

Our National Treasures: The Story This Far

*"It matters not what nationality you are.
You should be proud of your nationality, you should be
proud of your region. I want to respect your culture, you
respect my culture. And if we ever learn to do this,
America is a beautiful country, but it would even be
more beautiful. And we can do that. Some of us
has some work to do, but I think we're all together.
We're going to do it."*

Dewey Balfa, Cajun Fiddler



Dewey Balfa was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship in 1982. Photo by Robert Yellin

by Bess Lomax Hawes

Back in 1977 it was what everybody thought the Folk Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts ought to do. The pictures of Japanese pots and painted screens and silks were so lovely, and the glimpses of the great Japanese craftworkers we got on video were so inspiring. And such a compelling name – the Japanese Living National Treasures – what a marvelous idea! Surely the first order of business for the newly created Folk Arts Program – now the Folk and Traditional Arts Program – would be to set up a Living National Treasures program to honor our own traditional artists.

But when I suggested this, not just the Folk Arts staffers but many of our well-qualified and experienced panelists seemed interested in the idea but also anxious, even apprehensive. "Well, maybe, but let's not go too fast..." And then I saw I, too, was dragging my feet and I didn't know exactly why.

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The 1993 National Heritage Fellows pose for a photograph after receiving their award certificates at a special ceremony on Capitol Hill.

Photo by William K. Geiger

I kept thinking up possible outcomes to worry about. Maybe the “right” artists would not be selected. Maybe those chosen would swagger; maybe those not chosen would turn spiteful. Maybe widespread public attention would irritate or endanger or antagonize artists. Maybe their marketing prices and performance fees would get hopelessly out of kilter. After several years of intense but nonproductive discussion, I began to wonder if the entire concept was simply wrong for the United States – perhaps it just didn’t fit us well, culturally speaking.

An incident in 1975 kept coming back to me. Even when we think we know what is going on, cross-cultural meetings can be confusing. I was in East Los Angeles visiting a Chicano arts center when I happened to ask my hosts if they could recommend a really distinguished traditional *piñata* maker for the California presentation I was organizing for the 1975 Festival of American Folklife. Everyone looked a bit nonplussed. I didn’t understand why but kept insisting they must know *somebody*, and finally a strikingly pretty young woman behind the desk said, “Well, sure, *everybody* knows how to make *piñatas*. I mean, even *I* know how to make *piñatas*; I just made a 12-foot tall one for a local park celebration.” (I was to learn the young lady’s name later. It was my first meeting with Alicia Gonzalez, who some 15 years afterwards was named director of the Smithsonian’s commemoration of the Columbus Quincentenary.)

However, that evening in 1975, while thinking about the interchange on my way home, it occurred to me I probably had asked a question that was meaningless in her particular community. Translating the situation to my culture, suppose someone had asked *me* to recommend a really distinguished traditional Christmas-tree decorator. How on earth

would I have fielded that one? I would have had to put on my folklorist’s hat and explain tediously that there are indeed some art forms in some communities that are common cultural properties everybody “knows.” But although almost everyone in a particular ethnic, religious, occupational, or regional group may know at least the rudiments of a particular art form (decorating a Christmas tree, making a *piñata*), everyone is not equally interested or practiced in it. Srta. Gonzalez clearly had the aesthetic experience, taste, and skills to create a 12-foot tall *piñata* for the local park celebration; and the local community clearly had the right person – their own local artist – to do the job.

The glory of the world of traditional arts is that there are thousands of Srta. Gonzalezes across the nation carrying on the artistic practices, styles, and repertoires derived from the collective histories of thousands of vigorous cultural groups. Most traditional arts are comfortably local; most traditional arts express the values and the identity of the group they emerge from; most traditional artists distinguish themselves not simply by having learned the art (everybody learns a bit of it) but by working at it with focus and passion.

But there are a vast number of such people doing a vast number of things. When it came to thinking about selecting a small, nationally acceptable group of such artists and art forms, as the Japanese did, even the most thoughtful and daring consultants began saying, “Put somebody else on the panel, Bess; I don’t want to do it. I don’t know enough,

and I wouldn't even know how to begin this thing, if indeed we ought to begin it."

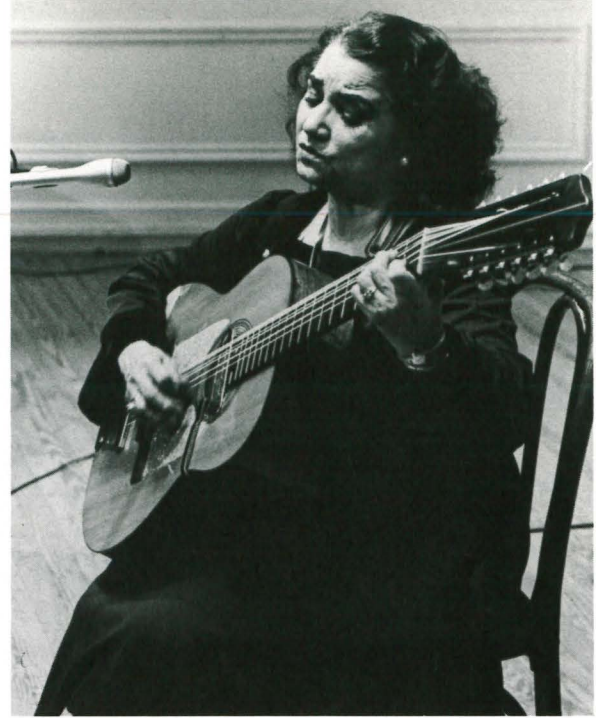
There was another consideration as well, specific to the times. The 1970s were giving rise to some of the first attempts to celebrate local cultures since the glory days of the '30s, when the great archives of folk music were established, when the WPA began to assemble its influential state guides and to amass its corpus of historically crucial ex-slave interviews, when major record companies marketed blues and country music, and when CBS radio carried the voices of American folk singers and tale tellers into living rooms across the nation.

World War II and the bleak years of reaction that followed eliminated most of these yeasty activities for almost 30 years. During the '70s, though, the ground-breaking Newport Folk Festival was followed by the seminal Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife; agitation for the American Folklife Bill had reached its peak with the placing of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress; and the National Endowment for the Arts carried through its long-standing commitment to the folklore community by establishing a national Folk Arts Program, complete with staff and budget.

In every one of these federal programs, but most particularly in the newly founded NEA Folk Arts Program, some heavy-duty planning and strategizing were essential. What were the most urgent needs of this far-flung field? How, and in what order, should they be tackled? Not just in Washington, D.C., but in every state of the union and all the territories. Not just for musicians, but for crafts workers and dancers and storytellers. Not just for Appalachian Anglo-Scots-Irish but for every American Indian tribe, every European and Asian ethnicity, every segment of the African-American diaspora. Not just for Baptist menhaden fishermen off the Atlantic coast but for Buddhist sugar-cane cutters in the Pacific.

For the small Folk Arts Program to begin answering that mind-boggling assignment by annually selecting a few individuals as National Treasures seemed almost trivial, maybe even irrelevant. But – come to think of it – the Japanese must have faced similar difficulties. They were a highly industrialized nation, looming large on the world scene, and in many ways comparable to the United States, though geographically much smaller, of course. We took a closer look.

Relatively little has been published in English on the history of Japanese cultural planning. But enough is available to suggest that their truly original and fascinating program was not a sudden act of bureaucratic creativity or a response to a temporary political situation. Serious, protracted debates over



Lydia Mendoza is a Mexican-American singer from Houston, Texas. Photo by Carl Fleischhauer, courtesy Library of Congress, American Folklife Center

how to preserve and nurture Japanese traditional art forms have been part of public life in Japan for centuries, as evidenced by a nation-wide pastiche of local and regional regulations on such issues.

In 1950 an important event occurred: national legislation established the overarching principle that Japan, as a nation, possessed a number of Important Intangible Cultural Properties. These were defined as "intangible cultural products materialized through such human behaviors as drama, music, dance, and applied arts which have a high historical or artistic value." Because generations and generations of Japanese citizens had worried over and participated in local decisions about their culture and its art forms, this new legislation fell upon fertile soil. By 1983, 59 kinds of crafts alone had been listed as Important Intangible Cultural Properties, and 70 persons and 11 groups had been identified as Holders of the Properties.

Each Holder receives a Living National Treasure Award, accompanied by an annual stipend for life. In return the Holder pledges to continue practicing the art form for life, representing and advancing its highest standards through public demonstration and instruction. Holders willy-nilly become public figures; they are invited to judge contests and exhibitions, to host important visitors, to give expert testimony in legal disputes or before political commissions, and to concern themselves in every conceivable way with the continued well-being of their art form.

The Japanese government, for its part, purchases work from the Holders, documents the methods and



Tommy Jarrell of Mt. Airy, North Carolina, was an Appalachian fiddler of storied repertoire and technique. Photo by Lawrence Downing

techniques required for its production, funds appropriate exhibits and theatrical presentations, and provides grants to support the study and analysis of all recognized Intangible Cultural Properties. The government also maintains a registry of private as well as public owners of important pieces of Holders' work, thereby helping to ensure the permanent availability of these arts to the Japanese people.

This complex and highly visible program reflects the extensive thought devoted to questions of cultural preservation and cultural autonomy by Japanese artists, scholars, and citizens for at least a century. They have had good reason for the effort. The decline of feudalism and the removal of trade barriers in mid-19th century Japan have resulted in occasional outbreaks of a passion for modernization that has threatened to drown out distinctive art forms developed during Japan's centuries of relative isolation. The Living National Treasures system has proved to be a highly effective response to this imbalance, one that is certainly not confined to Japan. Could the United States do as well?

Not, we realized, by simply imitating the Japanese system, so elegantly crafted to fit Japanese history and customary thinking. In spite of some surface resemblances, there were enormous differences between the United States and Japan. The United States, in need of a labor force to match its land mass, had encouraged and even compelled immigration; Japan with its small land area had forbidden it for some centuries. The United States had always looked admiringly overseas to the airs and graces of Old World arts, believing its own pottery and fiddle tunes crude and inelegant; the artists of Japan, long protected from external competition, had refined and polished their arts into world-

renowned gems. In the United States, the authority of individual artists to shape their art forms was a primary value; the artist was almost always more important than the art. The Japanese, however, had identified certain arts as Intangible Cultural Properties before they turned their attention to the Holders – the artists themselves.

The Folk Arts Program began to try to develop a way of recognizing individual traditional artists that would work in the United States, that would fit comfortably with the feelings ordinary Americans have about art and artists. Some of our principles were the same as those of the Japanese; some were almost polar opposites. Like the Japanese, we made the awards multidisciplinary, including music, dance, handwork, storytelling, and theater. Unlike them in our myriad immigrant populations, we would include many artists rather than an elegant few, and all the distinctive regional or ethnic styles of each art form. To use the omnipresent American traditions of fiddling and quilting as examples, we did not confine ourselves to a single most popular or well-known aesthetic style but included outstanding artists who exemplified Appalachian, Hawaiian, Down-East, Cajun, Alaskan, Irish, African-American, and Cape Breton aesthetics amongst perhaps a hundred others.

We made it a one-time monetary award, rather than lifetime support. We weren't sure we could recognize which artists would keep on keeping on for the rest of their lives, or which ones would even want to. This part of the Japanese system had a genuinely uncomfortable fit for American culture, scratchy and confining in all the wrong places. The open-handed good fortune of an award that comes out of the blue and drops money right into your lap

only once in your whole life seemed more harmonious with a society entertained by "Queen For A Day" television programs and enthralled by lotteries. We made the award amount \$5,000, a figure debated almost interminably when the fellowships were first established and again after 10 years when inflation raised it to \$10,000.

But actually, God turned out to be where He usually is, according to popular tradition – in the details. We had always thought the hard part would be to decide each year who would be given the fellowships, and we had been right, it was hard. But we also found that what happened after the panel decisions had been made was just as hard and just as important.

Simply calling a group of working artists National Heritage Fellows was not going to make much difference. What we could possibly affect was the impact of their work, how seriously it was taken inside and outside their communities, how many young people would think of trying to learn it, how many older people would begin to try to recall what they had known about that "old stuff," how much could be charged for their labor, and other practical issues. To use a contemporary phrase, we were empowering these artists. We hadn't been thinking in the beginning about getting into the empowerment business and, as is usual in newly developing human activities, we mostly made up what we did as we went along. We began to decorate.

The proclaiming of a National Heritage Fellow now consists of three somewhat ritualized events: a formal awards presentation on Capitol Hill before representatives from the House and Senate; a private dinner party for friends and family, complete with wine and speeches, where personal ties are forged and cultural strategies are considered; and a public concert in which the arts of the honorees are demonstrated before a cheering audience of everyday Washingtonians, where the musicians and dancers perform and the crafts workers discuss their work in front of wall-sized photographs of their creations. Governmental, personal, and public. All these worlds are fused, we believe, in the National Heritage Fellowship celebrations.

Bess Lomax Hawes recently retired as the Director of the Folk and Traditional Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts. She has taught folklore at the California State University at Northridge and has been a Deputy Director of the Festival of American Folklife. Her publications include, with co-author Bessie Jones, Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage.

We have tried occasionally to simplify the conduct of the celebration, but are reluctant to tamper with a ritual that is both popular and full of content. If I were to project a scholarly study of the results of this program, I would ask all the participants what part of the event seemed the most meaningful to them at the time, and what part seemed especially important in later reflection. Probably they wouldn't know. We often expect artists to tell us things that are beyond the capacity of most of us to formulate; and of course, they give it a good try, but usually their wisdom comes out in their art rather than in the answers to questionnaires.

My own reading is that the overall program has demonstrably helped a significant number of individual artists and has had no particular effect on others, who simply came to Washington, had a lovely time, and returned home with their certificates and checks to settle back into their ordinary ways. We have yet to hear of a situation – much feared when we started out – in which any artist returned home to unpleasantness of any sort.

But what the annual announcement of the National Heritage Fellowships *has* done without question is to help *all* Americans look with new eyes at the heady and creative surroundings in which they live, as full of color and variety as any flower garden. We don't usually see these riches, because we don't know they are there and therefore pass them by. Every year people tell the Folk Arts Program that they had never even heard of most of the art forms being honored, of the artists that created them, or of the communities where they flourish. If this significant effect can be maintained, if some competition to the enervating repetitiousness of popular culture can be mounted through this small federal expenditure, the National Heritage Fellowships will have made a truly important contribution to the quality of life across the entire United States.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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