

**The Nature of Folk and Vernacular Art in Canada**  
**Report on the Stanley House Conference organized by the**  
**Dalhousie University Art Gallery and sponsored by the Canada**  
**Council, 24–28 July 1978**

Thomas Lackey

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# *The Nature of Folk and Vernacular Art in Canada*

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Eleven participants and two observers gathered at the Canada Council's Stanley House on the Gaspé peninsula for the first conference to deal specifically with the ambiguous areas of folk and vernacular art in Canada. The purpose of the meeting was not to attempt a final definition for the areas under discussion; it was rather to introduce areas of concentration being explored by researchers who had, up to this time, been working in relative isolation and without any Canadian system of intellectual or institutional support. Formal papers were not requested, and presentations were offered in an informal discussion setting with topics ranging across a broad spectrum. Since so much scholarly work remains to be done in this field no attempt was made, at this point, to define closely connected themes in the work illustrated nor to determine discrete categories for the types of art discussed.

Bruce Ferguson, Director of the Dalhousie University Art Gallery, introduced the sessions by briefly reviewing the short history of Canadian institutional and intellectual interest in the subject and by discussing the difficulty of placing in a coherent context the various forms of art that have been popularly labeled 'folk art.' He noted that these forms range from the studied production of itinerant portrait limners in the eighteenth century to contemporary yard environments and even personal adaptations of twentieth-century hard technology.

The Dalhousie Art Gallery's folk art researcher, Thomas Lackey, presented the results of two years' work conducted under a grant from the Museums Assistance Programme aimed at compiling an archive of photographs and documentation on Canadian folk art forms. The basic purpose of the archive was to record non-native arts: primarily the product of European and Slavic immigrant groups. Institutions were surveyed by questionnaire but priority was attached to those pieces which were privately held or still in the possession of the maker. Since no collection of documentation existed for objects in many individual collections across the country, the archive was developed as a way of providing an information base on

which to build further, in-depth research on the various object types.

Wesley Mattie, Curator of Artifacts, Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, outlined the history and holdings of this division of the National Museum of Man (Fig. 1). The collection was begun during the Québec folklore researches of Marius Barbeau. When a separate folk culture studies division was established in the late 1960s, pieces from the Barbeau collection formed the base for a new collection whose mandate was to acquire objects of folk material culture in connection with ethnological and folkloric material. While the collection includes all types of utilitarian objects, there is a large proportion of pieces that fall within the general category of folk art. These works range from utilitarian objects that have received decorative treatment to pieces of purely decorative or whimsical intent. Since the collection has only recently become available for public display, the principal concern of Mr. Mattie's presentation was to introduce major works and object types from the collection to the other members of the conference.

Art historian J. Russell Harper, Concordia University, contrasted the apparent aloofness of modern elite art forms to the aesthetic accessibility of folk art forms. The latter are more accessible not only to the original maker and his audience, but also to the modern public. These observations were offered in the context of his criteria for the selection of works included in the *People's Art* exhibition mounted by the National Gallery of Canada in 1973. The art was selected on the basis of each object's 'integrity and impact' illustrating 'the ordinary man's fertile imagination.' Harper also expressed concern over the current fashionable place that folk art occupies in the art and antique market with its usually unfortunate impact on the appreciation and production of works.

Yard art and environments were discussed by Pierre Théberge, Curator of Contemporary Canadian Art at the National Gallery of Canada. Instead of employing the unique handmade object, many contemporary yard artists make extensive use of cast-off industrial or

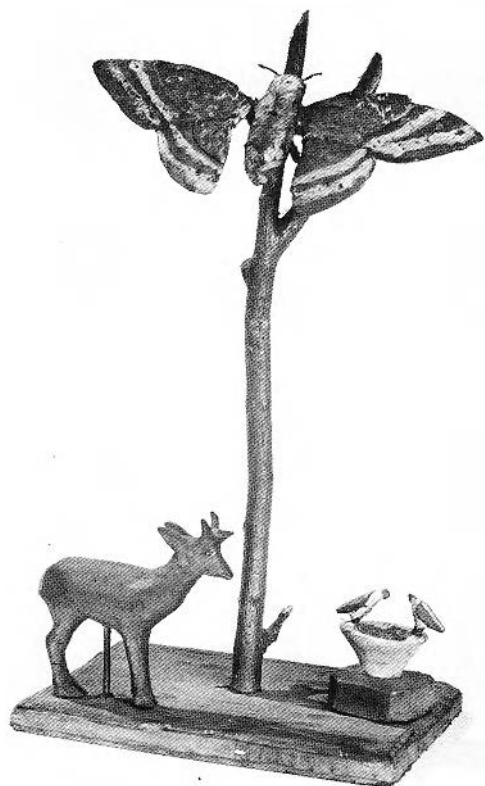


FIGURE 1. Anonymous Québec folk artist, Miniature butterfly, deer, and birds. Ottawa, National Museum of Man (Photo: National Museums of Canada).



FIGURE 2. Anna Weber, Illuminated page for Judith Hoffman, 1873. Waterloo County, collection Dr. Michael Bird (Photo: Phyllis Waugh, Fine Arts Archives, University of Waterloo).

commercial products. These scavenged objects, including tires, bleach bottles, plastic flowers, and hubcaps become invested with uniqueness by their arrangement and, frequently, the application of painted designs. Handmade pieces may also be included in this bricolage environment but no particular stress will be laid upon the handmade over the manufactured item. His premise was illustrated by examples drawn from the work of Arthème Saint-Germain of Thurso, Québec, a portion of whose work is now included in the collection of the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies.

Nancy-Lou Patterson, Associate Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Waterloo, traced the cultural geography of the Germanic Mennonite settlers in Southern Ontario (Fig. 2). The Dutch-German Mennonite assimilation of Ukrainian folk forms was traced through their migrations from Germany into the Ukraine and then into Waterloo County and the Canadian West during the Russian upheavals of the 1920s. Swiss-German migrations through the Rhenish Palatinate to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and then into Southern Ontario by the late eighteenth century were discussed in conjunction with the evolution of the

Germanic 'tree of life' and 'paradise garden' floral motifs. The Old Order Mennonite response to an ostensibly non-decorative philosophy was illustrated through their assimilation of popular forms such as pictorial calendars, the 'home place' drawings of family farms, and figurative renderings of popular clothing fashions by young girls whose religion forbade the wearing of such clothing.

From Regina, the Dunlop Art Gallery's Director, Wayne Morgan, discussed the response of a group of Saskatchewan carvers to their agrarian environment as manifested in their detailed miniature working models of farm machinery. A respect for the technology was evident in the subordination of expressiveness to detailed accuracy. Morgan also examined the particularly twentieth-century North American popular art phenomenon of pinball machine gameboards. He explored the development of the artist's response to the ethos of the 'Wild West,' adventure, romance, and to rapid technological change which affected both the content of the art and the nature of the pinball game itself. This accessible source of popular imagery, together with the comic book, have a readily traceable

upward mobility into the contemporary fine art of North America.

Ralph Price, a dealer and collector from Port Perry, Ontario, dealt with two major issues concerning the acquisition of folk art objects: accurate documentation and the relationship of buyer to living folk artist. Dealers are on the 'front line' in the purchase of many objects when they emerge from private hands, yet may be the last people with the opportunity to gather complete and exact information about the piece. Problems in documentation arise when the dealer buys through a middle man who conceals a source or alters the provenance in an attempt to increase the value of an object. An acute problem in working with an art form that is still vital but operating outside of the artist, dealer, gallery complex, is that of dealing directly with a living folk artist. Extreme care must be exercised to avoid influencing the production methods or motives of the maker.

The unique position of the fox image in Prince Edward Island folk art was the topic for Richard Field, collector and editor of *Arts Atlantic* magazine in Charlottetown. The use of the fox image springs quite naturally from the extensive fox farming that was carried on in P.E.I. during the first third of the twentieth century. Not only were the foxes themselves an obvious source of inspiration, but popular forms of commercial art were image sources that became incorporated into folk forms. Souvenir ceramic dishes with fox decals, potato sacks with a fox image as part of the company logo, and commercial illustration served as models. The potato sacks were the actual starting point for the traditional media of rug hooking, painting, and metal work (see RACAR, v: 2, 1978-79, 154, Fig. 5).

Jack Forbes, head of the Ceramics Department of the Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta, and the

prime mover behind the planned restoration of the Medalta Potteries in Medicine Hat, described the use of a particular waste brick form in Southern Alberta vernacular architecture. Abundant clay and natural gas made Southern Alberta a natural site for extensive ceramic production. Crude firing techniques in the production of brick invariably left a waste product of melted and unusable masses of clay which were thrown away or given to whoever would cart the pieces from the site. These salvaged lumps were then incorporated into an otherwise conventional brick structure and their irregular and often fantastic shape led to the making of considered aesthetic decisions in order to create a unified decorative wall surface.

The strong but relatively recent interest in American folk art was traced by Louis Jones, Director Emeritus of the Cooperstown Graduate Program in American Folk Culture Studies of the State University of New York and the New York State Historical Association. Beginning with the collection of Robert Laurent at the Ogunquit School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine during the 1920s, a series of young American artists were exposed to, and became interested in, objects of American folk art. This interest found public expression when Edith Halpert of the Downtown Gallery in Greenwich Village introduced Holger Cahill to Laurent and his collection. Cahill organized the two seminal folk art exhibitions at the Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey, in 1930 and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1932. These exhibitions were accompanied by Cahill's catalogues which established folk art as a subject for serious academic and scholarly interest in the United States.

THOMAS LACKEY  
*Halifax*