



The Twentieth Festival

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This year marks the 20th annual Festival of American Folklife, and as importantly, the 10th anniversary of the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress. The Center, on whose board I am pleased to sit as an ex-officio member, is important because that birthday passed should presage its continued health and permanent collegial presence. The Smithsonian has collaborated with the Center on several folklife matters, among them the Federal Cylinder Project, which preserved and is currently making available to Indian communities the earliest sound recordings of American Indian music. Congratulations to the American Folklife Center and also to our colleagues at the Folk Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts, now in their 14th year, for your continuing good work.

Twenty years ago the Smithsonian's Festival announced in a national forum that study and conservation of living traditional cultures were a continuing part of the Federal government's engagement with arts, humanities and science. This idea has resonated outside the Institution in a way that helped to shape a coordinated Federal approach to traditional cultures.

The notion of resonance also helps to note something quite different about the presentation of living traditional cultures at the Festival, and that has to do with how we know and appreciate the art and craft of a culture not our own. An object or a song in isolation from its culture is difficult to understand, or rather can be understood only with the thoughts that we bring to it. Most often these are not the same ones the people who create the artifacts use to think about their work. If we wish to see in the world something more than our own image, to learn from the lifeways of others, to be stimulated by another's aesthetic thought, then we need to find ways of understanding what it means to turn a pot or sing a song in another's culture. Of course, if the living people are here, as they are at the Festival, you can ask them. Another way is to sense the resonances among several elements of a single culture presented.

In the area of the Festival devoted to Japan, for example, the 13 foot samurai figure, in isolation, might conjure in our minds ferocious thoughts of others' values. But note the rice field that the figure adorns and the festive planting ceremony enacted in the field and the rice straw hanging up to dry, the very material from which the figure is constructed. What emerges is a complex and beautiful resonance among these cultural practices that deepens our appreciation of each and opens the possibility for us to begin to understand the many ways that Japanese folk culture speaks and sings about that most important commodity, rice.

The Tennessee area also takes this approach, as music, craft and food together define a regional style of doing things, as well as each forms context for the other.

This year's Cultural Conservation program presents a variety of craftspersons who singly and together define what is traditional about their crafts, how these are practiced in our country today, and why they are worth preserving for the future. I think it will be evident that these crafts, in a sense, record the resonances between a crafts-person's skill and the aesthetics of a particular tradition. Traditional crafts also record the craftsperson's use of the local environment and his or her negotiation with a sometimes changing market. It is these layerings of meaning and tone that define the communal base of folk crafts and bring harmony to their ensemble at the Festival.

American Trial Lawyers builds upon the Festival's 14-year attention to the folklife of occupational groups through presentation of and discussions about working skills, social organization and lore. Moreover, lawyers are storytellers in a profound sense: the stories they construct in court – the narratives of events and the interpretations of them – are meant to resonate with values held by jury members. Through reason and eloquence, lawyers engage jurors' sympathies for one side or the other, and that resonance between courtroom argument and social values is a mechanism of justice.

In a very different vein, daily dance parties invite you to participate in resonances between traditional social music and dance. Here, as in other Festival areas, participation is the key to understanding. Whether your sympathetic chords are struck by music or craft, food or narrative, or a rich combination of these, we invite you to participate – through dancing, understanding, questioning, or just enjoying. I think you will find this Festival engaging in many ways.