

THE INDEX OF AMERICAN DESIGN

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Hooked rug. Ca. 1838, probably made in New Hampshire. Index of American Design, National Gallery of Art.

*Excerpted from the Introduction of
THE INDEX OF AMERICAN DESIGN
by E. O. Christensen.*

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"The Index of American Design is a record made by artists of a chapter in American history which is largely anonymous. It is the story, told in pictures of articles of daily use and adornment in this country from early colonial times to the close of the nineteenth century. In the main it is devoted to the craft traditions which dominated American production for more than two hundred years and left their heritage to the developing mass-production technology, which has impressed its forms on our contemporary culture.

"The Index is the result of a conjunction of circumstance dur-

ing the depression of the 1930s. It was organized in response to several needs: the need of artists for employment, the need of the Government work program to devise projects which would maintain the skills of the unemployed, and a public need for pictorial information on American design and craftsmanship. The appreciation of American Folk and popular art, which forms one of the major categories of the Index, grew more slowly. It had two main sources: the ethnological collection which has made us aware of design horizons beyond our own Western tradition, and the rise of modern art.



"Modern artists helped to educate ethnologists and the museum public to the aesthetic quality of primitive, folk and popular art. Study of the art of primitive people led to an interest in the art of peasants, artisans and amateurs. In the second decade of this century folk art received recognition through its incorporation in the collections of such notables as John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and exhibits at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Colonial Williamsburg and The Museum of Modern Art in New York.

"There is this double aspect in the work of the craftsman who is a bearer of folk memory in the

arts. This folk memory, which is amazingly tenacious, is a storehouse of the technical and symbolic innovations of the past, and, on more than one occasion has prepared the way for new developments. It tells the story of creativeness and inventive change when traditional design failed to meet new problems. The inventiveness that reshapes forms in response to the needs of a changing environment and the stimulating influence of one tradition upon another is reflected many times in the Index.

"The Index, as it stands, is the largest and most comprehensive collection of its kind in the

world. But it is not complete. The Second World War brought the activities of the project to an end before its work was done in any state and before much had been accomplished in the South. The first need of the Index is completion. The second is a wider distribution of its pictorial information. The National Gallery of Art tried to meet this through making Index material available to students through exhibitions . . . The question of availability is important because the Index is of value not only for the designer, the craftsman and the manufacturer but even more for the historian, the student and the gen-



*Cornhusk doll tied with cornsilk.
Designed by a Tennessee mountaineer.
Index of American Design,
National Gallery of Art.*

eral public. As the late Constance Rourke, one of the soundest students of American culture, has phrased it: "Not the least of the revelations of the Index may be those offered to the student of American social history. Fresh light may be thrown upon ways of living which developed within the highly diversified communities of our many frontiers and this may in turn give us new knowledge of the American mind and temperament. Finally, if the materials of the Index can be widely seen, they should offer an education to the eye, particularly for young people, which may result in the development of taste and a genuine consciousness of our rich national inheritance."

The aim of the Index of American Design was to: Record material of historical significance which had not heretofore been studied and which stood in danger of being lost, to gather a body of traditional material which could form the basis of an organic development of American Design, to make usable source records of this material accessible to artists, designers, manufacturers, museums, libraries and the general public, and to give employment to painters, graphic artists, photographers and commercial artists. The Index recorded objects not only in museums but from private collections and scattered family heirlooms. They were all recorded in water color renderings and are available in photographs or slides at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. The Index is maintained as a source of information on American design up to the twentieth century.