

An Accessible Aesthetic:
The Role of Folk Arts and the Folk Artist in the Curriculum

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Mama was a beautiful quilter. She done the best work in the county. Everybody knew it. She never let anybody else touch her quilts; and sometimes when she was through quiltin' for the day on a job that she liked a lot herself, she would pin a cloth over the top of the quilt so nobody could look at it 'til she was done.

I always longed to work with her and I can tell you how plain I recall the day she said, "Sarah, you come quilt with me now if you want to."

I was too short to sit in a chair and reach it, so I got my needle and thread and stood beside her. I put that needle through and pulled it back up again, and then down, and my stitches were about three inches long. Papa come in about that time, he stepped back and said, "Florence, that child is flat ruinin' your quilt." Mama said, "She doin' no kind of thing. She's quiltin' her first quilt."

He said, "Well, you're jest goin' to have to rip it all out tonight."
Mama smiled at me and said, "Them stitches is going to be in that quilt when it wears out."

All the time they was talkin' my stitched was gettin' shorter.
That was my first quilt. I have it still to look at sometimes.¹

The folk art bear witness to the powers of informal learning. Basket making, traditional singing, storytelling, wit and humor in conversation, needlework, cooking, games, and pastimes—these skills are learned in the academies of the street, home, the park, the woods. And the masters are the people rooted in community and history. They acquire their skills for the most part informally from others, and with those skills they acquire deeply felt values, standards of excellence, and a resonant sense of who they are and where they are.

It is precisely this rootedness to community that is the hallmark of the folk arts and the folk artist. The basket making Bill Smith is famous for is no disembodied skill, no craft brought to us from afar by one who learned it from books. Rather, it is indigenous to the Adirondack area where Bill grew up. This craftsman carries biography in his baskets, a biography filled with the people from whom he learned, the people for whom he made baskets, the landscapes he incorporated into these objects, the places these baskets have been, the status he acquired through the value placed on his skills, his role as a link in a chain of generations of Adirondack basket makers. In this sense, these baskets "tell

¹ Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Bufere, *The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art* (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

stories.” Just as quilts tell stories. Quilt makers often say their lives are sewn into their quilts, piece by piece, each fragment invoking a whole garment, a person, an experience, a place, a period of life: “I remember this patch here... that was the dress my grandmother had that was so pretty to me then. I can just remember her in that.”² The quilt is truly a “scrapbook”, a net for catching memories.

What better way to convey to children the cultural nature of art and the rich artistic traditions of their own community than through living practitioners, through the folk artists themselves? We take children to museums so they can experience the power of the authentic, the original object, and not have to settle for facsimiles and reproductions. In a sense, the world we live in is a living museum, an opportunity to have primary experiences with aesthetically vibrant works and their makers. Folk artists in the schools provide children with the opportunity to experience living traditions directly and in the round. In the presence of a folk artist, the objects, the tales, the songs expand to encompass the biography and culture of which they are part. The child confronts an authentic maker and an authentic object, not a filtered rendition of it through a book or filmstrip.

Pedagogically, folk artists are effective in ways that challenge us to learn from them. Working in Appalachia, Eliot Wigginton noted that the quality of learning outside of the classroom in interaction with members of the community is rarely matched by what generally happens in the school setting itself. He says: “I’m convinced, for example, that a student learned more about himself and life generally in three days spent with an Aunt Arie (who went no further than the fourth grade) than in four years of high school English.”³ Children recognize the life-time learning, the integrity, and the commitment that make folk artists the compelling personalities they so often are. Are folk artists in the school providing the same human element in teaching that was so essential in their own informal learning. They are a lesson in the art of lifelong learning, in learning that is self-motivating, acquired through close attention, and nurtured by the support of others. Mrs. Catrino, an elderly Italian-American woman with a lifelong passion for needlework, remarked: “I watched my mother do it, she did all her sewing by hand; I was interested...So I enjoyed trying to learn. Whatever things I had to face, I either got information on it or watched. If I was near anyone that did any kind of work, whether it was a man or a woman, whether it was fixing the gas stove, or outside...and...I had the time to look. I was always interested because I had to be the man of the house.”⁴ Folk artists are also model teachers, aware of how they themselves learned, and generally anxious to pass their knowledge along.

A major factor in effective education is the integration of what is learned in the school with the experiences children have in their homes and communities. An equal challenge is the integration of the culture of the community into the

² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

³ Eliot Wigginton, ed., *Foxfire 2* (New York: Doubleday, 1973).

⁴ Lois Burch, “Mrs. Carino and Needlework: The Life Adaption of Handiwork in Terms of Continuity and Perpetuation of Self,” term paper for Folklore 564, Folklore, Culture and Aging (University of Pennsylvania, 1980), p. 40.

curriculum. While we want our children to be exposed to a variety of art forms and cultures, we do not want them to be alienated for their birthright, their own heritage. And their own heritage is valuable, not only because it is their own, but also because of the importance of a strong indigenous culture to the coherence of community life. “Feeling for a place is influenced by knowledge,”⁵ and folklore and folk art constitute the traditional knowledge we have about the places in which we live. **Folk artists are our indigenous teachers.**

Integrating Folk Arts and the Folk Artist into the Curriculum

If the community is a living museum, then the professional folklorist is its curator, and as such has an important role to play in identifying and interpreting the folk culture of an area and in working with educators to integrate the indigenous cultural resources of the community into the curriculum. There are many contexts within the curriculum where this integration can happen: history and the social sciences, the natural sciences, the humanities and the arts, even physical education.

Social Studies and History

For the folk artist, what he knows is truly a part of who he is, part of a way of life. Those who carry traditions - and we all do in different ways - carry a living history. Old-timers are eyewitnesses to life in the region over extended period of time. The younger folk artists dramatize the continuity of traditions in the community. Each folk artist is a primary source of the culture and traditions of the area, and can be integrated into local history components of the curriculum.

Such an approach to history and social studies can help children to identify with their community and its cultures, and to be proud of the indigenous forms of expression they may be expected to inherit. “Awareness of the past is an important element in the love of place,”⁶ and folk artists can help children to develop strong affective ties with the place they inhabit. Let us consider how an adult experiences where he lives, in contrast with a child:

Place can acquire deep meaning for the adult through the steady accretion of sentiment over the years. Every piece of heirloom furniture, or even a stain on the wall, tells a story. The child not only has a short past, but his eyes more than adult’s are on the present and immediate future. His vitality for doing things and exploring space is not suited to the reflective pause and backward glance that makes places seem saturated with significance.⁷

⁵ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

For a child, places are not yet “haunted by memories.”⁸ Hareven suggests that Americans suffer from a chronically short generational memory:

By comparison to other cultures, for most Americans generational memory is employed here broadly to encompass the memories which individuals have of their own family’s history, as well as more general collective memories of the past. Most people do not even remember, or never knew, their grandfathers’ occupation or place of birth...A sense of history does not depend on the depth of generational memory, but identity and conscience do, because they rest on the linkage of the individual’s life history and family history with specific historical moments.⁹

In contrast, for the folk artist, the past is long, longer than his individual life, as long as the memories that his parents and grandparents transmitted to him. In curriculum, the folk artist functions as yet another link in a chain that connects the present with the past. For the folk artist, places are saturated with meaning and haunted memories. As a result, the folk artist in the school can foster the kind of familiarity with the immediate environment that breeds affection, not contempt.¹⁰

Folk artists are living links in the historical chain, eye witnesses to history, shapers of a vital and indigenous way of life. They are unparalleled in the vividness and authenticity they can bring to the study of local history and culture, to any discussion of where we live and what it means.

The Natural Science

Folklore is traditional knowledge, and this knowledge extends to the arts of physical survival as well as to the arts of social life. Local people know the landscape, the seasons, the plants, the animals, the ecology of their region intimately. This knowledge, acquired informally from others, includes terminology for the natural environment, traditions for how to use plants to make baskets, build houses, stave hunger, prevent and cure illness, colorful stories that account for why things are the way they are. Peculiar land forms, the shapes of leaves, the marks on birds, the habits of animals—these are not fortuitous, but come together to give a place its distinctive character. The traditional stories that explain how such forms came to be, and the customs associated with the natural world and how it can be used to benefit people, transform the otherwise fortuitous environment into a purposeful place. Traditional knowledge of the natural environment and its uses us a vital link in the attachment to not only in the classroom but also on field trips, hikes, and other outings.

The Arts and Humanities

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Tamara K. Hareven, “The Search for Generational Memory: Tribal Rites in Industrial Society,” *Daedalus* 107 (1978): 137.

¹⁰ Tuan, *Topophilia*, p. 99.

Barre Toelken characterizes the folk arts, which he considers synonyms with folklore, in terms of their pervasiveness:

The folk arts...are not excerpted from everyday life for special scrutiny or elevation of taste or intellectual curiosity. On the contrary, what makes folk art different from fine arts is precisely that it is based on the aesthetic perception, expression, and appreciation of the community adventures of everyday life.¹¹

Folk artists are connoisseurs of eloquent talk, storytelling, wit and humor, apt metaphor, the crafted object, fine wood, the well-orchestrated celebrations. In a word, folk artists are connoisseurs of the arts of living.

Verbal art, the art of speaking well, takes many forms. Curriculum in language and literature could be enriched by the inclusions of traditional raconteurs, who know how to spin fantasies with nothing more than the spoken word. The rich traditions of speech metaphor and rhyming couplets in Afro-American communities would provide an alternative perceptiveness on the resources of non-standard English.

Traditional songs, sung for generations, express deep feeling and deeply felt values. Exposed to popular music through the media, and to classical music through the schools, students need to encounter the musical traditions of their communities through folk artists who still carry them.

Similarly, the objects of folk art - baskets, quilts, toys, tools, tombstones, buildings, decoys, cuisine, needlework - these too are part of the indigenous culture of the community. They are "everyday things made for daily use, which are appreciated for the skill and imagination required to produce them." I need only recall the daily satisfaction of an Italian cheese making family in Manhattan, as customers return with praise for their homemade mozzarella, ricotta, and rigatoni. Before the eyes of their customers, they made the cheese on a steel drum in the street. Here and there, perched on ledges and shelves are little mozzarella elephants, giraffes, and cows. The animals are made for feast days. For five generations, this family has made cheese and has maintained a small business with pride in the heart of a big city. Each contact is made with loving care, as if one were the only person in the crowded shop and time had no limit. The knowledge and pride of these folk artists enrich the lives of those they feed. This is an accessible aesthetic.

Encounters with folk artists can help students to understand the range of evaluative judgments that can constitute their aesthetic, an aesthetic that may contract sharply with ones encountered in the study of classical music, English literature, art history, or ballet. Folk artists, working within a local community canon of taste, offer an especially rich opportunity to explore the relation of the individual talent to tradition.

There are many dimensions to the accessible aesthetic that folk artists exemplify in the standards of excellence that they apply to their métier. For many folk artists, to succeed

¹¹ Barre Toelken, *The Dynamics of Folklore* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), p. 185.

is to “produce an excellent performance within a traditional form,”¹² rather than to create a unique item. Individual genius is realized in the production of the quintessential quilt or basket. Individualism and originality may not be valued per se, though folk artists do innovate and do pull community sensibility with them in new directions.

For other folk artists, value is placed on the metaphysical resonance of a form or motif. Ida Moffett prefers Easter eggs decorated with a wheat design:

There’s something about the wheat/symbol/that I like. Maybe it’s because I remember Mother’s scolding if we dropped a crumb of wheat on the floor, ‘cause wheat meant a lot to people in Europe. That was life, and as long as we had wheat, we had nothing to worry about. Mother always said it was life, ‘cause wheat was life to her. ‘Cause I know when we kids would drop even a crumb, we had to pick it up. We could not throw half a slice of bread away to the dog because she used to say, “As long as you have wheat, you can live.”¹³

Metaphysics and biography are intertwined in Ida Moffett’s account.

Indeed, biographical resonance is a particularly important part of the aesthetic of many folk artists. Speaking of the ten big bags of scraps she had accumulated for making quilts, one woman said, “Different ones of my family are always appearing from one of these bags. Just when you thought you’d forgotten someone, well, like right here... I remember that patch. That was a dress that my grandmother wore to church. I sat beside her singing hymns, and that dress was so pretty to me then. I can just remember her in that dress now.”¹⁴

For others, the value of what they make lies in their being a remedial social action. Of her mother, a prolific doll maker, Adele Wiseman writes: “Redeemer of waste, champion of leftovers, savior of non-biodegradables, apostle of continuous creation, she has this hunger to find and establish new relations among things, and so create new things.”¹⁵ Of her own dolls, Wiseman’s mother says: “Sometimes I think about the background of families that don’t treat children so good as should be done, and I think if they have nice dolls the children will be happy and forget.”¹⁶ Wiseman’s mother never sells her dolls, and her daughter saves them to remind her of “the true function of arts as one of life’s great gifts that undiminished in sharing.”¹⁷

According to Charley, an Appalachian chair maker, his grandfather’s chairs “weren’t comfortable but one thing about it, my grandfather’s chairs—if you could see one today—it’d be good and stout. They didn’t make for the beauty part they made for the lastin’ part, he did.”¹⁸ Durability, indestructibility, these are the qualities valued here.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 183.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹⁴ Cooper and Bufere, *The Quilters*, p. 75.

¹⁵ Adele Wiseman, ms., p. 38.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹⁸ Michael Owen Jones, *The Hand Made Object and Its Maker* (Berkeley: University of

Other evaluative criteria include the antiquity of the form, the appropriateness of methods used—there may be more than one way to skin a cat, but not all ways may be considered proper—the acceptability of the message, the styling of the performance of object, and even novelty. Old jokes are hissed at; new ones are recognized as jokes, but are appreciated for the freshness.

All of these modes of evaluation may coexist in a community, but may be invoked under different circumstances. Understanding these kinds of aesthetic judgments broadens a child's appreciation of his own culture. Indeed, children already apply many of these standards to their own expressive forms—games, stories, jokes, riddles, rhymes, toys and others.

The Role of the Folklorist

The professional folklorist has three important functions to fulfill. First, folklorists are in an ideal position to identify the folk cultural resources in a community. They have been trained in the techniques of fieldwork, are sensitive to the many forms that the folk arts can take, and are aware of how these traditions are transmitted, evaluated, and how they function in the lives and communities of the folk artists. Second, and for this reason, folklorists can ensure that folk artists are effectively incorporated in the curriculum. Aware of the relevance of the folk arts for many parts of the curriculum, folklorists can make certain that the folk artist figures as more than a pleasant interlude in a student's studies. Third, folklorists are particularly aware of the natural habitat of folk cultural traditions and the care that must be taken to ensure that folk artists are comfortable in the school setting, and that their valuable knowledge is conveyed and interpreted under optimal conditions. Many of the folk arts thrive in the intimacy of the home, among family and friends. Folklorists are aware of the care that needs to be taken when presenting folk artists and their skills "out of context." They are also concerned with the dangers of certain traditions and older practitioners of inappropriate exposure and can help to foster relationships between folk artists and the schools that will strengthen the folk arts while enhancing the curriculum.

Conclusion

In an eloquent presidential address before the American Folklore Society in 1974. Dell Hymes captured the mission of the folklorist:

Succinctly put, folklorists believe that capacity for the aesthetic experience, for shaping deeply felt values into meaningful apposite form, is present in all communities, and will find some means of expression among all. We do not disdain concert halls, art museums, quiet libraries, far from it—most of us are university scholars and that is part of our life. **But our work is rooted in the recognition that beauty, form and meaningful expression may arise wherever people have a chance, even half a chance to share what they enjoy or must endure. We prize that recognition above fashions or prestige. And we see it**

as the way to understand a fundamental aspect of human nature and human life.

This is what the folk artist can bring to life in the classroom.

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