

Reflections on the Festival

Robert McC. Adams
Secretary, Smithsonian Institution

It is an honor for the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife this year to host programs on the traditions of The Bahamas, the culture of Thailand, and on *Culture & Development* and *Masters of Traditional Arts*. In The Bahamas program, Americans will find intriguing connections to a shared history embodied in the traditions of the descendants of Africans, free and enslaved, British Loyalists, Seminoles, and many other immigrants. More than just beautiful sun, sea, and sand, The Bahamas, and especially its Family Islands, are home to a rich diversity of cultural communities and practices. Also on the Mall, yet half a world away, is Thailand, a nation that never acceded to colonial rule and whose ancient traditions are very much alive in contemporary households, temples, and the royal court. Given the growing economic and political importance of Asia and the Pacific Rim, we are well served by better understanding Thailand's cultural traditions. The program on Culture and Development, a collaborative effort with the Inter-American Foundation, recognizes the value of local cultural resources and practitioners and their role in development efforts. A strategy of appropriately utilizing a community's cultural resources often succeeds not only in stimulating economic growth, but also in promoting self-worth and popular participation in civic life. The program on Masters of Traditional Arts pays tribute to National Heritage Fellowship awardees from 17 states representing a broad range of American traditions. The awards, made annually by the National Endowment for the Arts, honor our human national treasures, those exemplary folk whose fine art expresses the history, identity, beliefs, and values of their communities.

These programs are more than just separate living exhibits. As a whole, they demonstrate quite convincingly that across the United States and around the world, traditional culture is with us, not just as atomistic survivals, but as part of social fabrics woven by individuals, communities, and nations. The folks at the Festival live contemporary lives. They are just as contemporary as the genetic engineer, cable television network shopper, or government bureaucrat. The traditions they carry are embedded in modern life. Yes, sometimes we find these traditions are on the margins, but most often they are in an ongoing, creative tension with new innovations and technical

and social changes. These traditional ways of doing, making, and being are continually, sometimes even daily, reinvented and applied to the circumstances of individual and institutional life. Innovation and tradition are not opposites, but are processually related to how we use our cultural inheritance – whether that be in music or the museum, handicraft or statecraft – to define and shape the future.

This Festival provides the public with a wonderful way to make these particular and general discoveries. The Festival is educational and entertaining, fun and serious, conceptual and personal, immense and intimate. As such, the Festival conjoins worlds we heretofore kept apart. Yet with a movement toward "infotainment," living history museums and historical theme parks, multimedia publications and classrooms, we are seeing new ways of increasing and diffusing knowledge – ways the Smithsonian will have to consider deeply as it approaches the next century.

Reflecting recently on the Smithsonian's current programs and future, I was struck that the Festival provides a kind of paradigm. The Festival exemplifies, and possibly provided the original groundwork for, so many things we now recognize as among our essentials: attention to the diversity of our cultural life, for example; the development of a dialogue and collaboration with the people whose traditions and aspirations we are seeking to represent; the sense of museums, and museum staffs, without walls or professionalized barriers of exclusion; and a readiness to tackle difficult and sensitive issues like cultural survival, equity, access to resources, and seemingly intractable ethnic differences.

Ralph Rinzler, the Festival's founder, saw this role for the Festival early on. And he saw the flowering of the Festival into documentary films, Smithsonian / Folkways sound recordings, educational materials, books, CD-ROMs, traveling exhibits, festivals "back home," and other forms. He also saw that the Festival could have a positive effect on individuals, communities, public and civic institutions, promoting the continuity, understanding, and appreciation of cultural diversity. For his achievements in helping the Smithsonian combine solid scholarship with community service, grassroots collaboration, and high-quality public education, a legacy that is here to stay, Ralph was earlier this year awarded the Secretary's Medal for Exceptional Service.