



---

# FOLKLIFE

---

AN INTERVIEW  
WITH  
S. DILLON RIPLEY  
SECRETARY  
OF THE  
SMITHSONIAN  
INSTITUTION

---

# AND THE

---

SMITH- CONDUCTED  
BY

---

# SONIAN

---

INSTI- JAMES R. MORRIS  
AND  
RALPH RINZLER

---

# TUTION

---



JRM

Numerous Smithsonian activities are aimed at bringing people to the museums and museums to the people. The *Smithsonian Magazine* and the Smithsonian Associates programs are two. How do you view the relationship of festivals to the museums?

SDR

A museum should be an open experience. People should be flowing in and out of the buildings, experiencing a sense of connection between their own lives and the history of their culture. And so, when they come into the Smithsonian museums, rather than feeling that they have walked through some invisible barrier into the past, they should enter without any sense of a barrier, carrying the present with them and realizing that the past is alive, that the past is a part of them, and that the past has messages for them.

These messages are that people are individuals, that they make things, that they sing and dance and play creatively, that they don't simply sit as passive spectators of a life that's going on through television or through another medium. The messages should say, rather, that they, themselves, can participate. They are individuals; they have one life; they should enjoy themselves; and they can educate themselves as they do so. So it seems to me, and always has, that a museum can be a constant revivifying force. It's not usually realized as such by people. It is, rather, generally assumed that you have to walk into a museum as a kind of experience, through some invisible barrier, and, once you are in there, you look at things that are all surely dead.

There is, of course, a fascination to cultures and life forms that no longer exist. Children are fascinated by sarcophagi in which they might be able to glimpse a mummy. They are fascinated by dinosaurs, deliciously reassured as they hold their mother's hand that the dinosaurs are dead. Old fears can be laid away just by seeing stuffed cave bears.

But there is much more to a museum than that. It is one of the few resources for people that reminds them not only of the history of which they are inextricably a part, but also that that history is alive and breathing. Things are being made and done all the time that are similar, perhaps even identical, to what they see in an exhibit. The instruments, the craft objects, and folk objects are not quaint examples of the past, of people who are all dead, of people who made things while we simply buy things. They are, rather, examples of the eternal creativeness of people which, essentially, keeps people alive, gives them interest and excitement.

I have been fascinated thinking about the fact that this year the folk festival will feature the sovereign state of Ohio. We are going to be honored and graced on the middle of the Mall by that state. It's a tremendous revelation to realize that Ohio, that great big central state, has so much that is so vital to the central theme which I have been trying to describe as the ideal role of the museum.

So, we can take a state like Ohio and profit by the combination of ethnic cultures that exist there—well, alive, and kicking—by the things that are made there, by the music and, furthermore, by the food. Think of apple butter. It just makes your mouth water. And the baking of Moravian love feast buns. What could be more exciting than to crunch into a crispy love feast bun? And think of the extraordinary variety of bands and music—the Blue Grass band, the Ukrainian bandurra bands, the mountain string bands, the blues.

All of this is a revelation surely, not only for us, but for Ohioans themselves. So I think it's this kind of discovery of our own nation that the festival can foster. I think you have been extraordinarily adroit in pinning the festival to an individual state, because this brings out new revelations about the continuum of our folk culture, which is a constant surprise and a delight to everybody.

I am fascinated too by the contact that this gives us with the American Indians and the pleasure they seem to derive from their contact with us. I think the festival is one of the most important things that we can do to remind all of



about the stars. I don't know if it is true or not. But certainly Henry and Lincoln were well acquainted. Lincoln was much interested in Henry's experiments, we know that.

Professor Henry must have been an important and symbolic figure in his time. Here he was, in the middle of the Mall, *the* professor in the Capital. He must have been quite an object of veneration as he grew older.

You know, he developed a sort of a horror about art because of the fire in 1865 in January, which gutted the east end of the building. The fire was due to a faulty flue. Henry himself rescued a number of paintings and carried them out. They were mostly the paintings of John McStanley, the painter of Indians. He was so horrified by the fact that this fireproof building had had a fire in it that he asked the Corcoran Gallery, which was starting then, to store all the Smithsonian's art works, because he was simply afraid that they would be otherwise burned.

Henry was an extremely gifted man. He had wide cultural interests and had traveled in Europe to study architecture and art. He was interested in the fate of people who lived in cities. He was worried about their morals and about their health. He was really interested in everything. And around him, I think, more folklore has developed than around anybody else connected with the Smithsonian.

RR

You hit upon one thing, Mr. Ripley, which seems to be a key to your interest in the festival, and that is variety. The festival itself is bent on stressing the fact that American culture is varied. It's not a homogeneous or a melting-pot culture at all. I wonder if you had that thought in mind in instituting the festival.

SDR

Well, I did very strongly in this sense: that I feel that variety is one of the great strengths of a museum. The museum emphasizes the variety of any setting, whether it is local, regional, national, or, indeed, supranational. The diversity of men is one of the great Circes in our life. It's a fact that constantly reinforces itself. All attempts to homogenize people sooner or later break down.

One of the failures of sociology today is to assume, first of all, that there is no such thing as a valid history and, secondly, that the human stuff is identical. There are people who have inherited diseases. There are people who have inherited skills. It is not counterproductive or undemocratic to say that people are different. There is one incredible fallacy in so much of our philosophy, which is that somehow or other we have to imply that everyone is exactly the same. I think Lincoln spoke about the fact that everyone is entitled to the best of opportunities, and the sadness of inequality lay in the deprivation of opportunities for those people who could take advantage of them. But the fact remains that, if you take twenty people from any segment of life, of any sort, mix them up and give them exactly equal opportunities, the result will be totally different in every single case. And that is one of the virtues of people.

No one will ever be able to put down people as people. No system, no demagogue, no dictator, no communist, no fascist, no tedious theoretical professor will ever be able to arrive at a formula that will make all people look and act like peas out of a pod.

So to celebrate this diversity which is innate and implicit in every aspect of human culture, I think there is nothing better than reminding people of it through the vitality and example of the Folklife Festival.



---

JAMES R. MORRIS has been director of the Division of Performing Arts since its establishment in 1966. He has had broad experience in the performing arts, as a director, producer, and performer.

RALPH RINZLER has been director of the festival since its inception in 1967. Prior to coming to the Smithsonian Institution, he directed field programs for the Newport Folk Foundation. He is both a collector and a singer of folk songs.



RR

us of our nation's Indian heritage and to show how much we welcome their presence on the Mall. This to me means a great deal.

Something just occurred to me. Charles Seeger, who came to Washington last fall, looked at the Capitol, waved his hand, and said "pure folklore". Well, you know, it's really true, when you get down to it, that so much of our lives are filled with folklore. The college campus is riddled with folklore. Every student has stories about all sorts of common things that happen. Every professor has a whole body of folklore. I'm wondering if, in coming in to the position of Secretary of the Smithsonian, you became acquainted with the body of lore about that position and about your predecessors in it?

SDR

Of course, it has always fascinated me and is one of the reasons why I was lured into coming. By all odds, the Secretaryship of the Smithsonian is one of the most fascinating of jobs. Aside from the enormous weight and psychic importance of the Capitol and the White House, certainly the old Smithsonian Building is one of the most symbolic in Washington. This strange tessellated castle with its battlements flung out against the monolithic Greco-Roman buildings. These great government buildings all seem to be lying down. They are not very tall and they occupy immense areas of space. They're all rather somnolent and very much the same. They look like a pride of lions, all sort of sleeping in the sun.

But the Smithsonian is an energetic upthrusting of little turrets and battlements, and it speaks of something else. With a little delicate and fanciful thrust, it bespeaks variety.

In our kind of life, in a bureaucratic setting, such variety is difficult to achieve. I often think of the little flag flying from the highest tower, and flaunting this little banner for Academe in the middle of this vast crushing bureaucracy. My words are perhaps a little fulsome, but in any case the building to me has great symbolic meaning.

Now, this part of the building is where the first secretary, Joseph Henry, who is more identified with the origin of the Smithsonian than anyone else, lived for thirty-two years, I believe. The building's cornerstone was laid in 1846, so perhaps he lived here for twenty-eight years, because it did take a while to get this part of the building completed. He died in 1878. He lived here until his death, and, not only he, but his wife and children. There was a boy who died fairly early, and I don't think ever came here, but there were two devoted daughters. The older daughter, Mary Henry, wrote a good deal about her father and mother and about what life was like in the "Castle".

In those days, there was a slave pen out in back. Henry was very upset about this and constantly railed about it. Then there were noisome canals, especially Tiber Creek which went along Constitution Avenue, and the desecration of the Mall by railroads, with their great yards down on Fourth Street. He felt that the Smithsonian had been set in a kind of abandoned wilderness, with symbols of decay and horror all about. He complained of the noxious affluvia that floated up in the canals and of the debased humans nearby. All of these things he was very upset about.

Yet the garden in the Smithsonian Park that he designed with the help of Andrew Jackson Downing was a very pleasant place to walk. We have a Civil War picture showing people knee-deep in daisies, with tree plantings of a deliciously random sort rather than the present ordered symmetry.

There are all sorts of folklore about people who came here and things that happened, including the string quartet concerts that were given in the evening by the Henry girls; the lectures, which were on everything from politics to snakes; and Abraham Lincoln, with his interest in signalling and in experiments and observations of an astronomical sort. There is a legend that Lincoln came sometimes when he was in agony about the war and sat in the Tower and talked