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AMERICAN FOLK ART: Expressions of a New Spirit, a book (1982) and exhibit (now back in its New York home) organized by the Museum of American Folk Art, New York are the subject of this item. I saw the show in March 1986 at the Columbus Museum of Art; it moved to Fort Wayne in mid-April.

I used to play devil’s advocate in arguing with a museologist and material culture specialist: Why should American Studies people pay atten-

FIGURE ONE: A highly symbolic mourning picture by an anonymous artist, likely a young woman, for Mrs. Ebenezer Collins. Mixed media on cloth, dated July 15, 1807.

FIGURE TWO: A pair of ceramic lions, from the Fenton Works, Bennington, Vermont, 1849.

...tion to folk art and material culture? His response at first was always, “We want to study them because the objects are old and beautiful.” And I would say that that was an excellent answer for a connoisseur, collector, antiquarian or gallery-goer, but not sufficient in a discipline in which we are supposed to get from artifact to social or cultural issue. American Folk Art is far and away the most beautiful exhibition of its sort I have seen; it satisfies his aesthetic requisites. Neither book nor exhibition does much in the way of socio-cultural interpretation, but neither really was designed to. Americanists, however, can bring their knowledge to the material and interpret it in the context of what they know.

One might also learn from it things one did not know. This, of course, had been the real object of my nagging questions to the specialist; he was my student in those days, and I was trying to get him to think of instances in which the artifact intimated something not previously known, or perhaps not adequately understood, about the social fabric of which it was produced. Could one go to it looking for evidence to support a tentative hypothesis, as one would go to an archive or to a dig? Musicological data had at least once even given Americanists a lead on an unexpected pattern of migration and cultural influence; had the study of folk crafts ever done anything similar?

The very difficulty of defining which objects are appropriately “folk” provides one clue for
the culturist seeking answers. No definition I’ve ever read of what constitutes “folk art” really covers the objects in this show. At one time, folklorists taught that the folk artist should be isolated from the traditions and procedures of “high” art. But Isaac Sheffield’s “Portrait of a Woman in a Mulberry Dress” (on our cover) still reflects late-Baroque portraiture, elements of which one can also see in the work of many eighteenth century limners. It was painted, however, in 1835. It’s quite extraordinary; the sitter’s face is handled with apparent sophistication and elegance, yet the figure and hands show the child-like but strong crudity more familiar within, say, the work of the Pollard limner of a century before. Since limner work is professional work (limners had craft training), limners are themselves folk artists in a somewhat different sense, say, than the ladies who produced the funeral pictures of the sort described by Huckleberry Finn (See illustration on p. 3, and Figure One), or the carvers of charming but naive animal figures. The show includes examples of both, and also some manufactured items; there are two winning stoneware lions from the Fenton Works, 1849 (See Figure Two); the show even contains a printed example, Jacob Skeen’s “Shaker Chronological and Genealogical Chart” (Louisville, 1887), an orgy of Biblical information on one giant multicolored sheet (See Figure Three). Are printed documents or commercial items which one buys in a store properly called “folk art”? “Oral traditions,” again, folklorists used to insist, “not written.” Certainly not printed.

I am very glad that they were in the show, and I think that the fact that it is hard to draw boundaries, hard to decide where folk leaves off and sophisticated, commercial, or “popular” arts begin provides one excellent manner in which one can answer that question. “All right, this stuff is wonderful to look at, but what good is it to Americanists?” If categories were easier to separate, the objects would be artifacts of a socially more stratified and stable society than the one which produced them. That the items in this show, from quilts to wonderfully ingenious whirligigs, show characteristics at once of high art, new technology, handed-down training and naive vision is itself an important socio-cultural message for Americanists. That levels of art are hard to define in our society has led sensitive scholars, Ann Douglas, for example, to fruitful social hypotheses.

There is a passage in Hawthorne’s The Blithedale Romance in which the narrator goes to an entertainment in an extremely small and isolated New England hamlet, and reports with surprise that people there do not look rustic. In fact, in describing them Hawthorne’s narrator uses the word “suburban.” If the artifact in one’s collection of “folk” arts is not “pure,” one may observe, First, that no artifact is ever pure anything, because cultures have always borrowed from one another, and folk artists can be expected to make use of anything they have seen; and Second, that the borrowing and influences themselves give hard evidence of the diffusion of ideas, objects, modes of perception, styles, or whatever. Hawthorne’s rustics looked

"suburban” before 1852, I suspect because they wore garments from the new mills and factories rather than homespun.

The range of pieces included in American Folklore was very large: objects which are artistically quite sophisticated, traditional objects (quilts, for instance), crude items such as several of the carvings, and wonderful “whirligigs,” or wind toys (See Figure Four). The anonymous authors of the captions have not tried to be analytical, limiting themselves to interesting and economical explanations. The prefatory material is also very modest in scope. I wish that it had explained how decisions about inclusion were made—someone must have been able to say, “Yes, let’s use that even though it isn’t ‘folk’ by somebody’s strict definition.” The scholars
quoted in the "Foreword" do not help readers to understand this issue. Thus Nina Fletcher Riddle is quoted as saying, "American folk art is not an unskilled imitation of fine art." What is in the show and the book contradicts that statement, for some pieces, like the wonderful Isaac Sheffield portrait on the cover, are largely just that.

A couple of pages after the quotation from Riddle, in a section titled "Folk Painting and Decorated Furniture," the anonymous author writes that in the early years of the nineteenth century, "the French and English romantic movements reached the American shores. Idealized pictures; moody, moonlight landscapes; and romantic story paintings emanated from [academies and finishing schools for young women] . . . in astonishing number." That's more evidence of the interpenetration of artistic and intellectual "levels." Students in "academies and finishing schools" would not be "folk" in older definitions, of course, but we would be poorer for not seeing this work. The argument heard so often in the late 60s about how we were wasting our time if we studied intellectual trends because they had no real impact on "people," seems awfully foolish when one examines artifacts produced by these ladies. "Folk-Romantic" works as a label for several of their pieces, which is to say that pieces in both book and show often were plainly done "in imitation of fine art." It should be clear, too, that "folk" does not imply "benighted." Show and book include a crude enough painting of an infant by William Matthew Prior (1806-73) (See Figure Five). This is the same Prior who painted a notable pair of portraits of a black minister and his wife (Reverend and Mrs. Lawson, 1843). The paintings are limner work, no more, but provide hard evidence that it was possible for at least some Americans to visualize black people as professionals and as substantial citizens. Recent historical scholarship on black professionals before the Civil War confirms what the images suggest.

As in some other recent art books, the reproductions in *American Folk Art* are so brilliant that the book is in some ways more visually impressive than the show. Both were simply wonderful to look at.

We don't review collections of essays in our regular review pages, but do note them here in "Obna" when one of our correspondents says one should, as George Cotkin does of *STREAMS OF EXPERIENCE: Reflections on the History and Philosophy of American Culture*. By John J. McDermott. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986, $25.00. Unabashedly written in the spirit and style of William James, this book centers around the notion of a "bequest": the bequest of classical American philosophers—James, Dewey and Royce—to the American intellect and experience, and the bequest of America to the evolving world configuration. Some essays are philosophical in focus, with emphasis upon the pragmatic doctrines of relations, pluralism and experience. Others apply pragmatic ideas to a wide range of issues: world hunger, the pedagogy of the handicapped, curriculum planning and the aesthetics of the city, to name only a few of the topics covered. The style of this book is jaunty and self-reflective. It is the work of a scholar and humanist grappling with his philosophical legacy but with one eye turned toward present and future experience. At once insightful and frustrating, learned and glib, this volume is above all a work of interest, especially in its marking out of the philosophical and experiential terrain of the American experience.
FIGURE SEVEN: (Right): A present to the teacher, c. 1850, this consists of a large sheet bearing a calligraphic drawing of a bird, on which are pasted smaller cards, each by a student. The design is highlighted in watercolor. The calligraphy is copied from a Platt Rogers Spencer handwriting copybook. FIGURE EIGHT: (Below): "Hemfield Railroad," a double-weave Jacquard loom coverlet, wool, about 1856, possibly by Daniel Campbell. Illustrations courtesy of the Museum of American Folk Art, reproduced from the exhibition "American Folk Art: Expressions of a New Spirit" reviewed in our column.