

Traditional Southern Crafts In The Twentieth Century

By Robert Sayers

As a popular art form, traditional or “folk” crafts have a certain appeal that few other objects in American life have. Unselfconsciously created by local – usually rural – artisans, they characteristically have a charm and forthrightness missing in many of the fine arts.

Equally important, we like to think that folk crafts harken back to an earlier, simpler time – an era of small town insularity before the intrusion of machine-manufactured goods and other commonplaces of the industrial age. In the North, this era ended before 1880. In many areas of the Southeast, on the other hand, continued isolation and agrarian self-sufficiency ensured that domestic activities like quilting, basketmaking, and coverlet weaving would persist longer.

Actually, the present generation is not the first to “discover” southern crafts, although the sentiments and meanings attached to such objects are contemporary in nature. As early as 1896, Dr. William Goodell Frost, president of Berea College in Kentucky, established a yearly “homespun fair” expressly to preserve and promote mountain handweaving. Out of a similar concern and about the same time, Mrs. Frances L. Goodrich created Allandale Cottage Industries near Asheville, North Carolina. Goodrich, a social worker for the Presbyterian Home Missions, found a powerful motive in her work beyond mere preservation. Among her stated aims was “to bring money into communities far from market and to give paying work to women in homes too isolated to permit them to find it for themselves....”

The ameliorative impulse, in fact, was justification for much of the interest in Southern crafts during this early period. To be sure, a good deal of the success of the so-called craft “revival” could be laid to its concurrent growth with the more pervasive International Arts and Crafts Movement after 1900. Consumers as far away as Boston and New York were much taken with quaint southern curios just as they developed a collecting mania for American Indian baskets and rugs. But for the purveyors of southern crafts, such as the George Washington Vanderbilt-sponsored Biltmore Industries at Asheville and the various settlement schools such as Pi Beta Phi, Pine Mountain, and Hindman in Kentucky and Tennessee, the motivation continued to be the fostering of productive skills that would bring money into impoverished households.

Eventually, independent craft guilds and cooperatives began to evolve alongside the earlier mission and settlement school programs. The largest of these was the Southern Highlands Handicraft Guild, that brought together numerous smaller organizations under one marketing umbrella. And for a time it appeared as though a self-sustaining southern craft industry was being created. However, the Depression intervened, and by 1937, when Allen Eaton published his remarkable *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands* (a book that details much of the history sketched here), the advocacy role of the early crafts revivalists had been passed to federal agencies.

Especially important in this regard were the National Park Service, the Resettlement Administration, and the Tennessee Valley Authority, all of which helped southern craftsmen sell their work during this difficult period. At the same time, photographers with the Farm Security Administration and artists employed to create the Index of American Design documented this work for posterity.

For the most part, federal involvement with southern craftsmen was terminated after 1940 and did not resume until the War on Poverty program of the Johnson Administration more than 20 years later. As during the first revival, this latter period was marked by a flowering of interest in things “organic,” “hand-

Robert Sayers holds the PhD degree in anthropology from the University of Arizona. He is the co-author, with Program Director Ralph Rinzler, of two monographs on Appalachian and Korean (forthcoming) folk potters.

U.S. 1, near Fredericksburg, Va., 1941
JACK DELANO, FSA PHOTO FROM LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Suggested Reading

The literature on Southern crafts is extensive and growing. The following books, all currently available, provide a useful starting point for the reader.

Books:

Bridenbaugh, Carl. *The Colonial Craftsman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.

Eaton, Allen H. *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1937 (Dover edition, 1973).

Glassie, Henry. *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968.

Glassie, Henry. *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975.

Hornung, Clarence Pearson. *Treasury of American Design: a pictorial survey of popular folk arts based upon watercolor renderings in the Index of American Design, at the National Gallery of Art*. New York: H. N. Abrams, 1972 (2 volumes).

Quimby, Ian M.G. and Scott T. Swank (eds.) *Perspectives on American Folk Art*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co. for the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1980.

Rinzler, Ralph and Robert Sayers. *The Meaders Family: North Georgia Potters*. Smithsonian Folklife Studies No. 1. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1980.

Tullos, Allen (ed.) *Long Journey Home: Folklife in the South*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Southern Exposure, 1977.

Vlach, John Michael. *The Afro-American tradition in Decorative Arts*. Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978.

Wigginton, Eliot (ed.) *Foxfire 1-6*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974-1980.

Catalogs:

Georgia Council for the Arts and Humanities Crafts Program. *Missing Pieces: Georgia Folk Art 1770-1976*. Gainesville, Ga., 1976.

Georgia council for the Arts and Humanities Crafts Program. *Georgia Crafts/Appalachia*. Gainesville, Ga., 1979.

Mississippi Department of Archives and History. *Made by Hand: Mississippi Folk Art*. Jackson, Mississippi: State Historical Museum, 1980.



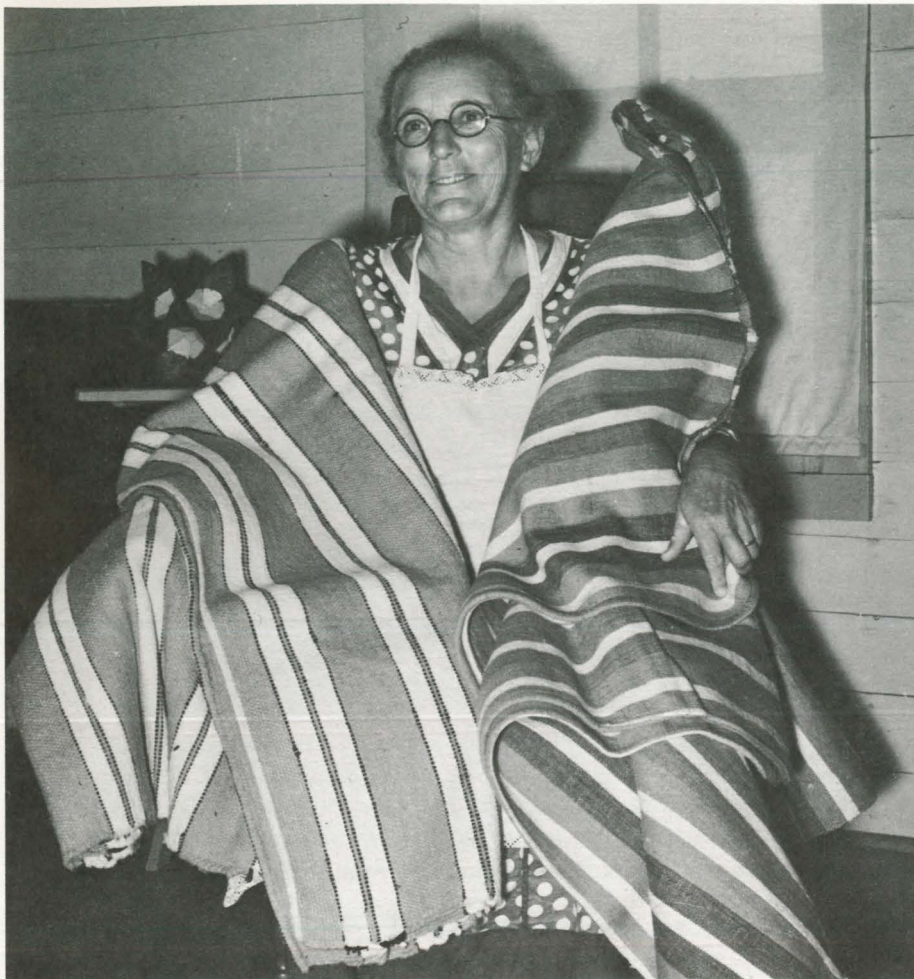
made," and "country." By no accident, the 1960s and 1970s also witnessed a renaissance in the professional disciplines of folklore and social history. The Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife is one product of this renaissance.

While the preceding sketch might suggest that southern folk craftsmen have been sustained to the present by well-intentioned activists and philanthropists and by distant markets, this is neither a complete nor an accurate picture. Recent fieldwork reveals, to the contrary, that virtually every area of the South harbors a potter, weaver, toy maker, wood-carver, boatbuilder, calligrapher, ornamental blacksmith, sign painter, or seamstress who has maintained his or her craft in the face of nearly total indifference by the outside world. It is true, certainly, that many southern craftsmen have discarded quilt making, coverlet weaving, and pottery turning as unpleasant reminders of their humble origins. For others, the crafts remain a beloved preoccupation that, like family reunion and music festivals, have grown to symbolize an important component of regional and ethnic identity.

As a group, there are few generalizations that can be made about contemporary southern craftsmen. Some are articulate about their work while others are inexpressive. Some practice crafts originally restricted to only one sex and passed from parent to child through an informal apprenticeship while others have not been so constrained. Many find monetary benefit in what they do; a few like the solitary carver or painter work to some inner purpose largely devoid (until the coming of the folk art collector) of remunerative value.

We have been conditioned to respect highly those craftsmen who remain closest to "traditional" ways, e.g. those who give the least appearance of having altered either their processes or their product. In this we differ somewhat from the early revivalists, many of whom seem not to have experienced any anxiety "improving" on local traditions. Examples in point are the early weaving cooperatives that introduced Italian drawnwork and Finnish rya wall hangings into the vocabularies of highland weavers, and the famous North Carolina pottery that successfully marketed "Chinese" forms and glazes in the 1920s and 1930s. Even those revivalists who stressed adherence to "Colonial" craft models were imposing their own versions of "tradition" on their client artisans.

The problem is that today very few descendent craftsmen preserve their craft completely free of outside influences; the greater number have adjusted their manufacturing processes to save time by using substitute materials and power tools just as they have adjusted their markets to take advantage of the tourist collectors' trade. In many ways, this can be very interesting, inasmuch as change itself is interesting. A favorite pottery of the author, for example, is the Brown Pottery at Arden, North Carolina. Founded by brothers Davis and Javan Brown in the late 1920s, it has survived numerous improvements in the succeeding 50 years and is now something of a shrine to technological experimentation even



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bit as worthy of study as the most conservative potteries in the South.

In another decade, our understanding of southern crafts – and of southern life generally – will have expanded enormously. Dozens of research projects are now underway in the field of southern material culture dealing with such disparate topics as Afro-American grave furniture, Georgia potters and quilters, Cajun and Creole fishing technology, and the history and distribution of the folk banjo. The singular advantage researchers working in the South have is the presence of craftsmen who still remember the old ways and who are genuine representatives of the cultural learning of generations. In an era of *Roots* and historic preservation, no area of the United States promises to yield more secrets.

Meanwhile, much of the satisfaction in collecting folk crafts comes from knowing the artisans who create them and the social and cultural context out of which these individuals emerge. The objects stand on their own as works of art, but they are also the concrete representation of ideas and a way of life. Knowing how the objects are made, by whom, and why, opens up avenues to understanding the ideas and meanings that stand behind the object.



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1 Quilting in smoke house, near Hinesville, Ga., 1941 JACK DELANO, FSA

2 Cajun with homespun blankets, near Crowley, La., 1938 RUSSELL LEE, FSA

3 Blacksmith, Abbeville, La., 1938 RUSSELL LEE, FSA
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