commission on Folk Arts. Its preamble declared: “Throughout the civilized world it is now being recognized that in the folk arts lies a regenerative and stabilizing influence for contemporary life and art; that each country has in its folk arts an asset of incalculable value; and that the time has come to assemble and record these folk arts before they perish at their source and to make them available for study and use” (A Folk Arts Service; see also Olrik 1934).

In the United States the link of folk art with national identity has been dramatically put on display in countless exhibitions, particularly since America’s bicentennial (see Teske 1988; Dewhurst and MacDowell 1984). The special conditions of the United States, however, lent confusion to the application of folk arts according to European Romanticism. Unlike the clear connection to peasant work and communally shared traditions in Europe, folk arts in American exhibitions variously expressed the grass-roots strength of the nation or the distinctiveness of groups within it. Folk arts also variously reflected American tradition as self-taught or communally shared.

Circles of Tradition was the result of a field survey by folklorist Willard Moore, who covered over fifteen thousand miles of Minnesota to document living artists engaging in traditional activities. The use of “folk arts” in the subtitle, the touring of the exhibition to towns throughout the state, and the attention in the book accompanying the exhibition to music, dress, storytelling, holiday customs, and foodways emphasized that these activities are part of community life. Moore organized his material, his artifactual “texts,” similar to narrative folklore texts, into the cultural contexts of first, “work, play, and survival in a northern land,” second, “spiritual community,” third, “adjustment to change,” and fourth, “continuity and variation.” Much as narrators express their culture through folktale texts and adjust their tales in response to immediate community and environmental influences or “contexts,” so folk artists construct artifacts that capture an intimate social relationship.

Visitors to the Circles show encountered the contexts as groupings of objects, photographs, and narratives within several rooms. The objects represented
Norwegian-style Cedar Fan, made by Walter Torfin, 1985, Duluth, Minnesota, from the exhibition Circles of Tradition: Folk Arts in Minnesota. In the exhibition, this carving using a traditional form was labeled a "perceived tradition." It might have been "integrated" in another context, but the craft was not totally integrated into Torfin's community setting. (Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota)

different kinds of traditions or "circles of traditions." The first rooms the visitor entered constituted "integrated" traditions, followed by "perceived" and "celebrated" traditions. In an accompanying exhibition brochure, Moore presented a conceptual model of the contexts transecting "tradition" as divided into three concentric circles. His choice of the circle is rhetorically significant, since it is a traditional symbol of magic and community. The inner and most traditional circle is "integrated": "within it lie the art forms, techniques, materials, and symbolic meanings that are most fully interwoven with the rest of community life." Here one found jars of canned vegetables, Ukrainian Easter baskets, and Laotian-American ceremonial dress. Here people share their arts with one another in community; they pass on tradition by face-to-face interaction and learning. The middle circle represents "perceived traditions." These are traditions often thought of as authentic, when in fact they have changed over time. Twentieth-century
Polish-American wycinanki (colorful designs from papercuts), for example, bear a diminished resemblance in form, technique, or function to the original European practice. The outermost circle contains “celebrated traditions,” which include the work of artists who for personal and aesthetic reasons choose to create objects not necessarily related to their own heritage or social roles. Here one found yard constructions and rosemaling bowls.

Of the three “circles of tradition” in the exhibition, the integrated tradition arguably has a preeminent status. It celebrates people making connections to the land and to one another. The strength of community over the individual and nation predominates in the integrated tradition. Yet taken together, the products of all the circles form a brightly colored quilt of the people of Minnesota. Even the poster for the exhibition illustrated variety in traditional arts: it juxtaposed objects such as painted fish decoys, Scandinavian carved fans, and Ukrainian Easter eggs on a textured family quilt. All the traditions vividly displayed regional and ethnic
expression persisting and adapting to everyday contexts of work, play, and custom. Wall panels showed photographs of objects being made and explained customs surrounding the objects. The objects, such as Laotian rice cakes in banana leaves, Latvian mittens, and Jewish marriage contracts lacked great visual impact by themselves, but with accompanying photographs of makers and their environments, the objects gained stature as community expression. They portrayed a sense of sharing, a balance of people and place. A dynamic plurality of customs and peoples appears to be the natural—and moral—order of life.

*Treasures of American Folk Art* displayed the “best” objects from the collections of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center in Williamsburg. As the preface of the accompanying book stated, the *Treasures* show celebrated Rockefeller’s tasteful eye and generous pocketbook for American folk art. The title *Treasures* conveyed a sense of value attached to individual objects, and the installation stressed fine art, rather than cultural categories. Its abundant use of pedestals and rectangular lines emphasized artifice and technological control. Most of the objects were forms of painting and sculpture with scanty labels—a tactic that directed viewers’ attention
to form rather than context. Communities were not shown as much as outstanding individuals who created works notable for their form and color. In contrast to Moore’s living traditions drawn from sometimes struggling classes, the Treasures show, as the narrative of Beatrix Rumford and Carolyn Weekley emphasized, featured “our middle-class American ancestors.” Progress in the form of “burgeoning industrialization, improved road and canal systems, westward expansion and development,” they announced, comprised “factors that contributed to the common man’s prosperity” and “resulted in a new sense of individual and national identity,” factors evident in folk art (Rumford and Weekley 1989, 8, 18).

The difference between the two exhibitions Circles and Treasures became magnified in the books published to accompany them. Treasures was an oversize book with an appearance suggesting a framable work of art. It was image-laden and short on text. In the book’s very design, one appreciated the emphasis on decorative purpose and communication through images established in Cahill’s exhibitions. Circles was of standard paper size and emphasized text. Several chapters explained the objects’ contexts and featured ethnographic photographs. Circles encouraged reading, questioning, and even exploration, while Treasures invited aesthetic appreciation, and maybe consumption.

The cover of Treasures showed a painting of an innocent looking, well-dressed blond boy holding a finch in a flowery interior (entitled Boy with Finch, attributed to John Brewster, Jr., New England or New York State, ca. 1800). The book’s first section contained similar paintings. These portraits, including the famous Baby in Red Chair, celebrated as an “endearing image,” are among the “favorites” of visitors to the Folk Art Center, according to Rumford and Weekley. The connection of the approach in the Treasures show to Cahill’s exhibitions can be seen in the emphasis made on portraits. Portraits were the first and the largest group of images put forward by Cahill as folk art. (They were conspicuously absent in Eaton’s exhibition.) According to Cahill, portraits by a less-than-accomplished hand were folk because they were “quaint”; they commonly lacked a known artist and seemed refreshing in their depiction of plain features.

Landscapes and townscapes were also portrayed plainly. In the Treasures show, Peaceable Kingdom by Edward Hicks was a central image conveying harmony and pastoralism in the imagined unity of a new nation. Hicks’s romanticization of William Penn’s treaty with the Indians on the Philadelphia riverside under a majestic elm is another frequently exhibited expression of American harmony. The Hicks rendition of the legendary seventeenth-century event is actually an adaptation of a Benjamin West painting of 1771, which is typically included in the fine arts canon. Hicks probably admired Penn’s Quaker principles of trust and friendship with the Indians amidst God’s gifts of a sublime American landscape, and the image has been used subsequently and most frequently in advertising and politics to connote fair dealing and social unity (Showalter 1996; Kashatus 1996). Rumford and Weekley called Hicks “the most celebrated of America’s folk painters of religious
Unidentified artist, *Baby in Red Chair*, possibly Pennsylvania, c. 1810–1830, oil on canvas, from the exhibition *Treasures of American Folk Art from the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center*. This “endearing image,” according to the curators, “is among the favorites” of visitors to AARFAC. Indeed, it is the opening image to the preface of the catalog accompanying the exhibition and thus conveys the characteristics of “quaintness,” “wholesomeness,” and “innocence” associated with American folk art generally. The authors’ interpretation of the painting emphasizes aesthetic form: “The baby’s legs are convincingly foreshortened, but the chair is not, providing an interesting pattern of softly colored forms moving in and out of space.” (Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center)
Edward Hicks, *Peaceable Kingdom*, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, 1832–1834, oil on canvas, from the exhibition *Treasures of American Folk Art from the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center*. Iconic images by Edward Hicks connect this exhibition to Holger Cahill's of the 1930s. Cahill considered Hicks an American Rousseau and called his landscapes forerunners of the Hudson River School. The authors of the *Treasures* catalog praise Hicks as "one of the most familiar and beloved folk artists." (Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center)

pictures," and "by the early twentieth century, one of the most familiar and beloved folk artists" (Rumford and Weekley 1989, 90–93).

Hicks's work is another link between Cahill's show in 1932 and the *Treasures* exhibition. Cahill hailed Hicks as "an American Rousseau," forerunner to painters of the Hudson River School (Cahill 1932, 15–16). Created in Philadelphia, the same city highlighted as diverse by Allen Eaton in the frontispiece to *Immigrant Gifts*, Hicks's expression of Quaker and regional associations alongside Statue of Liberty weather vanes and Victorian mourning pictures become American melting pot perspective (see Vlach 1988, 121–42). Williamsburg's recontextualization of Hicks as an American image of peaceful unity is paralleled in other frequently exhibited collections such as those of Meyer and Vivian Potamkin. During the Vietnam War, the Potamkins collected and exhibited the Hicks images to convey a contemporary "message of peace" during the divisive conflict on the home front. Vivian Potamkin explained to reporters, and in the catalogue of the show, that she was
especially drawn to the feature of William Penn settling a treaty with the Lenape, which Hicks often put in the background of his Peaceable Kingdom versions (Cullen 1996). She considered the scene of two cultures existing in harmony as a symbol of peace, although the curator of the Potamkin exhibition worried about possible criticism of the destruction of Native American culture some visitors may view in the pictures (Cullen 1996, E8). The opening panel of the exhibition nonetheless declared, “Within everyone lies a desire for peace. Art collectors Meyer and Vivian Potamkin found an expression of that quest for harmony amid the brushstrokes of a folk art painting.” A whole room behind the panel was devoted to a wall mural of a Vietnam battle scene with Hicks’s Penn’s Treaty enshrined under glass below. Despite the contextualization of Hicks’s painting for its peaceful image, the artist completed at least six versions of Washington crossing the Delaware in celebration of the Revolutionary War, but these works rarely make it into folk art shows (see Kammen 1978, 82).

The landscapes and portraits central in Cahill’s folk art imagery support the Peaceable Kingdom theme. Paintings such as Charles Hoffmann’s depiction of a Pennsylvania-German community become not regional or ethnic expressions but constructions of harmonious American landscapes. It is no wonder that Edward Hicks is so celebrated in folk art: his farm scenes conjure the notions of natural creation, proprietorship, and the unique character of the American scene. The curators of Treasures hung Pennsylvania-German fraktur and Scherenschnitte (scissors-cutting) as aesthetic creations rather than as expressions of cultural creativity or tradition. Pennsylvania-German fraktur, such as the birth and baptismal certificate by Friedrich Bandel, lost its cultural connection but gained a relation of form when placed next to the Anglo-American birth record from New England for Mary E. Wheelock. Fraktur emphasizing religious texts in dialect among the Pennsylvania Germans, documenting cultural rites of passage and ordinarily kept hidden in dower chests, were framed and displayed like decorative pictures.

In a revealing photograph in Rumford and Weekley’s book, two painted boxes from New England were set on top of a painted Pennsylvania-German dower chest. Viewed together, they appeared to be similar shapes, given character by color and line, rather than by region or group. Their lines remained constant as if put into the world by creation. The religious and the secular blended; cultural meanings became obscured by form.

The handling of sculpture in the Treasures show resembled the presentation of painting in Cahill’s exhibitions. Sculpture’s surface quality attracted the viewer. Sculpture, like painting, reinforces an American vernacular apart from group tradition; it conveys an American nationalism with sculpted heroes and sovereign eagles. Ship carvings and weather vanes appeared as self-contained creations, apart from their original context. Although many of the sculptures in their original contexts were once intended to signify labor, they now invited aesthetic appreciation in the Treasures exhibition. The sculpted human figures formed an American pantheon.
Unidentified maker, *Butterfly*, c. 1850–1875, painted sheet copper, from the exhibition *Treasures of American Folk Art from the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center*. This weather vane is treated as sculpture when taken off the barn and placed on a pedestal. The dents on the butterfly’s wings that seem to give the work an abstract design were caused by people shooting at the vanes to make them spin, a common pastime. (Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center)
Both the *Circles* and *Treasures* shows exhibited quilts as the epitome of folk art, but the character of the selections in each differed sharply. In the *Circles* show, quilts with comparable designs related to intergenerational families or ethnic and community traditions (Old Order Mennonite and African American, for example) received primary attention. Many quilts remained on the beds for which they were intended. In the *Treasures* show, only quilts with unique forms or designs merited display. What qualified quilts as art was not their social connection or cultural creativity, but their text of individualism: the self-referential use of color, line, and arrangement. Quilts as a feminine commodity in shows such as *Treasures* stand above hooked and woven rugs, which are often given secondary importance because of their utilitarian associations. Quilts are bolder in their use of color and design and have persisted as an art world image of the rural American past. Along with painting and sculpture, they also defy regionalization and ethnic association more so than other "arts" such as gravestones and architecture given special attention in folklife scholarship (see Glassie 1968, 1972; Bronner 1989b; Vlach and Bronner 1992).

While shows such as *Treasures* sometimes spawn exhibitions on different regions of America, thematic or celebratory shows of important collections are more common. The images in such events support one another and give the impression of a whole based on artistic creation, but their selectivity is conspicuous. In contrast, shows such as *Circles* emphasize inclusiveness. The former apparently flows from the patron and the latter from the culture. *Treasures* called for a good "eye" for form and color representative of modernism while *Circles* required a more tactile feeling for creators at work.

For more than seventy years the patterns in the two models have seemed irreconcilable, although some recent convergence is evident. *Circles* mounted objects that expressed individual taste even if it relegated them to the outermost circle of tradition. *Treasures* contained twentieth-century material and acknowledged southern African-American collections to augment its earlier collections. It should be pointed out, however, that the move to add black folk art to the art world canon fits more into what Nathan Glazer calls the "southern model" of ethnicity, in which society divides by race, rather than the multiethnic "northern model" apparent in *Circles* (see Glazer 1983, 314-36). In the art world's use of the southern model, nationalism produced by a dominant stock is still appreciable. Yet taking into consideration the challenge of Pennsylvania-German folklife to the national model, the Museum of American Folk Art installed an exhibition of traditional Pennsylvania-German barn decorations, and folklorists have produced more studies of individual and even idiosyncratic artists (Yoder and Graves 1989; Jones 1989; Ferris 1982; Marshall 1983). Although common ground has opened in the consideration of creativity and tradition together in human practice, divisions remain strong.

Images of folk art express the changes and conflicts of both the past and present "American Kingdom"—peaceable or turbulent. After the ethnic transformation of
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American society during the late nineteenth century, classical patriotic symbols appeared convincing (see Kammen 1991; Bodnar 1992; Glassberg 1990). When countries of Europe reinforced their nationhood by celebrating unified folk traditions, America—often called a “nation of nations”—could barely boast a sense of its own self. Questions arose whether it possessed an “American” folk tradition at all (see Dorson 1971a, 94–107; Kammen 1991, 407–43), and partly in response an American studies movement arose to examine the national unity of American art, literature, and history (see Dorson 1976a, 1971a, 78–93; Wise 1979, 293–337, esp. 331–35).

In America the dispute over folk art persists as a representation of tension between national and folk cultures and their respective backgrounds in class and ethnicity. The nationalistic *Treasures* exhibition has commanded more publicity and prestige than the folkloristic *Circles* show. Since America’s sesquicentennial the organization, wealth, and power in the art world behind *Treasures* resulted in the “triumph,” as one prominent folk art museum director called it, of new images for the twentieth century based on those of stability in early nineteenth-century life (L. Jones 1982, 147–66). *Peaceable Kingdom* and *Baby in Red Chair* are more than “favorites” of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center; they have become popular images offering a stabilizing middle-class consensus as national tradition. This appeal has been challenged during the 1980s and 1990s by multicultural images that highlight the creative labor of diverse ethnic groups (see Teske 1994; Siporin 1992; Glassie 1989; Noyes 1989; McClain 1988).

Whether triggered by national anniversaries, new immigrant waves, demands for collective rights, major communication transformations, or anticipation of entering a new century, folk art during the twentieth century repeatedly became a primary reference in a contested discourse over how life was—and will be—lived. Especially since America’s bicentennial of independence, communal folk art images have been more apparent, although they typically have emerged from organizations outside of institutional power (such as cultural agencies, learned societies, and community groups). From such organizations during the 1990s, traditional textiles, baskets, and ceramics representing labor and community have challenged the prevailing imagery of painting and sculpture (see Vlach 1988, 1991b; Glassie 1992). In 1991, for example, the *Journal of American Folklore* adopted a new cover format featuring an African-American basket, an English-American quilt design, and a southern face jug.

Exhibitions such as *Treasures* with their ideology of historical unity appear aesthetically impressive, although not as intellectually convincing as ethnographic shows such as *Circles*. One conclusion, then, is that the approach of *Circles* bears merit because it is more intellectually defensible than *Treasures*, but this judgment sidesteps the issue of social demands for the different approaches. Despite years of criticism for contrivance of a national spirit, aesthetically impressive presentations such as *Treasures* remain emotionally persuasive for many viewers. Although both approaches are exaggerated social visions, Americans are not moving quickly
toward resolving this conflict—even when confronted with simultaneous, polarized exhibitions such as these two in Minneapolis. Nor are they likely to do so. American curators and scholars have invested the term "folk art" with power as a keyword for society, or as one art world editor offered, a "juicy term" not likely to be given up (Jules Laffal, editor of Folk Art Finder, quoted in Benedetti 1987, 6). From it is squeezed an undeniable authenticity, the "right stuff" of America. Socially, it points to the impossibility and simultaneously the necessity to characterize the American "people," or their commonality. In its American version, the rhetoric of folk art grew with a strong emotional core exhorting the very spirit of the nation's contested traditions.

Art and the Elevation of Tradition

There is a significant sense in which folk art and folklore are joined by tradition in a discourse of culture. Influenced by the use of folk art to elevate tradition into a spiritual power, extensions of art beyond physical things to verbal expressions became apparent in scholarly discourse, especially after World War II. But when they did, it led to behavioral conceptions of American identity that challenged the existing debate in folk art between diversity and unity. Folk art clasped folklore to form a view of tradition operating universally among individuals to imbue modern life with meaning. Folk art as commentary on the virtue of culture became a strategy to explain the persistence of folklore in widening, transnational mass culture. In devising a behavioral model of folk art, proponents inspired a move from the gallery to the festival to display the celebration of tradition in action.

Festival as a strategy of displaying folk art encouraged performances and designations of participants as "folk artists." It brought dance, music, and drama under the tent of folk arts that enriched the presumed drabness of modern life. Having a festival was celebratory, and bringing different types of performances together under the heading of festival fostered a positive response to the range of tradition. As the folk art exhibitions of the 1930s variously established the boundaries of material as part of American tradition, so the burgeoning festivals at the same time defined varied songs, dances, and crafts as cut from the same cloth of tradition. The organized events designed to present traditions became repeatable, "annual" traditions unto themselves. Traditional festivals such as Mardi Gras or Fiesta de Santa Fe did not appear to Americans to be as numerous in their land as in Europe, and the twentieth-century construction of festivals of folk arts appealed to a sense of locality and ethnicity suggested by the older sense of the folk festival. With roots in the Appalachian handicrafts revival and immigrant arts expositions of the early twentieth century that so inspired Allen Eaton, the festivals mushroomed during the 1930s as music and dance concerts in celebration of the "common man." A lull in their development occurred during World War II because of travel restrictions and war conditions. After the war, the folklife festival that demonstrated arts and
crafts of regional-ethnic groups burst on the American scene. The National Endowment for the Arts encouraged the growth of festivals after the 1960s and, with the support of state “folk arts coordinators,” fostered promotion of festivals as grand displays of folk artists and their plural communities. They were usually booster events combining entertainment and education and meant to invigorate communities as well as build support for folk arts.

The move from folklore to folk arts to represent the elevation of tradition in modern life owes much to Martha Warren Beckwith’s campaign to connect the professional folklorist to issues of art during the 1920s. Unlike the anthropologist who sought out primitive groups of remote cultures or the literary scholar who dealt with verbal texts of civilization, the folklorist was a new hybrid who interpreted artful expressions of traditions within industrialized societies, she insisted (Beckwith 1931b, 5-8). The task at hand, she underscored in her manual for the field, was to recognize how folklore “develops as a living and social art” (Beckwith 1931b, 66). In 1929, her book Black Roadways made the point by culminating in a last chapter entitled “Folk Art.” The art of the people she observed was not so much materially crafted as expressed in the stories and rituals they enacted. To show their tie to everyday life, she subtitled her book A Study of Jamaican Folk Life.

While the treatment of folklore as art could be demonstrated in scholarship, Beckwith also considered ways it could be shown with integrity to the public. In her manual of folklore, she lauded “the establishment of folk theatres in which the people themselves take an active and creative part,” and thought that they had a special role for preserving “in our immigrants a sense of the dignity and beauty of their old national traditions” (Beckwith 1931b, 64). During the 1930s she served on the National Committee on Folk Arts formed in New York City by folk dance promoter Elizabeth Burchenal to bring together rising authorities on material as well as performing arts and consider their proper presentation to the public as a widening range of “folk arts.” Beckwith gave her nod to festival as an active display format in two groundbreaking reviews for the Journal of American Folklore in 1938. It was startling to have such reviews in a bookish journal, but she insisted that the burgeoning festivals of the day were as important as books for the statements they publicly made on tradition. She touted the value of the National Folk Festival in Washington, D.C., and the Mountain Folk Festival in Berea, Kentucky, in presenting traditions as creative works enriching American life. She underscored the work of the performers in these settings as that of “folk artists” and worried whether the gritty force of tradition properly came through in the unnatural setting of the stage (Beckwith 1938).

The National Folk Festival, founded in 1934, was unusual at the movement’s beginning because it was multiethnic. Other festivals such as the Mountain Folk Festival in Berea, Kentucky, or the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville, North Carolina, tended to be regionally focused and implied a monocultural environment. The monocultural festivals sought performers who reached fellow residents to boost the esteem and unity of regions and groups marginalized by mass
culture. The National presented the diverse range of America with musical performances by American Indians, blacks, French, and Mexicans to reach a countrywide public. Building on its pluralist vision of America, the National also tried to show an occupational range by featuring cowboys, lumberjacks, and sailors (Gillespie 1996). First produced in St. Louis, Missouri, it moved to various sites during the 1930s. It was organized by Sarah Gertrude Knott, who had a background in dramatic performing arts rather than folklore. Despite her independence from scholarship, her energy and vision drew the interest of professional folklorists such as Martha Beckwith. One point of disagreement, however, was Knott’s rejection of the term “folklife” as condescending to the artistic merit of the musical performers, while Beckwith insisted on it to signify the integration of art as part of the daily life of multiple groups. Another point of contention was Knott’s use of “revival” artists who adapted folk material and whom she contrasted with presumably authentic “survival” performers who had preserved practices through the generations.

Beckwith and most folklorists favored the representation of authentic American tradition with the survival performers. The National attracted others making a connection between folklore study and display such as George Korson, who produced his own popular multiethnic festivals in Pennsylvania during the 1930s in addition to collecting mining lore of various ethnic groups (Gillespie 1980). The shift to the polestar of arts became evident at the National when its sponsoring organization, the National Folk Festival Association, became the National Council for the Traditional Arts (NCTA) in 1976 under the leadership of Joseph Wilson. The Mountain Festival at Berea that Beckwith reviewed also shifted its emphasis from staged music and dance to the wide range of arts, and in 1988 the Commonwealth of Kentucky designated Berea as the “folk arts and crafts capital of Kentucky” (Ramsay 1996). The full-fledged folklife festival that emphasized the integration of folk arts in the life of a community meanwhile took off especially from professional folklorist Alfred Shoemaker’s Pennsylvania-Dutch events after World War II.

That art became thrust into displays of tradition in exhibitions and festivals during the 1930s suggests a connection of this trend with changing views of art as experience at that time. In the industrial letdown of the 1930s, social critics stressed human capriciousness over mechanical efficiency. With doubts about the satisfactions of material existence, many critics proposed the compassionate realm of experience as humanity’s essence, and saving grace. Art, creativity, and tradition came to the fore to express social objects of experience that sustained people through the worst of times. Social activist Joseph Freeman, for example, declared in 1935, “Art, then, is not the same as action; it is not identical with science; it is distinct from party program. It has its own special function, the grasp and transmission of experience. The catch lies in the word ‘experience’” (Freeman 1935, 10). Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey helped spread the keyword of experience by publishing
Experience and Nature (1925) and Art as Experience (1934); A. Irving Hallowell, president of the American Folklore Society in 1940, expanded the theme to culture studies in Culture and Experience (1955). Hallowell stated the problem well:

it should be possible to formulate more explicitly the necessary and sufficient conditions that make a human existence possible and which account for the distinctive quality of human experience. A human level of existence implies much more than an existence conceived in purely organic terms.... The unique qualitative aspects of a human existence that arise of conditions of human experience which are not simple functions of man's organic status alone, and that have variable as well as constant features, must be thoroughly explored in all their ramifications and given more explicit formulation. (Hallowell 1967, vii–viii)

Hallowell signaled for folklorists a philosophical turn from approaching folklore as fixed forms to be biologically preserved and classified to dynamically observed experiences that enlivened existence.

The development of performance analysis of folk arts from changing views during the 1930s of art as dramatic experience that served social ends has a common source in the formation of American pragmatist philosophy and its debt to the "dynamics" and "interactions" in physics. In 1985, in fact, several folklorists reflected in Western Folklore on the relation of the pragmatist philosophy of William James, especially in relation to perception of truth and explanation of belief, to folkloristic interpretation (Mechling 1985; see also Bronner 1990c). Jay Mechling observed that in relation to pragmatism, "Folklorists join others in seeing human cultures as collective exercises in creative meaning-making, in 'practical reason,' wherein meaning is an interactive, emergent, and contextual accomplishment. Moreover, the folklorist brings to the interpretive approach the additional insight that practical reason is 'artlike,' that we are studying not 'mere' discourse but stylized communication that is as often as expressive as it is instrumental" (Mechling 1985, 303–4).

As far as pragmatists were concerned with perceptions of meaning in events, folklorists applied ideas of expressions that reflected thinking serving the individual's needs and interests. The importance of an event's context came out in John Dewey's claims that the practical bearings ideas have on experience can be observed in the circumstances of their use, especially of a public nature. Moreover, the idea of emergent tradition from the interaction of people in a situation can be seen in pragmatist George Herbert Mead's proposal for the importance of process and the application of rigor to the interpretation of social situations. Mead favored a physical sciences metaphor over the evolutionary biological framework for describing society. In the physical sciences metaphor of actions and reactions, one found a relativism where judgments of superiority could not be made. Different situations operated under separate systems and gave rise to varied expressive, even artistic, results.
Pragmatist influences on the application of art to the process of folklore can be significantly found in William Bascom’s oft-cited writings on “verbal art.” Introducing the modification of art in the *Standard Dictionary of Folklore* (1949–50) as a definition for folklore, Bascom expounded on this use of “art” at the American Folklore Society’s annual meeting in the “art capital of the world,” New York City. Even before the paper was published, Bascom’s view, in recognition of its portent perhaps, received a rebuff by literary scholar Samuel Bayard in the pages of the American Folklore Society’s journal. Arguing for an emphasis on form as the distinction between folklore and other expressions, Bayard concluded that he saw no precedent or justification for the relation of art and folklore (Bayard 1953). His line of textual preservations and readings of folklore stretched from his teacher at Harvard George Lyman Kittredge back to the Brothers Grimm. He recognized the possibility that a shift to “verbal art” would move the predominant debate from the texts and sources of tradition to the processes in some kinds of universal experience.

The paper that Bascom read appeared as “Verbal Art” in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1955. To the anthropologist Bascom, verbal art described the core of folklore study, spoken forms, to distinguish it from the customs and beliefs that anthropology claimed. Bascom asserted that the term placed folktales, myths, proverbs, and related forms “squarely alongside the graphic and plastic arts, music and the dance, and literature, as forms of aesthetic expression, while at the same time emphasizing that they differ from the other arts in that their medium of expression is the spoken word. From this point one can go on to examine the relation of verbal art to the other art forms, drawing helpful parallels and determining what special features it has which grow out of this medium” (Bascom 1955, 246). Bascom differentiated between folklore that was primarily social—such as customs—and folklore that was primarily expressive, textural, and artistic—such as tales and myths. His emphasis was on recognizing the aesthetic forms of folklore; the term “verbal art” combined attention to expressive form and to its medium.

As a museum director and a collector of African primitive art, Bascom had culled his rhetoric from the growing consideration of crafts and primitive material culture as “folk arts” in the postwar period. Previous anthropological use of folklore suggested to him a tight weave in the fabric of group life under study—Indian tribes, Sea Island blacks, Mexican peasants. But he felt that folklore in the postwar era became less attached to isolable cultural groups. He observed folklore being collected from distinctive individuals who had a knowledge of traditional expressions and who might be connected to an abstracted community. As folklore appeared to carry less utility and as it seemed more marginal in an era of electronic communication, it moved to the realm of special creativity, of art. He mustered support from a trend toward democratization of the arts heralded by Allen Eaton and continuing into the post World War II period. The democratization of the fine arts to embrace “primitive” art and photography had spread in the 1930s with the celebration of the
common man in the Index of American Design and various Work Progress Administration (WPA) projects. The point reached a height of sorts with the exhibition in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1944 by Grandma Moses, a self-taught painter of past everyday life, who subsequently enjoyed extraordinary fame.

As the meaning of art in the postwar period opened to broader interpretation, it came to signify expressive, creative social values in contrast to modern or commercial workaday values of conformity and banality. It could exist among others besides fine artists. Landscapes, foods, furniture, and crafts created for a social life considered romantic or nostalgic could be touted as art to draw attention to their handmade fragility in a mass culture. Sociologist Howard S. Becker recognized, for instance, that "quilts are not art because no one treated them like art. They were the physical embodiment of families and communities, but that was not reason to preserve them; if they were not preserved they could not be admired and eventually seem to have the artistic qualities they might or might not have.... That has changed, as it has for many other products of family and community industry, as museums have either devoted themselves to preserving native crafts or recognized artistic merit in such work" (Becker 1982, 257–58). As folk art the objects connected to a loose sense of community, and somehow imparted vernacular honesty. It aestheticized ordinary experience for an intimate audience.

While new uses of art elevated tradition and stressed its creative components, a potential problem for folklorists was that art often carried with it elitist connotations of judgment and value. It was commonly evaluated from outside a localized culture. It consisted of a body of images and articles that was accepted by tastemakers—a body whose value was decorative and mercantile rather than utilitarian. And because art, or the lack of it, was used to measure the social value of cultural groups, scholars concerned with the integrity of cultural groups often applied it to describe, and defend, their collected materials. The formation of the Folk Arts Division of the National Endowment for the Arts represents such elevation of traditions by often marginalized groups into art. Its major projects have featured artists outside the art worlds—in presumably endangered communities usually defined as ethnic, racial, or regional (Peterson 1996a). Its rhetoric echoed through the work of local and state "folk arts coordinators" who formerly had preferred the label "state folklorist." The major coordinating task became to identify and display endangered, marginalized works of creative tradition in festivals, schools, and exhibitions. Whereas installing exhibitions had been their primary function during the 1970s and 1980s, in the 1990s they reported spending more of their time planning programs involving performances and demonstrations (Peterson 1996a). The urgency of their task was created by the image that a diversity of American tradition would be lost if its folk arts were not presented before a wide public. During the 1990s, the urgency also included a plaint that more than diversity, the very evidence of performance would be lost. Art raised the social status of artist and group before a public judge, but it could also signal cultural weakening.
One answer to the implication of marginalization of a group's folk arts was to situate art as spontaneously generated in various performances. Art therefore appeared everywhere—in conversation, gesture, and craft. Groups could be variable and temporary; people could simultaneously hold connections to many groups. In “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context,” the most widely cited article on folklore through the 1970s and 1980s, Dan Ben-Amos contributed to the rhetorical development of art by defining folklore as “artistic communication in small groups.” Ben-Amos went beyond the combination of form and medium that Bascom had suggested in the term “verbal art” by emphasizing the transmission—the behavioral and textural qualities—of lore. Examples of the behavioral or textural qualities of art, Ben-Amos observed, can be “rhythmical speech, musical sounds, melodic accompaniment, or patterned design.” He admitted that his attention to such behavior is “a reverse argument for the arts. Accordingly, a message is not considered artistic because it possesses these qualities, but it is these textural features that serve as markers to distinguish it as artistic.” In this view the texture of art is set apart from everyday ways of acting and folklore, too, is isolated. Ben-Amos stressed that “folklore, like any other art, is a symbolic kind of action. Its forms have symbolic significance reaching far beyond the explicit content of the particular text, melody, or artifact ... the time and locality in which the action happens may have symbolic implications for which the text cannot account” (Ben-Amos 1972, 11). The importance of artistic action to the conception of folklore came even more to the fore when Richard Bauman published Verbal Art as Performance (1977) and, following Bascom and Ben-Amos, characterized folklore as “artistic action in social life” (vii).

Bauman’s references to artistic action followed social studies that examined the ways that Americans, freed from the deep roots of community, could speak or dress differently to take on various roles, which had the effect of impressing a select audience. Commonly this kind of action model was arranged into the communications metaphor of frames. Political scientist Harold Lasswell in 1948, for example, described diplomacy in terms of “attention frames.” He defined them as “the rate at which comparable content is brought to the notice of individuals and groups.” In contrast to the frame of folk cultures, he said, the frame of modern urban life is “variable, refined, and interactive” (Lasswell 1949, 102–15). Of especially lasting influence was sociologist Erving Goffman’s “frame analysis” in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1956) and Behavior in Public Places (1963). Using the theatrical metaphor of performances, Goffman described framed events that serve the symbolic function of “impression management,” demanded by the postwar economy (Goffman 1956, 1963; Abrahams 1977, 102–8; Bauman 1972, 33–34).

The emphasis on action and the individual conveys an image of the ungrounded variability of modern living. Indeed, Bauman praised the efforts of performance analysis “to really comprehend what modernity means and to see what genuine expressive and esthetic responses emerge to deal with it” (Bauman 1983a, 155). In this
image of modern living, an electronically mediated modern world, speaking needs to become performance to be heard; speaking gains meaning as the medium of staged sincerity. In a modern era marked by what Bauman calls “differentiation,” or individualization, life seems more complex and demands more scripts. Individuals become actors adjusting their roles to immediate conditions. In the postwar shift, too, from a manufacturing economy to one based on service and information, “performing” services and speaking in routines become more part of daily life (Abrahams 1978). It is not surprising, then, that folklore with its intimate connection of speaker and listener and its connotation of sincerity should have drawn the attention of scholarship seeking meaning from communication in society.

Interpreting the theatrical nature of modern life restored some of the humanistic orientation to the study of culture. The metaphor of “performance” was still steeped in behavioral analysis, but it replaced the laboratory metaphor with an artistic one. In emphasizing display and performance, in the assumption of expressive actions as strategies used in specific situations, the nature of an actor was separated from the act, and the physical stage was isolated from its social surrounding. Less aware of a specific audience and left alone to become more ritualized, people used performance to manage a public life in a world of strangers. This seemed to replace the familiar community who shared a knowledge of common texts. The assumption was that with the breakdown of community, an audience consisted of strangers who needed performed symbols to denote status, knowledge, and feeling.

In an action model of behavior, the stability and three-dimensionality of material arts described less the activity of folklore than the variability and fluidity of performing arts. In Ben-Amos’s and Bauman’s rhetoric, art’s position was significantly adjectival; art described a quality of action rather than an entity or article. While emphasizing the position of groups in the generation of folklore, Ben-Amos and Bauman devalued the importance of the collective whole in the conception of folklore or raised the significance of individual creativity. Bauman defended the move by pointing out that “tradition, the collective, the communal, the conventional, are not forsaken here; rather, the individual and the creative are brought up to parity with tradition in a dialectic that is played out within the context of situated action, viewed as a kind of practice” (Bauman 1992, 33). References to “small groups” and “social life” underscored the adaptability of folklore to varying situations and changing identities. No longer a thing of the past, folklore became continually re-created and appeared integral in modern life. Indeed, the use of folklore appeared more active, since it appeared to be a human tool, not simply a reflection of culture or a repetition of tradition. Dramatic in its display whether as a craft or a story, folklore appeared elevated as folk arts in competition for public appreciation of cultural virtue.

When folklore was viewed as dramatic performance, however, the objective reality of an American tradition frequently appeared in doubt. Life could appear as
variable events not bound by the isolation of place or the continuity of time. Unlike the museum display where tradition appeared fixed, public performance resisted borders of time and location. It was an event that was situated rather than an artifact that was preserved. Bauman referred to the "immediacy" of events, for example, and offered performances as "enactments," framed into "public displays" (Bauman 1983a, 157). To represent this view to the public, many performance-oriented folklorists conceived of displays to the public that would be active and experimented with festival formats to show performed traditions as situated arts (Gillespie 1996). Indeed, one handbook labeled the production of festivals as Presenting Performances (Wolf 1979). In celebrations of folk arts within festivals, tradition appeared enlivened and significant. But the need to construct a festival also implied a need to boost tradition, a sign of cultural weakening. Especially since the United States is not known for its folk festivals the way, say, Japan is, festivals were understood as contrived events meant for promoting fragmented or minimized arts. I have seen a marked change in festivals from the 1960s, when they were meant to present neglected folk artists, to celebrations of diversity as a living tradition and, since the 1990s, to participatory events stressing the ubiquity of performed tradition.
Alaskan fisherman explaining tools of his trade to a family visiting the Festival of American Folklife, July 1984. Photograph by Simon Bronner.
East Lansing High School students working on a homecoming float at the Festival of Michigan Folklife, East Lansing, Michigan, August 1996. Photograph by Simon Bronner. (Michigan State University Museum)

In an example of encouraging participation in tradition at a festival, visitors learn to dance the Macarena at the Children’s Area Stage, Festival of Michigan Folklife. Photograph by Mary Whalen. (Michigan State University Museum)
Conceived in 1967 to represent the cultural pluralism of America, the Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C., attracted notice during the 1980s and 1990s for trying to program performances of tradition away from the boundaries of stages. It offered apparently spontaneous rituals and children's play on its grounds. These events were often not isolated as American traditions, but rather explained as vital human responses to various needs. Festival planners added that "the festival encourages visitors to participate—to learn to sing, dance, eat the foods, and converse with people represented in the program" (Kurin 1996a, 253). In 1983, festival planners built a replica of the Atlantic City boardwalk to show the kinds of interactions that occurred in a traditional slice of New Jersey (Gillespie 1996). Usually unromanticized workers, including taxi drivers, meat cutters, and construction workers, engaged visitors in conversations that brought out their performed traditions. In 1995, a site to show Cape Verdian traditions had no stage, but at certain times, program participants led visitors in a ritualized dance through the grounds. Despite these efforts, the festival could also be criticized by the performance-oriented folklorists for its labeling of traditions into fixed groups and the separation of "folk artists" from everyday life as unusual entertainers (Bauman, Sawin, and Carpenter 1992, Price and Price 1995; Sommers 1996).

The Festival of Michigan Folklife sponsored by the folk arts division of the Michigan State University Museum worked performance into its programming by revolving its displays around life themes. In 1997, summer visitors wandered around tents presenting many ways that the automobile spurred traditions. It could be a place—a situation—for enacting play, and it could also be a product that inspired artistic traditions by assembly-line workers and car decorators alike. In 1996, the organizers asked me to be a "presenter" at a tent meant to invite participation in tradition. The theme that year was the life cycle, and while some tents had bakers artfully showing their decoration of wedding cakes or weavers preparing special costumes for life's events, the one I staffed stood out because the demonstrators did not seem to qualify as "artists." It had teenagers from a local high school folding colorful paper into wire fencing to make a homecoming float. It was a slow, tedious process although it formed a creative act. As is usual in the tradition, the youth tried to coax volunteers to help in the labor-intensive task. My job was to give the big picture of the whole event and invite visitors to participate or return to see the work develop. I could tell that visitors that bothered to check out the site were startled by the scene. They did not expect casually dressed teenagers milling about to be engaging in "folk arts." No one sang or danced. They did not have special skills. Visitors saw no stage, detected no relics, and discerned no ethnic-religious connection. The site was artificial, to be sure; usually the event occurred in the fall at students' homes and the planning had a certain amount of secretiveness and competitiveness to it (Dewhurst 1996). Still, some visitors at the summer festival found themselves altering their thinking of folk arts. Those who had worked on such a structure in the past or present were invited to share their
accounts with the students to show continuities in the annual reenactment of tradition. The idea was that visitors became the tradition bearers instead of viewers of an exoticized other. With the process winding along slowly, those participants that stayed usually ended up socializing and narrating, thereby showing the integration of “folk arts.” Although they usually did not have an awareness of being “performers” or “artists,” they were nonetheless participating in a contemporary situation where traditionalized creative events occurred.

Many folklorists implied that in their ordinary performances, people revealed themselves and even found themselves. Roger Abrahams commented, for example, that “reality itself ... appears to be layered, made up of different levels of intensity and focus of interaction and participation. A very precious commodity is being negotiated, after all, one which is remarkably vital and which, in fact, we might call our socio-cultural vitality. For it is in these states of ritual or performance, festive or play enactments that in many ways we are most fully ourselves, both as individuals and as members of our communities” (Abrahams 1977, 117).

Even work could be divided into artistic events for people to find their vitality. Michael Owen Jones gave a behavioral orientation on this in his oft-cited essay, “A Feeling for Form, as Illustrated by People at Work” (1980a). Taking art to mean this “feeling for form,” even in apparently mundane tasks such as cleaning tuna, Jones concluded that “it is precisely this perspective emphasizing the art of work that is needed both to understand the nature of homo faber and to improve the very conditions as well as goods and services whose quality is so often deplored. At present, most people whose labor is simplified, specialized, and standardized must content themselves with subtle (some might be tempted to say ‘pathetic’) attempts to develop and elaborate tasks into forms having esthetic value crucial to their sense of self worth and being” (Jones 1980a, 268). For Jones, the process of action carried not just displays of routine, but also suggested inner feelings of worth, of being. Folklore thus could be constructed to make a commentary on the fragmentation of the present moment. Its historical role, its former use as “roots” to culture, had been transformed into an ethnography of the emerging message made possible by aestheticized events. Performance analysis looked at individuals as actors in a modern drama that was spontaneous and disjointed. It proposed to give social significance to modernity’s minimal units—its situations. Tradition could become an art of the moment.

Performance owed some of its appeal in the display of tradition to the commonly held perception in post-1960s society that showmanship and “impression management” were more necessary for the self to be recognized in the run of modern life. As Americans left home for far-off climes and felt their ties to family, church, and community slacken during this period, more scholarship contemplated how individuals reestablish identity and connect to tradition in unfamiliar surroundings. One answer was by enacting symbolic performances that heightened special forms of experience. To Bauman, for example, “performance thus calls
forth special attention to the heightened awareness of the act of expression, and gives license to the audience to regard the act of expression and the performer with special intensity” (Bauman 1977, 11). The artistic expressions that were associated with the processes of folklore were signs of identity-forming intensity, of sincerity, of really being alive. Really being alive was an issue because of fears that television, governmental regulation, and service work, among other mass cultural phenomena, had made Americans less active, less creative, less feeling. At the same time, the tendency of modernization to alienate individuals from social ties to tradition meant that belonging to community appeared more elusive. A performance orientation imagined Americans as citizens of humanity who had to ask who they really were and how forms of cultural identity carried meaning beneath the surface allure of modern life. Performance invited formation of, and participation in, symbolic experience.

Praxis and the Representation of Action

The everyday experience of labor, of daily routines, rarely translates well into the display of art or performance, but it fits well with the idea that creatively following tradition is a human condition. From behavioral perspectives comes a view of the display of tradition that avoids the rhetoric of art as an aestheticized thing or of performance and embraces routine activity as widely representative of a cultural mode of thinking. Such displays can be seen in community events not meant to present performances as much as represent actions considered significant to local lives and symbolic of tradition. It may not fit neatly into the installation of folk art in a gallery, staging of folk arts at a festival, or recording of verbal art as performance. It may be called praxis by scholars outside the displays, but within them, participants may say that “it’s what we do,” or “it’s our tradition,” and thereby express its quintessential character.

The circulation of praxis in public discourse of the 1980s to describe the meaningfulness of routine activities attracted the notice of popular columnist William Safire in 1989. Known for commenting on the vogue of words and their social backgrounds, he spread the headline “Praxis Makes Perfect” in the New York Times to mark a shift from neutral “practice” to socially charged “praxis” (Safire 1989). He thought that the demonstrations for democracy by students in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square had much to do with the spread of the term from scholarship to the press. The translation of the term by the students implied that they would change by organizing “doing” rather than protest. They would encourage the standardization of behaviors in China’s daily life that would represent a democratic spirit. The dissidents claimed to install an alternative “praxis” that provided the meaning of democracy even though they understood that they were still under communist dominion. Safire took notice after the demonstrations that two political senses of praxis came through in press reports: an old view of “practicality,” such as is put
forward by ‘capitalist roaders’ and free-marketers, and ‘action,’ such as that undertaken by hunger-striking, freedom-seeking students” (Safire 1989). Safire noted that praxis in public discourse carried the meaning of “action based on will,” and Safire quoted American philosopher Sidney Hook on the “selective behavior” beyond practicability which is praxis, the realization that knowledge made apparent in symbolic action across a range of events could express meaning and emotion.

Closer to home, the hotly disputed Hegins Pigeon Shoot in central Pennsylvania from 1989 to 1994 conspicuously forced nationwide speculation about praxis. There may seem hardly a comparison between demonstrations for democracy in a world-class city and a display of destroying pigeons in a spot absent on most maps. But the media reports explaining the fuss made over pigeons dramatically broadcast ways that displayed behavior came to symbolize different worldviews that extended well beyond Hegins. They picked up on the protestors’ theme that more than the event was in dispute; questioning tradition generally implied a challenge to the authority of a past in need of change. The protestors objected to the social “praxis” perpetuated through time of abusing animals and violating the dignity of life. The traditionalized shooting, protestors implied, represented a root cause of society’s ills of social violence, environmental decline, and moral crisis. They intimated that pulling out this root was a natural extension of civil rights movements breaking with institutionalized traditions to create a more tolerant, egalitarian, and compassionate humanity.

The shooting for supporters showed a grounding in tradition, community, and land that had been seriously eroded with the domination of modern urban living over American worldview. Hegins was the kind of small place that went its own way, complaining of an America that seemed to pass it by. Its older residents recalled when the labors of hunting, fishing, and farming that characterized Hegins life were national pursuits. They saw the decadent city “over there” and on television, and media events built around social protests were even more distant. When buses emblazoned with city sources rolled into Hegins challenging what it was about, Hegins could blithely go about its own business no more. Different ways of doing and living came hostilely face to face for cameras to vividly see.

The shoot was a form of display organized by residents and meant primarily for residents of the rural valley. It was not a tradition that any of the state’s folklorists chose to have performed in a folk festival or celebrate in an exhibition. At least one folklorist wanted to make a film on the ubiquitous hunting culture of Pennsylvania, but his grant proposal was turned down by an arts agency because the panel did not think the activity constituted folk arts. None of the coveted National Heritage Awards given by the National Endowment for the Arts Folk Arts Division has ever gone to a hunter. The arts agencies did not recognize or favor the aestheticized customs of traditional hunting and shooting contests. When I prepared a presentation with Jay Mechling at an American Studies Association meeting about the Hegins Pigeon Shoot, we heard that the “tradition”

One of many confrontations between animal rights protestors (left) and pigeon shoot supporters at Hegins, Pennsylvania, Labor Day, 1992. Photograph by Simon Bronner.
was an affront to many students of culture used to receiving scholarship advocating respect for marginalized groups. Although we did not come down on one side or the other, we heard several responses accusing us of supporting the event by rationalizing the irrational behavior of Hegins Shoot participants. Several audience members argued with us that this was not a tradition to encourage. It deserved the category of repulsive ritual rather than folk arts. Inclined toward the rhetoric of civil rights and away from the destructive aspects of hunting, their relativism apparently had its limits.

In most states today, the Pigeon Shoot would be illegal, although forms of the shoot were once widespread in early America. It carried on legally in Pennsylvania and was a regular feature of many private hunting and fishing clubs. It was part of hunting-related practices including turkey shoots and snake hunts that were widespread in Pennsylvania. The place of rural Pennsylvania as a haven for hunting traditions is indicated by the fact that Pennsylvania usually led the nation in the number of hunting and fishing licenses issued. And it should be noted that Pennsylvania has the country's largest rural population. The beginning of hunting season is a major event, and the opening of deer season is usually a school holiday. Hunting and shooting contests for many participants, usually men, are rich in tradition, so they said, and draw much of their appeal from it. Hunters extolled their commune with nature, rituals initiating novices and recognizing seasoned veterans, engaging in long rounds of storytelling at the primitive lodges, and donning earthy dress and body appearance that separate the activity from modern life. They commonly brought out arts of taxidermy and woodcarving to display their trophies of adventures in the wild. In their talk, they often connected to the days of yore in the primitive wilderness and imagined themselves as part of a classic American story of triumphing in the woods.

Hegins is in the middle of an isolated rural area known for its vistas of field and stream and legacies of hunting and farming. Yet the cities of Harrisburg, Scranton, and Philadelphia loom close by since a superhighway cut through the woods and mountains. The mountains that once set this valley apart suddenly do not seem so much a barrier to urban encroachment. Harrisburg, the state capital, is only an hour or so away by car. It is surely a different place, residents constantly reminded me as I made the trip to Hegins from the capital. Pennsylvania German could still be heard in the valley's public places, and even the children who did not speak it often had a "Dutchy" accent. As a lush valley circled by imposing mountains, it sometimes could feel like a world away. The juxtaposition of city and country, their stark contrast in this part of the country, is one reason that Hegins became a text of praxis.

What made Hegins so noticeable was that it was the largest public contest of pigeon shooting in the country. The community festival at Hegins galvanized public opinion when national media picked up the story of protestors descending on the tiny town. It was a scene reminiscent of northern buses of freedom riders
Pigeon Shoot supporter sporting one of many T-shirts invoking the importance of tradition to justify the Labor Day event, 1993. Photograph by Simon Bronner.
coming down South in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. In the 1990s, the media smelled a skirmish in the culture wars: animal rights protestors against traditional values. The protestors consisted mostly of women from urban areas such as New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia; they devoted their Labor Day holiday beginning in 1989 to block the operation of Hegins's annual community festival. Having had successes in urban settings, and being savvy in using protests to attract national media and publicize their cause, leaders of animal rights organizations proposed assaulting the bastions of American culture in its old heartland. They viewed the isolation of Hegins as a sign of its backwardness and wanted to draw media to the shame of the town in progressive America. They derided the event as a “blood sport” and referred to shooters as barbarians.

Participants at Hegins thought that the contest was part of coming home. There were some who predicted that the shoot might have dwindled in its impact on the valley in favor of family picnicking if the protestors had not come, but the coverage of the event raised the stakes for hanging on. What happens at the contest is that shooters, mostly men, stand seventy-five feet away from a set of boxes lined in front of them. The boxes, called “traps,” hold live pigeons and are connected by strings to a booth where a man can open the lids by pulling on strings. The shooter does not know in advance which box will open, since it is chosen randomly by a man “pulling the strings.” The challenge, then, is to aim and shoot quickly as the birds take off. The birds tend to ascend slowly, however, and most shooters hit their mark close to the ground. In an event meant to eliminate the birds, the majority of birds are picked off. The birds fall without much evidence of blood, although feathers typically fly. Thus attendees sported T-shirts declaring patriotically, “Let Freedom Ring and Feathers Fly.” Townspeople generally considered the shoot a wholesome pursuit, as another T-shirt announced with the phrase aimed at urban decadence, “Shoot Pigeons, Not Drugs.”

The event is a fund-raiser for the community park and is a capstone to the Labor Day homecoming. It announces the end of summer and the foregrounding of fall recreational hunting season that structures the lives of many families in the valley. The Hegins park called the event a tradition because it had been active for almost fifty years and invoked occupational hunting activities that were once part of the seasonal cycle dating back to the beginning of settlement of the central Pennsylvania valleys in the eighteenth century. The Hegins valley retains its Pennsylvania-German cultural cast and agrarian landscape, but it has suffered economically and socially as declines in coal mining and agriculture have forced younger generations to migrate away since the end of World War II. During the summer and especially on Labor Day weekend it is common for family reunions to take place in the valley, drawing back kin to the rustic roots of the “old-time” valley.

The shoot, unnecessary to the needs of modern daily life, nonetheless was a retained, reorganized activity that expressed rural values recognized in the region.
When protestors came, supporters viewed the demonstration less as an objection to the event and more as an attack on their *way of life*. Their views of labor in an agricultural valley centered on dominance over land and beast and many could cite Biblical passages to underscore the idea of human dominion over nature. They also understood the shoot as elimination of a detested pest in their farm existence. They thought the pigeons as disgusting as the droppings they scattered over barns and sheds. They referred to the pigeons as diseased rats rather than as animals with lives to be respected. While families watched adults take aim and shoot, young boys gathered the downed birds in sacks and unceremoniously disposed them. If the shot birds were not dead when they were picked up, the boys finished the job. Protestors saw this division of roles as initiating the boys into the acceptability of violence. The boys understood it as taking an appropriate task of cleaning up before they could be in charge. They willingly took responsibility in the social structure of the community.

The townspeople of Hegins refused to give up their public display of killing birds. They loudly retaliated against the protestors because they felt that an urban authority and moral system had eroded the foundation of their rural society. Between protestors, police, media, and supporters of the shoot, attendance skyrocketed into the thousands. The crowds strained the capacity of the park and turned most of their attention to the confrontation. State Police carted away protestors who stormed the site and tried to release birds from the traps. A breakaway group of protestors engaged in civil disobedience reminiscent of the Civil Rights movement and lay down in the shooters' lines of sight. As protestors and townspeople pressed toward each other, bloody scuffles broke out, and hundreds were arrested. It became a media event sending out a narrative pitting a relic of small town America against a modern urban moral order. In maintaining the festival (even though a minority of the attendees actually shoot), supporters made a claim for community authority.

Some protestors set up a first-aid tent for injured birds that got away. The protestors made it a studio to focus the media on the brutalized animals and thus show the barbarism of the deed. Meanwhile, the calmest of the supporters beheld the landscape and down-home sights of which the symbolic activity was a part. Not being organized about exploiting the media, many rough-edged supporters to their discredit were recorded swilling beer and hurling abuse, and sometimes dead animals. One photographed supporter drew national front-page attention by smilingly demonstrating how the bag boys finished off the birds by wringing their necks until they died. Others ridiculed the calls of the protestors for extending the cause to exploitation of animals. They ate hamburgers in front of the vegetarian protestors and boasted T-shirts illustrating the delicacy of pigeon pies. They yelled for the protestors to fix the cities rather than attacking the country. Some supporters tagged the urban protestors as abortion rights advocates, but appeared confused when they heard pro-life stands from the protestors.
The shouts and signs during the confrontation at Hegins divided between the protesters' rhetoric of "rights" for the animals and moral grounding of the shoot, and supporters' messages of respect for tradition and community. Many signs from the protestors called for breaking tradition to join a universal, progressive order of humanity. "Is 7000 Deaths Worth a Tradition?" a protestor's sign proclaimed in reference to the average number of birds killed at the shoot. "Shame on America," "Join the Human Race," and "Hunters are Killers" were others. Some of the women brought sexual politics into it by accusing the shooters of brandishing their phallic guns in a sad, transparent show of their manly prowess. Shooting for Hegins residents, even for those who did not engage in the practice, became not so much a performance to be questioned as much as a symbolic action that connected to a series of other activities involving dominion over the land. As the protests built up during the early 1990s, many supporters came to the festival in military camouflage wear to show their embattled state. As the State Police exerted more control over the event, they moved the protestors further away from the site, and their effectiveness for the media was reduced. The protestors failed to close the shoot down, and in 1995 they shifted their protest away from the display event to the state capitol in Harrisburg. One organizer of the protest who talked to me about the move thought that the organization could be more effective in the new setting because legislators shared their understanding of activities of political organizing and rights talk.

If performance's metaphor is dramaturgical, praxis's is epistemological. It follows from the classical distinction between theoria and praxis; theoria is concerned with knowing for its own sake, while praxis realizes knowledge expressed through activities in social life (Dolgin et al. 1977; Markovic 1979). It suggests evaluation of basic actions that express meaning to individuals within a society. It points, in the words of Richard Bernstein, to an "understanding of the ways in which men are what they do, of how their social praxis shapes and is shaped by the complex web of historical institutions and practices within which they function and work" (Bernstein 1971, 306). "The Japanese Tradition of 'Smaller is Better,'" one exemplary text of praxis asserts, comes from the way of knowing in folding common in Japanese society. Things that are folded pervade society and help explain its "compact culture." Folding takes large ideas and renders them small, thereby making them graspable and comprehensible (Lee 1984). The folded fan devised in Japan takes scenes and reduces them in the hand. The traditional folded fan is used by men and women alike and represented in advertising and arts as an icon of Japanese modesness. Children learn folding early as a fundamental way of creating beauty in the reductive behavior of the origami, and use it above all to miniaturize the national symbol of the crane. In their religious practice, the Japanese signal their wishes by folding them on paper. Sentences and poems follow the pattern of going from the largest idea to the small. Superlative terms are those expressing tiny detail and being packed in. Places of honor are designated by folded backgrounds.
Bowing, so basic to acknowledging social relationships, is itself a form of folding the body. The praxis of folding, of reducing, can bridge the past and present from the miniaturization of trees and rock gardens, where space is scaled down to the MiniDisc and folded earphone. The Japanese have taken the table-top television screen and put it in the fold of the hand. The Japanese contrast their packing in of knowledge within a hand’s grasp and American ideas of expansiveness gained from sweeping vistas and yawning sprawl. They question the ways that Americans express their ways of knowing by enlargement. Panoramas, wider and wider screens, and spacious cars are the mark of American technology. Importance is bestowed by upward aspiring monuments, giant heroes, and gaping spreads.

How praxis is differentiated from performance in the American rhetoric of display is conspicuously evident in Roger Abrahams’s widely read essay on contemporary uses of Romantic Nationalism. Dissatisfied with the limits of an approach that declares the uniqueness of single performances, he reflectively wrote on developing an event orientation that builds a comparative view of “praxis” (Abrahams 1993, 25). Although the trend of performance analysis had been to fragment experience to individuals, he asked whether activities that produce folklore could indeed still be related to national patterns. Or considering the ubiquitous influence of “cultural diversity” during the 1980s and 1990s, and looking for an understanding of “the role of folklore in society,” Stephen Stern found promise in a “concept of praxis” that “may assist us to wed performance to the larger philosophical issues that imbue folklore events with significance . . .” (Stern 1991, 26). Shortly after Stern made his observation, Paul Hanson reflected on the aging influence of performance orientations in Toward New Perspectives in Folklore (1972) and pronounced that “folklorists are now in a position to expand their understanding of performance as speaking praxis beyond isolated folklore events” (Hanson 1993, 332). If Abrahams and Hanson drew attention to the reality of the nation-state and the ways that social structures manage cultural communication, the significance to Stern is presumably political as well as cultural, at least in the ways that power relations in a view of cultural diversity and unity can be approached between folklore events and various social ideologies and organizations affecting them. Concerned about “hazards” of reducing the social units in performance-centered folkloristics during the 1980s, the editors of Theorizing Folklore (1993) reported that growing interest in nationalism and the organizational construction of tradition “led to growing questioning of the adequacy of analyses that do not make reference to these sorts of ‘macro’ processes” (Briggs and Shuman 1993, 121; emphasis added).

The idea of organization commonly comes up in discussion of praxis, because the use of praxis springs from an altered view of modern life, one that is structured less by variable situations and more by organizations. During the 1980s, the public became more accustomed to hearing about the worlds of power, organized worlds that were creating cultures of their own. The public heard about the corporate world and, later, corporate cultures, about the fashion world and, later, about the
culture of consumption. In a modern society that was noted for its increasing individualism, organizational settings define more identities: the office, the military, the city, the media, the school, the profession, the government. Thus the individual and the organization often have a syncretic relationship: organizations help guide individuals’ choice and action, and they instill a feeling of belonging and cultural association (Cohen 1974; Handy 1976; Jones et al. 1988; Jones 1996). Organizing becomes a common praxis in modern life, a way of traditionalizing from the widening, and often dizzying, array of choices available to individuals forming social identities in a mass culture. Although conceived as an offshoot of occupational folklore study, concern for organizational tradition to Michael Owen Jones, a folkloristic mover and shaker of organizational theory, casts a wide net to take in “many folklore forms and examples as instances of organizing. Festivals, parades, religious ceremonies, family reunions, and annual clam­bakes require organized effort if they are to occur and be judged satisfying” (Jones 1996, 533; emphasis added). Expanding the range of tradition to organized privatized events and their organization in terms of fundamental praxis, Jones presented a strong case that “most family outings, sandlot baseball games, impromptu picnics, and birthday parties are spontaneous organizations. They exemplify organizing in its fundament; people cooperating, channeling resources, and distributing roles and activities for a designated purpose” (Jones 1996, 533).

The term praxis comes into play because it refers to a type of action separable from conceptions of art and performance. Praxis implies “practice,” essential in an idea of tradition as the ritualized tasks of daily life rather than its division into special performances, but it has more social and intellectual connotation than the neutral “practice.” In praxis is the idea that individuals as participants in continuities of time and place follow and adjust customary modes of behavior and thought. In praxis, more so than in performance, the view of social structure and historical condition become more paramount. The verbs that describe cultural forms of praxis discussed so far—folding, shooting, organizing, reducing, enlarging—are the kinds of productive activity where the final product is not the sole end, but where the doing and the experiences and symbols involved are equally important.

The source of a concern for praxis comes from a society where process appears increasingly removed from the product. Modern Americans fit descriptions of consumers, spectators, attendants. The prefabricated suburban home can become a public gallery of artistic activity by individual manipulation and decoration of the yard from the mailbox to the garden. Yard art can be looked at for its traditionalizing process of arranging consumed goods into a personally meaningful landscape that carries social significance. Many studies have documented yard arrangements with wonder because the results seemed artistically bizarre. The process of production, however, is explainable in terms of a praxis. Makers share the action of taking available materials from the consumer society and converting them, in the style of craftsworker, into a symbol of identity and feeling. They use
the consumer praxis of arranging rather than the productive activity of crafting to express creativity. Many practices draw attention to themselves because they display skill in activity, from storytelling to pigeon shooting. For many, the process takes on a symbolic significance for its exercise of personal control and its relation to the consuming, conforming standards of organizational life. Many studies of the "arts of work" (a reversal of the gallery emphasis on "works of art") examine the process of control as a basis of traditionalizing. In creating routines shared among auto workers on the assembly line, in aestheticizing the tedious cleaning of tuna, in decorating the faceless corporate office, modern folk engage in forms of praxis that achieve the emotional creativity of tradition, so folklorists have informed humanities scholarship in the discourse of American culture (see Dewhurst 1984; Jones 1990).

The display of tradition in representative activities in fact may not be public but may be for the self in a play of emotions. The display is perceived, made cognitive, rather than performed for an audience. In my book *Chain Carvers* (1985), for instance, I argued that in the private trick of "cutting in" the wood to produce the chains, elderly carvers found a reassurance that they could be cut into society (see also Bronner 1996a). To George Blume, born and raised in the country and in a mode of craft production stressing self-reliance and communal values, the factory and its corporate structure lured him because the old economy in which he existed was breaking down. Still, he maintained the old values in symbolic material forms. He made long expansive chains, usually from the very wood the factory used for furniture, to show his prowess despite the advance of age. Earnest Bennett carved tiny replicas of tools from the farm that no longer were prevalent and thereby announced their specialness. Another factory worker, Linus Herbig, made miniature chairs and put them in bottles to show their fragility and attract closer attention. In these apparently whimsical and decorative forms, the objects held no social threat to the corporate structure. Yet the activities of miniaturization, bottling, caging, and chaining expressed labor that had been marginalized. The craftsworkers signaled a way of doing things that had been rendered small and that they wanted to elaborate. What they meant could be perceived differently in various settings. When I showed them in Japan, their reduction of experience was perceived as a sign of empowerment; in the United States their encasement was typically seen as trivialization.

The various perceptions of culture bundled in orientations toward art, performance, and praxis mark struggles to determine the role of identity-forming tradition in modern life. Semantic changes in the keyword *culture* represent changes in intellectual perception of identity. In the late eighteenth century, culture was the tending of natural growth, the kind that human training close to what the rooted homeplace provided. In the nineteenth century, culture became a thing, "a general habit of the mind having close relations with the idea of human perfection." Culture was something that could be cultivated in society and raised the status of
creative pursuit. Identity was broadly conceived in civilization and often into hierarchies of taste. It was associated with intellectual development or the general body of the arts (Williams 1983, 87–93). In the twentieth century, culture has been increasingly perceived as variable, relativized communication, and the most particularized communication could become an act of culture (Hall 1959; Leach 1976). In this view, the constant redisplay of tradition is understood as part of a modern need to pin the jelly of communicated culture to the wall. If culture became realized through a composite of fleeting events, then it needed to be defined at dramatic moments, and thereby was habitually reified through displays of tradition to various publics. If American culture was a problem to describe because of its ethnic and geographic diversity before the twentieth century, it became even more of a problem in behavioral perspectives on communication that fragmented experience. It was easier to imagine a region or nation when culture was a thing bound to the land.

As the stability of an American culture has become more elusive, there is a renewed search to locate traditions that center people’s actions in a consuming modern life. In the effort to clarify culture when people consume more than they produce, the traditions that draw attention are the kind that are repeatable, variable, and observable. If people do not offer recognizable stories and things as were once imagined, they can reconceive traditions that express and narrate action. Tradition, then, clarifies guides to what people do, and why they do it. Moving toward the twenty-first century, public formats for the display of tradition show culture as creativity, a process of fabricating social meaning from activity. Questions arise in the discourse about how much control humans have over their expressiveness and how much they are able to adjust their identities in life’s various frames of experience. If orientations toward art, performance, and praxis differ as to the extent to which tradition is followed, they nonetheless share the view that its interpretation is relative to the dislocating experience that modern living provides.

Williamsburg’s “treasured” displays of tradition as paintings and sculptures of national unity, Minnesota’s “circles of traditions” as labor of ethnic and regional groups, Michigan’s demonstration of performances in folk arts, and Hegins’s sticking to their guns have a common strategy of organization. They offer to reunite public actors with their art. In the twentieth century, they have been powerful instruments of persuasion to view the creativity of tradition within modernity. Once primarily a contest of themes that commanded the folk art exhibition showing Americans as a collective whole or members of plural groups, the search for definition of life in America has expanded to the art of the moment presented in festival, performance, and activity. Forms of displaying tradition in America have been notable for their alternative visions of the relation of self to society for a future America. Although the pluralist theme in folk arts arguably has been ascendant in popular discourse since the 1990s, it still must contend with the force of
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displays conjuring American tradition as an unfinished project. There is still time for recasting the present and past into fragmented performances, representative actions, and national symbols, they remind us. The spread of display strategies argues for finding ways to follow and guide tradition, for ways that as Americans or individuals, people realize their roles in the flow of time. Presumably, it is a search forced by a modern existence that strains the ties of individuals to culture, and impels them to organize belonging.