

LOOKING AHEAD

A Challenge for the Future

by James R. Morris

In 1967 the Smithsonian Institution established a Division of Performing Arts for the purpose of bringing life to the collections of the National Museums and to present programs that explored the American aesthetic experience. In those Spring days ten years ago, I remembered historian Constance Rourke who had reminded us that, as late as the 1930s there was a common belief that America had no aesthetic tradition of its own, and that this country had never produced a culture in which the arts could flourish.

Ms. Rourke was not referring to a commonly held belief about the urban enclaves where theater, music, dance and graphic arts flourished, but to a belief about the nation as a whole, and to a state of mind and spirit that was representative of American society.

We as a nation had developed a pattern of behavior toward the arts which reflected the cogency of Ms. Rourke's observation. We had accepted the idea that we had no aesthetic tradition of our own, and had developed the habit of importing our art. To be sure, we are part of the western world, but because of our insecurity we had become its captive.

This insecurity had caused us to contrive an intricate array of labels which severely conditioned our way of looking at ourselves. A place called a cultural center defines, by the nature of its programming, what culture is. An arts organization has defined, by the pattern of its support and programs, what art is.

Throughout our educational system, courses titled Art History or Music Apprecia-

tion ignore all but a narrow strip of the nation's art and music.

A local radio station whose programming was primarily symphonic, operatic and chamber music used to identify itself as "the good music station," as though to imply that other stations were playing bad music.

Other media contribute to this attitude, transmitting their notions about culture in their reporting and criticism.

In 1967 the Smithsonian began to explore and present American folk culture, to investigate our own aesthetic traditions, and, by implication to embark on a period of examination of the cultural establishment as a whole. We called our presentation the Festival of American Folklife, and through the years it has grown until now, in the Bicentennial summer, the Festival will run for 12 weeks and will have some 5,000 participants. Thus, the Bicentennial Festival is the largest cultural event of its kind in our nation's history.

When we present live folk artists on the Mall in Washington under the sponsorship of the National Museum, we attempt to challenge a narrowness of cultural outlook and provide for public examination the forms of expression that are diverse and complex, as well as simple and well known. We place a value on the participating folk artist by the act of our invitation. By recognizing creativity as a human force, we take the first step in providing an access to art for all people.

What have we accomplished in this decade of exploration? Well, we have paid tribute to tradition, not just as the ties that bind, but as the wellspring of art. We have compiled a primary catalogue, a sampler of the expressive forms which emerge unselfconsciously from the home, the places of work and the centers of community life. I hope we have caused people to reconsider their concept of creativity. I believe we have begun a long delayed redefinition of our understanding of culture.

If this is true, and if there is a new, emerging definition of culture, then this definition will recognize that to be creative is a natural human urge, and thus we may see art as a comfortable and logical extension of our own personal experience, and not some exotic facade or acquired taste. Once we have all been included in the experience of creativity, we can recognize the role that art plays by providing us a way of making sense out of our experience, and of reaffirming our value as human beings.

Taken a step further we may personally experience an age old phenomena, the interdependence of the artist and his world. One of the strongest and most discernable models of this interdependence is found in the relationship which exists between a folk artist and his community.

We are not silly enough to imply that all creativity is art, but by recognition of the creative forces within all, we associate the most natural and basic of human forces with the same life force that occasionally produces great art.

During the nine years in which the Folklife Festival has developed, we have seen a substantial rise in public awareness and appreciation of our traditional music and crafts; the formation of a Folk Arts program in the National Endowment for the Arts; the establishment by Congress of an American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress and a substantial growth in academic programs in folk culture.

So perhaps our Folklife Festivals have shown that America does have an aesthetic tradition of its own, one which is incredibly rich and diverse. But if we are to produce a national culture in which the arts can flourish, then we have barely begun. In the coming years, I hope we can develop a national cultural policy which includes all the people, and thus breaks away from the operative policy of 1976.

The present policy is expressed in the priorities of government and foundation grant programs and in arts-in-education

formulae, the majority of which are designed to develop a greater body of consumers. These policies are determined by the few for the many, are basically patronizing in attitude, and are uncoordinated and largely unevaluated.

The Folklife Festival may have provided access to the cultural system through the Smithsonian, but now we need to provide access to the policy making procedures by which we will sustain a culture in which the arts can flourish.



Goodbye Eden—Adam and Eve take one last look as they exit Eden, being driven from the garden. Photograph from the carving by Edgar Tolson of Campton, Kentucky. In the mid-1960's VISTA workers and Appalachian Volunteers sought out creative crafts producers and established cooperative marketing organizations. Tolson, discovered and brought to the Smithsonian for the second Folklife Festival in 1968, has since become internationally known for his skilled and sensitive treatment of familiar Biblical and rural work themes.

James R. Morris established the Division of Performing Arts which produced the first Festival in 1967. He is the principal executive responsible for performing events at the Smithsonian including the Festival, the Smithsonian Jazz Program, the Smithsonian Collection of Recordings and a wide variety of programs in contemporary music, chamber music, theater and dance.