

National Heritage Fellows Portrait Gallery

by Alan Govenar and Paddy Bowman

The annual National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowships began in 1982 to honor the excellence of folk artists who represent diverse communities throughout the United States. The portraits in this gallery portray artists who have mastered their art forms through years of study with elders and family members. They are also active teachers of their traditions. The gallery features life-sized photographs by folklorist and photographer Alan Govenar. This fall Local Learning will launch a portal featuring Heritage Fellows' portraits on our website as inspiration for learning to make photographic portraits of local masters of traditional arts in students' lives.



Sue Yeon Park, photo by Alan Govenar

Although cultural groups different from our own may appear exotic or hard to understand, all cultural groups share common ways of life that call for ritual, celebration, custom, music, crafts, dance, food, stories and special language—in other words, folklore. Activities in this gallery provide tools to read photographs as text, address cultural assumptions, and discover new traditions and artists.

Traditions are not frozen in time but are alive and part of an ongoing process. To be a master is to be creative. National Heritage Fellows are teachers in their families and communities, passing on their complex, hard-won skills and knowledge.

Below are three websites that creatively present the lives and artistry of this unique group of American master artists.

--Find profiles of all the Heritage Fellows and the webcast of the 2014 concert on the NEA website <http://arts.gov/honors/heritage>.

--Experience virtual artist residencies with Heritage Fellows on the Local Learning website <http://locallearningnetwork.org/guest-artist>

--Explore the online *Masters of Traditional Arts Education Guide*, by Paddy Bowman and Alan Govenar, featuring lessons, activities, and multimedia clips of Heritage Fellows. www.mastersoftraditionalarts.org.

Alan Govenar is director of Documentary Arts in Dallas and New York City, and **Paddy Bowman** directs Local Learning.

Classroom Application: Reading Portraits

Choose one Heritage Fellow portrait to study carefully. Do not look at the artists' bios yet!

1. "Reading" a photograph is like reading any text. Look closely at the portrait for one minute.

What clues to the artist's life and art form do you see?

What do gesture, objects, clothing, hairstyle, and facial expressions reveal?

What title would you give this portrait?

2. Before reading the artist's bio, answer these questions.

What do you think the artist does?

Where do you think the artist lives?

What clues inform your assumptions?

What do you know about this art form?

3. Read the artist's bio.

What surprised you?

What did you assume correctly?

What did you assume incorrectly?

What questions would you want to ask the artist?

4. Write an exhibition label for this portrait describing how the choice of dress and adornment relates to the artist's cultural identity.



Henry Gray (2006), photo by Alan Govenar



Kamala Lakshmi Narayanan (2010), photo by Alan Govenar



George Na'ope (2006), photo by Alan Govenar



Sue Yeon Park (2008), photo by Alan Govenar



Henry Gray
Blues piano player, singer
2006 NEA National Heritage Fellow
Baton Rouge, LA

Henry Gray was born January 19, 1925. While growing up on a farm in Alsen, Louisiana, a few miles north of Baton Rouge, he began playing piano when he was about eight years old. An elderly woman in the neighborhood, Mrs. White, gave him lessons, and he began playing piano and organ at church. After serving in the Army in the South Pacific in World War II, Gray joined the African American migration from the South to Chicago. In 1968, Gray returned home to Louisiana after the death of his father to help his mother in the family business. While working as a roofer for a local school district and raising a family, he played in clubs around Baton Rouge. Eventually he began recording and touring again, both at home and overseas, playing and singing classic blues covers and his own originals.

Since the 1920s blues musicians have chosen to wear suits and ties in photographs as an indication of their professional stature. Dressing well was a great equalizer for African Americans and even more so for blues musicians, who were often considered to be rough outsiders. Wearing a suit meant a man was determined and prepared for life. In his portrait, contemporary bluesman Henry Gray plays with his name, sporting a dapper gray suit with pleated pants and a black and white piano keyboard tie with his name written in red. His black and white shirt also riffs on the piano motif. Like many blues and jazz musicians, he wears a brimmed hat.

Kamala Lakshmi Narayanan
Bharatanatyam Indian dancer
2010 NEA National Heritage Fellow
Mastic, NY

Bharatanatyam dancers wear highly ornamented costumes that project the spiritual into the material world. Facial expressions and gestures symbolize an idea or emotion. In this ancient dance of south India that remains widespread today, dancers strike dramatic poses and their rhythmic footwork is made audible by an anklet of copper bells. Master dancers like Kamala Lakshmi Narayanan wear more rows of bells since expertise is measured by how little the bells jingle. Makeup, bangle bracelets, earrings, and rings make gestures and expressions more visible to the audience, but for this portrait Kamala Lakshmi Narayanan chose not to wear makeup, making the viewer think more about her costume and gestural movement. In this photo she is demonstrating *Karuna* (compassion or kindness), one of the nine *rasas* (emotions) known as the *navarasas* in Bharatanatyam. Although the costume of bright colors and a contrasting border looks like a sari, which is made from one piece of cloth, it is made from several pieces of cloth.



Kamala Lakshmi Narayanan, born June 16, 1934, in Mayuram, India, began dancing when she was five years old. While growing up in Bombay (now Mumbai), in northern India, she began learning the region's style of classical dance, *Kathak*, whose name means "telling stories." During World War II, her family moved to southern India and she began learning Bharatanatyam, a style that dates back thousands of years and, according to legend, was given to people by Brahma, the creator, as a gift of beauty and happiness during a time of great turmoil. The dance style has been called poetry in motion because of its fluidity and expressiveness.



George Na'ope
Kumu Hula (Hula Master)
2006 NEA National Heritage
Fellow
Hilo, HI

George Na'ope was born February 25, 1928, in Hawaii and was known there as "Uncle George." He devoted his life to preserving the ancient traditions of his people. "In the ancient hula and in all of our chants are the history of Hawaii." Na'ope saw progress from his days in school, when teaching the Hawaiian language and traditions was forbidden. "All of the schools are teaching hula now. I'm glad they're emphasizing the ancient dances in the schools and the youngsters are beginning to learn to chant in the Hawaiian language. They are learning the language in the schools, which is very, very good. "The hula is the ability to create one's most inner feelings with the love and respect for our culture."

As a deeply beloved Hawaiian musician and hula master, George Na'ope pushed the boundaries of traditional Hawaiian dress and wore individualistic, often flamboyant clothing, hats, jewelry, and leis. In this portrait, his long white lei, Polynesian print shirt, and ukulele are an expression of his distinctiveness, self-confidence, and stature in his community. Known on the mainland as the Hawaiian shirt and printed with flowers or Polynesian motifs, the Aloha shirt was first made and marketed by a Japanese immigrant to Hawaii in the 1930s. This loose-fitting shirt is worn untucked and usually has short sleeves and a left breast pocket. (See the story of another iconic shirt, the *guayabera*, in this issue.) The ukulele was adapted from instruments brought by Portuguese immigrants to Hawaii in the 1880s. The lei is an important symbol of love and friendship. The flowers and leaves and type of braiding are symbolic of different places and occasions.

In her portrait, Sue Yeon Park wears her costume for the *Salpuri* form of Korean dance, which is rooted in ancient shamanism. The solo dancer expresses both beauty and sadness to bring peace after a loss. The long, billowy white dress, called a *hanbok*, covers the feet, on which are worn *beo-seon* socks. The hanbok has a blouse, skirt, and belt. Controlled movements with a large white silk handkerchief are an important part of the dance and symbolize the dancer's state of mind and emphasize her subtle movements. Sue Yeon Park chose not to wear the elaborate face makeup that practitioners of this dance usually wear, showing more deeply how the costume is a medium of expression.



Sue Yeon Park
Korean dancer and
musician
2008 NEA National
Heritage Fellow
New York, NY

Sue Yeon Park was born August 22, 1958, on Kanghwa, an island near the mouth of the Han River in South Korea. Her family was deeply involved with shamanic Buddhism, and Park became obsessed with the shaman's dance when she was very young. She once skipped school to attend a *gut*, a two- or three-day ritual performed by a *mudang*, or shaman. The shaman sings and dances during the *gut*, usually accompanied by three or four musicians who are typically family members. In the Seoul area, the *gut* includes a banquet followed by music and dancing. When Park was eleven, she became so carried away by post-banquet dancing that she grabbed the shaman's *jango*, an hourglass shaped drum, and danced with it. The shaman told Park's mother that the child would become either a professional dancer or a *kangshin mudang*, a shaman who has no hereditary ties to the profession but receives the spirits.