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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.

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

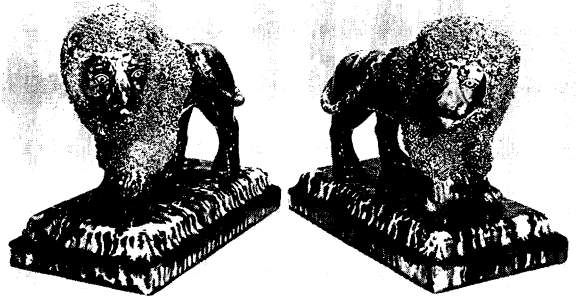


FIGURE TWO: A pair of ceramic lions, from the Fenton Works, Bennington, Vermont, 1849.

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

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;



FIGURE FIVE: An oil portrait by William Prior (1806-73) of an unidentified child.

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 ar-

tifacts 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.



FIGURE SIX: A watercolor-on-ivory political pin from the 1840 presidential campaign.

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.

