

# Preserving Folk Arts

## The National Endowment for The Arts, Folk Arts Program

by Bess Lomax Hawes

What are folk arts?

Most of us think:

- Folk arts are *simple*. They are easy and childlike; “anyone can play”; they represent the democratic ethos at its best.
- Folk arts are *natural*. They are innate, inborn, arising out of the general human condition, out of universal feelings and perceptions.
- Folk arts are *unsophisticated*. They may be a bit crude, but this is because they occur spontaneously, free of restrictions. They are the ultimate expression of the individual psyche, uninstructed and untaught.
- Folk arts are *dead*. They are what our great-grandparents did long long ago in the Elysian age when things were (somehow) easier, and when the simple, natural, and unsophisticated ways could (somehow) persevere.

The Folk Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts has not found this description true. Instead, we discover, as we look around our diverse nation, that:

- Folk arts are *complex*. In our apprenticeship program, every report tells us that there is far more to learn than the neophyte has expected. The great guitarists, lace-makers, and step-dancers make it look easy, but mastering the art and the essence of the style is a long-term job that requires a serious commitment.
- Folk arts are *culturally specific*. In every one of our multi-cultural urban festivals, each ethnic or tribal group likes to demonstrate its own special aesthetic vision, its own particular artistic life. The single truly universal principle appears to be *mutual appreciation*. As one of our most honored grantees, the great Black singer, Mrs. Bessie Jones, once remarked: “I just love to hear people play their own music because they do it *so well!*”
- Folk arts are *sophisticated*. Each master craftsman, each master musician, works from a tradition so complex and so artfully refined over generations that it takes the most careful documentation to capture it for our future benefit. Ukrainian egg-painters can distinguish their work from that of Polish or Russian egg-painters at a glance. The rest of us, untutored and naive, require thorough, sometimes even scholarly, explanations to guide us through the mysteries.
- Folk arts are *alive*. Indeed, in many places and among many groups, they are growing. It is true that each week – sometimes, it seems, each day – we lose another old master; it is that which makes our work seem ever more urgent. Still, the young people are always with us, and they seem, at this time, to be re-evaluating the past, to be learning from it, to be using it as a springboard for new artistic adventures.

To support these complicated, culturally specialized, urbane, and lively arts, the Folk Arts Program has formed its strategies after the classic models: from the Little Tailor in the Grimms’ fairy tales, from Monkey, from Hodje, from B’rer Rabbit, from Coyote. We try to be quick and clever and creative; we try, above all, to keep single-minded. We have only one goal: to help preserve the very highest forms of the multiple aesthetic systems that make life in these United States joyful and exciting.

“Multiple” is the important word. Other programs within the Endowment endeavor to sponsor variation and creativity by nurturing individual talent, the private visions of the independent and self-motivated artist. Folk Arts has a different task: the fostering and nurturing of whole aesthetic systems. That these

Originally published in the 1979  
*Annual Report of the National  
Endowment for the Arts*, pp. 85-86.

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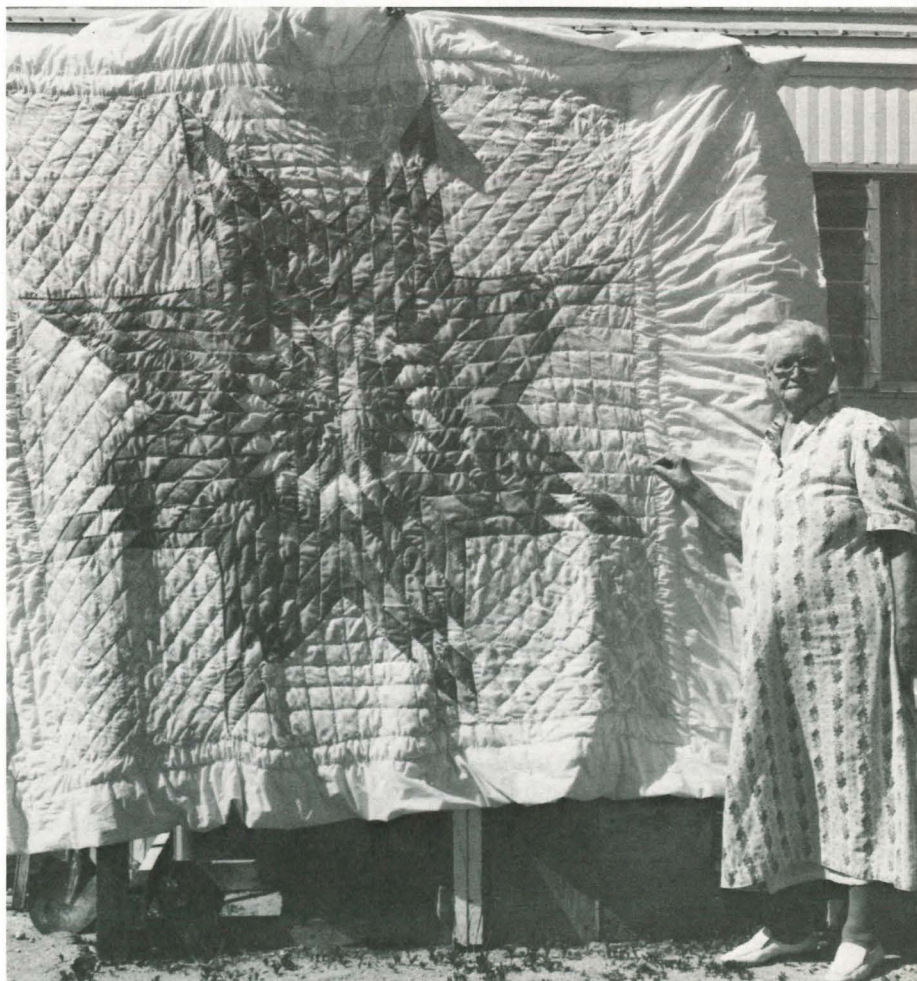




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systems exist is enough to enliven everyday life in the present. Their development may well enlighten the future that awaits us. We look to the past to inform the present and make the future more elegant.

It is not a simple job; and, naturally, we make mistakes every day. Naturally, too, we prefer to talk about our successes: our Irish-American tour that for two years has brought the very finest of traditional Irish musicians and dancers into communities across the United States; our folk arts coordinator program that has to date placed full-time folk arts advocates in central positions in 15 state governments; our documentary activities that have produced such widely shared films as *No Maps on my Taps*, on Black tap dancers, or *The Popovich Brothers of South Chicago*, on a Serbian-American musical family. Our quieter grants have a special importance too: our sponsorship of small local festivals in sites as remote as St. Simon's Island, Georgia; Zion National Park, Utah; Topeka, Kansas; and Hallowell, Maine; our Folk-Artists-in-Schools programs in Ohio, North Carolina, and Alabama.

We are proud, too, of our "special" grants: to support, through a series of workshops for younger tribal members, the skin-sewing skills of Alaskan Eskimos; to help the Basques of our western states retain their ancestral musical skills through teaching their young people to play the *txistu*, their traditional flute; to encourage Mexican-American traditional song-compositional styles by means of support to a series of radio programs broadcasting traditional contemporary California *corridos* (narrative songs about actual events). We support Mexican-American *mariachi* teachers, Black blues pickers, German-American hammer dulcimer makers, New Mexico Hispanic tinsmiths, and Native-American Klickitat basketweavers.

We try to use our federal monies creatively. One of our proudest discoveries is that during the years of the Folk Arts Program's existence, we have funded only five organizations on an annual basis. Many of the groups that we help take pride in telling us good-bye: "We had a real nice festival (or concert series or workshop or exhibit), and we raised enough money so that we don't have to come back to you next year."

We tell them. "So long, and Godspeed; remember us if you ever need us again." Then we turn our attention to the next of the myriad of regional or cultural groups in our incredibly varied nation that need a little encouragement to remain themselves, to retain their uniqueness, to honor and revere their artistic pasts-presents-futures, to keep American cultural diversity and creativity alive and well.