

## THE HISTORIC ROOTS OF AMERICAN FOLKLIFE

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Folklife in America is essentially a condition of the past; even where it still exists it belongs to the past. Documenting and recording and collecting the artifacts of folklife where it survives today are therefore of prime importance to the cultural and social historian. In the traditional patterns of daily existence and the sounds, forms, and techniques of folklife are the ingredients to help us understand better the origins of our own culture. Yet, in a world from which it is already possible to escape into space and return alive, where today's events occurring on one side of the earth can be seen in the remotest parts of the other half, where a fourth dimension of time-space reduces distance to insignificance, where electric power transforms daily tasks into almost automatic simplicity—in such a world, with its homogenizing components, folklife is a vanishing anachronism which no amount of artifice can cause to endure. Many of the folk crafts still continue to be practiced, fortunately; but increasingly the stimulus for their survival is an urban, sophisticated market, far removed from the original essence of their identification with a folklife now nearing extinction. While today's city-bred customers thus help to prolong traditional skills, the motivation changes and the product becomes a different one.

Until the urbanization and industrialization of America, virtually all life here was fundamentally folklife. In the cities, to be sure, and even in the country, the sophisticated arts like silversmithing flourished

*Overmantle painting in the parlor  
from the Crowell House,  
Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts.*



and elegant architecture graced the landscape. Expensive Oriental porcelains found their way into remote plantation houses in the South as well as merchants' mansions in the North, while the formally designed glass and ceramics of 18th-century English factories provided intellectualized accoutrements for many people who considered themselves persons of "good taste."

Notwithstanding, there was an almost never-absent element of folk expression that went alongside sophisticated imports and urban skills. A notable example, now in the Smithsonian's Hall of Everyday Life in the American Past, is the parlor of the Crowell house, built in Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts, in 1808. The woodwork of this room shows the accomplished hand of a skilled cabinetmaker, probably working from an imported builder's handbook. Yet, set permanently into the overmantle is featured a naive landscape painting that meets all of the criteria of true folk art. Dominated by this single element, the room as a whole, therefore, becomes a folk expression.

In the same hall is exhibited a log house, built originally near Wilmington, Delaware, about 1740. It is a classic example of Middle Atlantic vernacular, or folk, architecture. Yet along one wall of its living room, surrounding an enormous fireplace, is paneled sheathing of great sophistication. Here, again, is juxtaposition of folk form and refined form, where the latter is merged and absorbed as a part of the basic folk expression.

All through the colonial period and well into the nineteenth



*"Sir William Pitt" carved by Joseph Wilson.*

century, folk crafts were practiced in the towns as well as in the country. Pottery, for example, was made in a manner that adhered to ancient traditions, supplying utensils for cooking and dairying purposes that were governed by centuries of folk custom. The Smithsonian's collections are rich with such creative materials. Similarly, woodcarvers in coastal towns made ships' figureheads that are often masterpieces of folk art. One of these, Joseph Wilson, carved a group of historic and mythologic personages for the eccentric "Lord" Timothy Dexter of Newburyport, Massachusetts, late

in the eighteenth century. One of the figures, representing William Pitt and exhibited in the Growth of the United States halls, is a unique example of three-dimensional folk art. Despite the upper-class gentility of Federal-period Newburyport, Lord Timothy was an earthy character for whom the picturesque assemblage of folk sculptures provided meaning and satisfaction. In York, Pennsylvania, Lewis Miller left a most remarkable written and pictorial document which, besides being folk art in itself, is a demonstration of how completely the customs, skills, and activities of a pre-industrial American community combined to define a pattern of folklife.

Today, true folklife and folk expressions, fragile and flickering in a few belated cultural pockets, are like stubs of candles guttering in the breeze. The impact of modern technology, communications, and social attitudes is speedily relegating them to the historic past. In the brief, dying interval in which they still exist, however, we are making haste to observe them and see, as it were, the past still living. As a part of the work of the Museum of History and Technology, we are recording craftsmanship and music in a few last outposts of folklife, and are collecting the objects that are made there, to be placed alongside materials of greater antiquity. In this way, the people of earlier generations whose artifacts we collect come alive again, making more meaningful our relations to them and their now-stilled activities and skills. In so doing, we learn more about ourselves and whence we came.