

CONCENTRATION RESEARCH PAPER

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FOLK ART

Submitted by

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The act of creating for any artist is an assertion of his or her individuality and this is especially true of the American folk artist in the 20th century. My interest in folk art grew from the observation that a great many people without formal training in the arts produce vital imaginative visual works. The intent of this paper is to give an overview of what's happening in folk art, to give examples, to raise questions about an important art form and to explore the life and work of Uncle Jack in depth.

It is hardly surprising that arriving at a definition of 'folk art' presents a problem. Since until recent decades the old folk paintings and sculptures -- crude wood carvings, primitive portraits and landscapes, stylized mourning pictures, samplers and Inn signs, weather vanes and whirligigs -- were simply not considered 'art' at all. (1) However, in the later 20th century, as the idea of progress in all areas of life have been questioned, both scholars, artists and the public have shown increasing interest in 'folk art'. We have come to recognize it as thriving independently of, though in proximity to, the fine arts and to value it highly as one of many varieties of expression. (2)

In a sense, the concept of 'folk art' was invented by 19th and 20th century western art historians, who established an evolutionary sequence of art styles, customarily fractured into periods. They called any art that did not fit comfortably into those periods 'folk'. 'Folk art', outside this sequential pattern, generally utilitarian and made by artists who lack academic training, was usually considered to be of

inferior aesthetic merit and was ignored. (3) We now consider the beginnings of American folk art to occur just at that moment when a craftsman in metal, wood, clay or fabric shape an object to provide a creative element that ignore just utility. Craft crosses over into art. The concerns with ideas, energy, irony, mystery, traditionally the realm of 'fine art,' are equally the concerns of modern American folk art, liberating and celebrating materials and bringing attention the transformation of life into things and things into life. (4) Art exists, and in many forms. Exploring ideas and concepts and transforming them into something concrete that has meaning and content which is central to your being, is a primary concern for all artists and is important to all thinking people with the desire to understand their existence in the universe. 'Folk artists' merge tradition, change, feeling, learning and self-realization into forms of art. It offers futures that are open to all who respond to the touch of materials and the satisfaction of creative endeavor. The 'folk artist' comes to his or her calling free. There will always be those who will turn their hands to giving form to things yet unshaped and bring order to what is seemingly chaotic. (5)

Man-made objects are marvelous things. Each one is essentially the physical embodiment of an idea. Creative expression does not occur in a vacuum; every designer is influenced by the requirements and barriers of his environment, his culture and his skills. Folk art thrives in rural settings, among peasants, artisans, and shopkeepers, but it also prospers in cities and among the rich. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the so-called, fine artist and the so-called folk artist. 'Folk art' is traditional, enduring time, but

tradition is not static, enslaving and unchanging. What passes from one generation to the next is not an art work to be imitated but flexible ability to create new artworks that look and feel right in terms of past experience. (6) To speak of any art work as traditional is to admit the reality of historical continuity. It's maker accepted the past, but in a manner allowing for infinite variation. They depend on their cultural surroundings and history or meaning. (7)

Objects of 'folk art' are in fact, more or less centrally located between the conceptual poles of the aesthetic and the practical. (8) It's aesthetic quality is obviously revealed in applied 'decoration,' such as carving on a chest or inlay on a rifle stock. Formal considerations in proportion are pulled together with function with the chest's traditional shape and in the rifle's graceful balance to create something special that reveals the intuitive perceptions of balance, unity, rhythm and gestalt. As a whole the piece functions separately with aesthetic magnitude apart from the elements that are brought into it. For example, if your life depended on hunting for survival, your rifle is a very important part of your existence. The aesthetic qualities function as a force that help in your survival that bring object and individual closer.

Why do folk artists create? They create because they are driven by the same impulses that lead all artists to seek a means of expression. They participate in the same creative joy as their more 'sophisticated' artists. They see the same visions, but why does anyone create? Because we're all searching for answers or seeking the right questions to ask ourselves, which could therefore lead to a better understanding of how we fit in the universe, but paradoxically, maybe its just a force

inside all of us that needs no questions but action for understanding.

A story is told of Rodin that when asked how he carved a hand out of a block of marble he replied, 'I don't make the hand -- it's there inside. I just cut away everything that isn't hand.' Miles Carpenter, who runs a rickety icehouse and watermelon stand in southern Virginia, has carved a grand fifteen-foot snake from the limb of a tree, and he will readily tell you why he did it. 'I saw the limb lying on the ground and there was the snake -- right inside. What I did is, I let him out.' (9)

Few folk artists seek fame, and many speak depreciatingly of their work. They tell you it's "just whittlin', just something to pass the time." And yet others have the overwhelming sense of destiny that has stirred the greatest geniuses of the ages. William Edmundson, who lived in Nashville, Tennessee, until his death in 1951, was an unlettered man who worked at a variety of humble jobs. In his fifties he began carving, and with a feverish devotion and intensity, he made hundreds of limestone figures. He had no problem explaining to people why he did it:

These here is miracles I can do. Can't nobody do these but me. I can't help carving. I just does it. It's like when you're leaving here and you're going home. Well, I know I'm going to carve. Jesus has planted the seed of carving in me. (10)

The competence within folk art has often been described as child-like. Nearly fifty years ago Henri Focillon dealt with the same matter in his introduction to "Art Populaire." Focillon described children, primitives, and folk artists as

'Those who conceive before they see.' Presentation of images, in their case, is dominated by rationality, as opposed to empiricism, and by a powerful instinctual need for order. (11)

The term such as 'naive,' may be used to communicate some sense of the attitude of the artist. Naive art is the record of an

uncomplicated response. It cannot be learned, but it can be understood. The naive artist uses an unconscious and intuitive approach to the problem of communication. He does not disguise his techniques. He shares everything from the beginning. He works without concern for alternatives, and he has no fear of doing things poorly, but can also consider the idea of quality in his work. He does not have to practice to improve. He willingly uses whatever materials are at hand to give form to his ideas. He is often more interested in his own creative process than in the finished product. His vernacular expression does not go through styles or fashion cycles since it is nearly immutable. His role as an artist may begin and end within the process of painting a single sign, or it may involve a lifelong dedication to a creative vision. This naive art is a rich source of conceptual ideas and unexpected visual forms. Personal philosophy and political beliefs often motivate the naive artist to use his art as a means of one-to-one communication. (12) In comparison, which is hard not to do as a so-called 'trained artist,' I think we need to question the idea of progress and what this difference between the so-called 'naive or folk artist' and the 'sophisticated artist'. I've talked about basic needs and concerns that all artists tend to share, but what really is the distinction? Maybe the idea of what progress is, is one of the major differences. The folk artist doesn't seem to be caught up in the fast pace, materialistic, technological oriented computer age. Our society is a complex world of nuclear threat and T.V. addicts and information bombardment that is inescapable. The 'end product' seems to be of ultimate importance, not individuality or even quality but the increased

desire for new ideas and for faster and cheaper objects. The arms race is an example of this concept. We, as Americans, are pouring money into objects, not ideals; we are beginning to trust our machines more than the human power of thinking or involvement. Maybe the folk artists' life isn't as complex, but possibly they are closer to the reality and basics of life and just probably that's why we're so intrigued by it. They seem to put importance on the creative act itself rather than swiftly getting to an end product of lost fulfillment and satisfaction. Conceivably art is the act of creating and not the end product, and it's likely the satisfaction comes from doing and involvement.

Jesse Fuller is a so-called 'folk artist;' he has surrounded his farm with signs that proclaim his views and concerns. The signs are occasionally stolen and they weather in time, but they are repainted and new thoughts are added, keeping the project alive. Individual words and ideas are emphasized by changes in size and through a personal kind of color coding. Along one of San Francisco's crowded residential streets is this breathing space of brightly colored signs. It is a private garden full of painted sculpture and lively slogans proclaiming messages such as 'Love thy neighbor' and 'Wake up America.'" The project is the work of Peter M. Bond, a ninety-year-old philosopher and artist, who paints the signs in his basement studio. The garden is a visual presentation of a philosophic system. (13) Naive art can offer both the viewer and the artists an occasion for contemplation. We cannot predict when or where it will appear, but of one thing we can be certain, there undoubtedly will always be people who feel the need to make something original, and their work will always enliven and humanize the environment.

There are some naive 'masters' whose dedication and passion for self-expression have resulted in some remarkable creative achievements. Ed Root of Wilson, Kansas, devoted nearly half of his ninety-two years to creating dozens of concrete yard sculptures, light fixtures, plaques, and planters. His cast cement forms are richly surfaced with embedded bits of broken glass, tile, and found objects. Some of the larger forms are hollow and contain displays which can be viewed through small concealed openings. Not many artists, naive or professional, devote an entire lifetime to a single project. The 'Garden of Eden' in Lucas, Kansas, is a monument to a rare kind of creative endurance. Although the project was never actually completed, S. P. Dinsmoor worked for over forty years on an environmental sculpture that involved designing and constructing cement buildings, life-size trees and figures, a mausoleum, and cement replicas of the American flag. The size and complexity of the 'Garden of Eden' can only be compared to the more recent 'Watts Towers' monument constructed by Simon Rodia in Los Angeles, California. In both the 'Watts Towers' and the 'Garden of Eden,' the artists chose to create their linear structures using reinforced cement. Maximum flexibility of design was possible with this inexpensive material that could be prepared as time and funds permitted. (14) Out in the country, up the hollow, and in big city apartments gifted but untutored men and women are working in the same tradition as their predecessors of a century or two ago. Some find inspiration in recent events, others in memories of times past. Most often the memories are of happy occasions or of everyday events which have acquired patina of ease and pleasure. Folk artists are selective in what they choose to record, some find a rich source of inspiration in religion, in mystical visions, and in

familiar stories. American folk art is alive and well in the last quarter of the twentieth century and it may well be in your neighbor's front yard. (15)

John William Dey or 'Uncle Jack' as most people call him, is a retired policeman who lives in Richmond, Virginia, and he estimates that he's done 650 paintings in the twenty-five or thirty years he's been at it. His work has a distinctive hard, glossy finish. The secret is the medium, tester's airplane paint. The paintings are a patchwork of landscape and dream, or remembered scenes overlaid with fantasy and humor. Uncle Jack is a precise and meticulous artist with his own rigid aesthetic.

When I've finished with a painting, I put a bright light on it, and I go over the whole thing with a magnifying glass to see if anything's wrong. Sometimes a picture just doesn't look like it's level, and then I have to put something on to anchor it, something like a cow or a rabbit.

When he was eighteen, Uncle Jack spent a year working in a lumber camp in Maine. "That was back in 1933," he says. "I was crazy about it up there. I paint about it a lot, the outdoors and the old cabins and the snow." Many of Uncle Jack's paintings are snow scenes.

When you paint a winter landscape you have to fill it all up because it's so bare, you have to put all the branches on the trees, and then you have to put something up front.

Uncle Jack wants it understood that the act of creation properly starts with the frame. A tireless hunter of antique and secondhand shops, he has collected frames of all shapes and sizes.

Once you pick the frame, then you put in a piece of wood and start painting. At first I used to use oil paint with a little bit of house paint too, but now I like the airplane paint. I buy it in a model store. When I first started painting,

I took an old man and I put him on a rocking chair with a whiskey jug in his hand and I called it 'Wife's Away.' Early on I made a masterpiece.

Uncle Jack has a house filled with frames and an imagination bubbling with plans.

In this Mexican frame I'm going to do a picture of the Reverend fishing, and there will be a moose and the old chicken house and a lake. I can see it in my head. You know, if you're painting it's quiet, you finish one thing and the other idea is right there waiting. Sometimes I wake up at three o'clock in the morning and an idea has stepped into my mind. Here I am with close to eighty-four frames. In this big one I'm going to do a picture of Charlie Chaplin. In this one I'm going to do another masterpiece with everything in it. I'll put the Reverend slam bang in the middle and all the people around, and the animals and some crows and rabbits, maybe a moose, and the lake. You know, when I was a lumberjack I wanted to be the best lumberjack, and when I was a policeman, I wanted to be the best policeman, and now I want to be the best painter. What I don't have isn't ideas, I don't have enough time to do them all.

One of Uncle Jack's large recent paintings shows Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The lake is glassy blue, there are pine trees on the mountain, and a waterfall drops sharply into the middle of the lake. The tempter has become a red-haired woman with horns who is saying, the dialogue is written on the painting: "Please just try it. You will like it." On the apple tree a sign says: "Forbidden tree." Eve is exclaiming: "I can't believe I ate the whole apple. I just can't believe I ate that whole thing." (16) My own analysis of Uncle Jack's attitude about his art emulates a positiveness and yet humorlessness and seriousness at the same time. He wants us to feel good about his art and about life. I have not been able to find a reproduction

of his painting in color but just from the black and white reproduction the painting seems to be alive with vivid and brilliant colors that vibrate in the living landscape. The images themselves say vivation with birds in flight with outstretched wings that seem to symbolize freedom. The birds are larger than the people and are close enough that we are made to feel that we could be in flight with them. The viewer is ever positioned above the landscape on the same level with the birds to heighten that feeling. The people almost seem inferior to us, the viewer. It is as if Uncle Jack is trying to make us aware that we're all given the choice of freedom in understanding our spirituality. We know the conclusion of Adam and Eve and ultimately the inevitability of all of us. We are caught in Uncle Jack's perception of paradise, and yet it's a paradise that many of us might create in our minds so it fills a satisfaction from the beginning. Centrally located is a huge lake being filled with mountain water and a forest filled with blossoming flowers and green trees that act like window curtains which invite us into the action. Adam and Eve are nude and almost insignificant with the same kind of flatness that the signs take on. Uncle Jack is creating a clear picture of his perception of paradise and reality. The many uses of symbols, words, and images help in clarifying our own illusion of paradise adding intrigue. The painting represents a special moment and yet we get an idea of the passage of time. He uses a narrative and we as observers react and read into the memories of the reality and fantasy of life. Uncle Jack has a keen sense of balance, unity, sensitivity, humor, tradition and child-like quality about his art. He is truly an artist of tremendous quality.

Uncle Jack and other folk artists have passion and excitement about art and their own creative expressions which give me joy and added hope about the art world and our society. 'Folk art' is a rich source of conceptual ideas and unexpected visual forms, it is a valuable and inspirational resource not only for me but for everyone who will allow themselves to partake. 'American folk art' is alive and well in the last quarter of the twentieth century and it may well be in your neighbor's front yard.

END NOTES

¹Fried, Frederick and Mary, *America's Forgotten Folk Arts*, printed, 1978, pp. 82-125.

²*The Encyclopedia Americana*, International Ed., Connecticut: Grolier Incorporated, Vol. 11, pp. 486-495.

³*The Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Knowledge in Depth," Chicago: William Benton, Publisher, 1943-1974, Vol. 7, 15 ed., pp. 470-478.

⁴Swank and Quimby, *Perspectives in American Folk Art*, Published for the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum: W. W. Norton & Company, 1980, pp. 218-225.

⁵Birdsall, Derek, *American Folk Art, Expressions of a New Spirit*, England: Penshurst Press, 1983, pp. 6-124.

⁶Fried, pp. 82-125.

⁷Derek, p. 14.

⁸Horwitz, Elinor Lander, *Contemporary American Folk Art*, Philadelphia & New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1975, p. 74.

⁹Birdsall, pp. 14-16.

¹⁰Watson, Patrick, *Fasanella's City*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1973, pp. 7-25.

¹¹Swank and Quimby, pp. 218-225.

¹²Fried, pp. 82-125.

¹³Horwitz, pp. 25-30.

¹⁴Derek, pp. 9-13.

¹⁵Horwitz, pp. 25-30.

¹⁶Ibid.

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