

# Folk Arts and the Elderly

by Bess Lomax Hawes

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The Grand Generation: Folklore and Aging has been made possible through the generous support of the American Association of Retired Persons in celebration of 25 years of service to older Americans, the Atlantic Richfield Foundation, the National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, and the Music Performance Trust Funds.

The Folk Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts has distributed its second annual National Heritage Fellowships. So far, thirty-one individuals have been singled out for national recognition as “exemplary master folk artists and artisans,” and honored for their “authenticity, excellence and significance within a particular artistic tradition,” and for their “ongoing artistic accomplishment.” The art forms of these master folk artists have ranged from duck decoy carving to quilting, from ballad singing to bagpipe playing, from storytelling to Afro-Puerto Rican *bomba* dancing. The artists have come from all sections of the nation as well as Puerto Rico; they speak in Yankee English, Louisiana French Cajun *patois* and Texas-Mexican Spanish; they are black, brown, red, and white; they hail from big cities and from country farms; some are women, some are men. All of them, however, were over fifty when they received their awards, a fact made the more remarkable when one realizes that their ages were not generally cited in the letters of nomination. But “ageable” they all were — five in their fifties, eight in their sixties, eight in their seventies, seven in their eighties, and a triumphant three, ninety years old or over.

How does it happen that in the Heritage Fellowships there has been such a concentration on older artists? It was not planned but there does seem to be an especially close relationship between the folk arts and the elderly. The reasons are many, having to do both with the nature of folk arts and the nature of the general human life cycle.

As we note in the Folk Arts Program guidelines, “the folk and traditional arts have grown through time within the many groups that make up any nation — groups that share the same ethnic heritage, language, occupation, religion, or geographic area.” They are the “homegrown, traditional artistic activities of such groups . . . and they serve both to identify and to symbolize the group that originated them.” A list of examples might include Samoan storytelling, Ozark balladry, Irish step dancing, and Southeast Asian embroidery. Almost always, these art forms have been learned informally, by casual or not-so-casual observation, or by being “shown,” often a relatively brief experience. On the whole, one does not go to Julliard to learn how to play a hammer dulcimer, nor are there courses available, even in our technical schools, in how to build an Eskimo skin boat. Nor do informally learned art forms necessarily lead to an exceptional rather than mediocre practice, for only those practitioners who have mastered their arts through years of refinement are viewed as true “artists” by their communities.

American society does not ordinarily place much stock in informal learning. The notion that an artistic activity or style might be absorbed simply by a process of hanging about and observing sits uneasily with our feeling that the really important things ought to be conveyed in a formalized manner. Just a bit of reflection impresses upon one the universality of those early childhood experiences when one drifted off to sleep to the strains of grandfather’s fiddle practicing waltzes, or the family’s favorite



gospel hour on the radio, or the matachine society next door getting ready for the fiesta tomorrow. In the visual dimension, as the child watches the swift fingers of a basketmaker selecting and rejecting grass stems, or sees the seamstress making the vital decisions between contrastive or complementary colors, or absorbs, just by living with it, the spare dignity of furniture built in the Shaker style, an equal number of elegant distinctions are being learned, even though not taught.

Whether or not we practice or personally participate in the local art forms, each of us grows up within an aesthetic environment that helps us identify and express from whence we come. Thus we come to know early on whether our folks like to workshop God with big massed choirs or solo voices, to dance to oompah bands or to bluegrass combos, to sleep under overshot coverlets or woven Indian blankets. And, depending upon individual temperament, family attitudes, the demands of the larger society, and a myriad other variables, each of us may dedicate some part of ourselves to emulating those artistic features and techniques we most admire during our growing up days. We may begin to try playing the fiddle, clogging, whittling, or singing harmony.

A lot can be learned by observation and trial-and-error, or simply being part of the scene. But there are techniques, materials, specifics that are harder to come by. Where is the young learner to turn? Typically, to the grandparental generation. Parents are generally pretty busy people, earning the money, raising the babies, putting food on the table and clothes on the backs, running the farm or the household or the store or fulfilling the demands of the job. Even thinking about teaching a young child can be an added imposition, though most parents will “shew” a thing or two on the fly. But the longer term, more serious learning relationships generally skip a generation.

As one changes focus from the learner to the teacher, from the younger to the older, a sense of pattern begins to emerge from all the variables. A number of years ago I taught folklore at a state university in California, an area often settled down in by retirees. My students were all expected to do some fieldwork, and a regular semester assignment was to seek out and do a structured interview with someone over sixty-five. Over and over again my horrified students protested they did not know anyone over sixty-five; over and over I brutally replied, “They’re all around; go make friends. Heck, you might even try talking to your grandfather!”

Such human treasures they found: a Van Nuys clockmaker who also made and repaired musical instruments and finally shyly admitted to being able to play the five-string banjo of his youth that now stood in a corner of his shop; a grandmother in Anaheim who, after her interview, went up into her attic and brought down her old guitar, an exquisite turn-of-the-century rosewood “lady’s model” wrapped carefully in a long silk scarf (none of her grown children had ever known that their mother both played and sang; her fascinated grandson was her first audience in over fifty years); an Irish steelworker from the Midwest who brought his old Irish “elbow” pipes into retirement with him and soon developed a sort of human train of young musicians who followed him like a line of ducklings.

My students and I became able almost to graph the career lines of these artists. All of them had been exposed to their eventual art form in childhood, normally by “picking it up,” watching fine musicians or artisans, absorbing the aesthetic criteria, getting the feel of what is good and what



Abraham Hunter shows grandson Stevie how to make a cornshuck mule collar.  
Photo by Roland Freeman

is better, becoming excited, trying out a skill, making mistakes, getting corrected. Some were universalists, attempting a bit of many crafts and styles; some fewer became entrapped early, one might almost say, in a single art form and made it their own speciality.

Childhood moved into young adulthood with increasing energies shown most frequently by the musicians and dancers (good for courtship, after all). But with marriage and growing family responsibilities, much of the artistic activity slacked off; a kind of general latency period set in and life became real and earnest and the "old ways" began to seem less beautiful and interesting. My files contain perhaps a hundred interviews containing one or more of the following statements: "I don't know, I just stopped quilting (or fiddle playing or embroidery or any number of things) while the children were growing up. I was too tired, and we wanted so many things you had to buy, and the old things just got to seem too old-fashioned and corny. And then there wasn't any time."

But when people reached their fifties and sixties, many resumed their old art form like a second career with all the enthusiasm of teen-agers — and infinitely more knowledge and subtlety. We began almost to wonder whether the long middle period of inactivity was not so much a time of abandonment of the art as a time for lying fallow, for gathering together energies, ideas, creativity. Perhaps the older musicians and dancers could not jump so high nor move so quickly, but the smaller movements and the less frequent notes so often had the elegance and authority that comes only from mastery and from experience. And the morale — the enthusiasm of the old artists and artisans is death-defying. Carmen Maria Roman, who came to Cleveland in 1952 from Puerto Rico, and who has taken up again the art of embroidery she learned as a girl says: "I love it, oh boy! No more pills, no more nervous, I'm happy!" Sra. Roman works with her niece to produce traditional ornamental favors for weddings, christenings and baptisms — elegant creations of lace ribbons and embroidered flowers. They sometimes make as many as five hundred for a special occasion, and the artist remarks, "If you don't have these at a wedding, it's not really a wedding." No wonder she is happy — she has resumed a vital role in her own culture, aided appropriately by a young relative.

Here we begin to see the life cycle of a single artist repeating and overlapping with the brand new oncoming second generation in a never-ending linked chain. Admittedly this is an idealized picture, but most diagrams or analytic schemes are just exactly that: representations of the knobbly, awkward and ungovernable reality. And a pattern, even though it may not exactly fit any single individual or situation, can still express an essential truth. What we see, over and over again, not just in the United States but around the world, is that the three generations that overlap in their individual lifetimes interact in the following pattern: the grandparents inspire and instruct the children while the adult parents work to support and protect both the young and the old, until such time as they themselves become the grandparents and their own children take up the middle year tasks and a new generation of young ones come along.

The late great anthropologist Margaret Mead was once asked at a public forum what was the most vital problem in the United States of the 1970s. Without pausing a beat, she said, "How to put the grandparents back into contact with the grandchildren." It is dismally true that within the contemporary United States, at least, changing patterns of housing, employment,



and family structures have driven deep rifts into the vital communicative chain that has transmitted cultural values, skills and morale across the generations for millenia. It is a deeply troubling situation.

What can be done about all this? In connection with my job as a grants officer for an arts agency, I have often asked folk artists that I meet what they would really most like to be doing. A poignantly large number of the older ones say that what they would really like to do is teach young people. Over and over they say that they want to get into the schools, to work with the children, to be allowed to be in touch with the generation that has always been their special historical responsibility. Can this ever be arranged? Not everywhere, of course, nor with every senior citizen, many of whom announce forthrightly that they have done their bit for future generations and want to relax for awhile. But so very many artists — **especially**, it seems, the artists — really long for a genuine contact with the young.

Another observation that is crystal clear to any folklorist is that our older citizens are incomparable aesthetic **resources**. So much of the gerontological literature that I glance through basically treats the elderly as a problem and old age as a time of life when a burdensome series of special conditions have to be met. In folk arts, the elderly are, generally speaking, thought of as the solution, rather than the problem (or at least as *a* solution), and we worry about meeting their needs in order that they may continue to be productive and help us onward with their wisdom and experience and toughness and smarts. It is quite a different point of view, and I recommend it to all those who work with the elderly as a more respectful and considerate stance, and one that is always productive of cooperation and achievement.

Finally, I would like to suggest that the overall every-other-generational pattern that I refer to as “the chain” is an infinitely subtle and effective communicative pattern that provides both for continuity and for change in proportions that are balanced with extraordinary delicacy. We will neither remain mired in the past nor careen rudderless into the mysterious future if we can respectfully help maintain this age-old system of order. In it, both the old and the young have their appointed responsibilities, their traditional and crucial roles. (They may, of course, swap positions and often do; I know many radical grandparents and plenty of conservative children, but in general a certain balance tends to maintain.) Even in such mundane interactions as learning to make baking powder biscuits or how to tune a fiddle “Sebastopol” style, the leit-motifs of “Well, the way I always heard it” and “But why couldn’t it?” intertwine in a never-ending dance of give and take, stability and innovation. It is a great system, and I hate to see it weakening because half of the participants are in retirement villages and the other half have gone off to day camps.

Our traditional arts — the ways of magnifying and decorating our lives through which we express our sense of ourselves and our belongingness to our own special people — are the essential preserve of experienced and senior practitioners. They often appear simple, but a lifetime may be needed to get them just exactly right. And all this experience, all this devotion and skill turns to ashes, if the human chain is not in working order, if there is no one to pass the art on to.

*Suggested reading*

Francis Erhard, Doris. *Everybody in my Family has Something From Me: Older Cleveland Folk Artists*. Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Department of Aging, 1983.

Mead, Margaret. *Blackberry Winter*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1972.