

# Culture In and Out of the Museum

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Welcome to the 1999 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. On the National Mall of the United States for two weeks culminating with our Independence Day, the Festival enables people to represent their own cultural traditions and creativity, and celebrate these with fellow citizens of the nation and visitors from around the world.

This year, we host programs on New Hampshire, Romania, and South Africa. A central theme is the ability of diverse people from three continents, living with incredible societal changes, to use their own deeply held cultural traditions as a means of crafting their own identities, their own stories, their and our very future.

*Celebrating New Hampshire's Stories* points to the many ways people from that fiercely democratic state define their lives. The state's natural bounty is continually expressed in the arts and enjoyed with the help of varied crafts and skills that serve a vibrant recreational and tourism industry. Economic life illustrates ingenuity and a historic continuity with traditional manufacture, both in large corporate workplaces and smaller, high-tech, precision manufacturing shops. Community life reflects a strong investment in the historic preservation of the built environment and participation in institutions such as town meetings, contra dances, and *soirées* that bring people together just when other forces in society tend to keep them apart. And the life of our nation itself is

dramatically shaped by the most contemporary of conversations that traditionally occur in New Hampshire cafés and living rooms during presidential primary campaigns.

*Gateways to Romania* is an apt title for what is, in effect, an opening at the Festival of relationships between the American and Romanian people. The Festival program, and the process of achieving it, represent an important collaboration between Romania and the United States. Following decades of political repression, Romanians now seek the means of realizing a democratic and humane society. The cultural correlates of such a society are freedom of cultural expression, and the ability to practice and preserve one's traditions as well as create new cultural syntheses. Romania has long been a cultural crossroads with Latin, Orthodox, Balkan, Germanic, Hungarian, Roma, Turkish, and Jewish influences in music, song, dance, craftsmanship, sacred and culinary arts. The Festival provides both a showcase and a means for culture-rich Romania to use its treasures, for the benefit of its own citizens and to inform Americans about its people and heritage.

*South Africa: Crafting the Economic Renaissance of the Rainbow Nation* reveals the attempts of thousands of community-based craftspeople to enhance their economic development and civic participation through their artistry. Crafts in South Africa are as diverse as the Rainbow Nation itself,

drawing upon the generations-old traditions of indigenous people and those of Asian and European immigrant communities, from functional crafts of everyday use to the arts of survival that developed in townships. For many, crafts have a civic as well as an economic role, expressing the identity of a community while at the same time earning income for a family's livelihood. The Festival is part of an ongoing attempt to build upon the knowledge and skills of local-level artists in order to help build a new nation based upon human and cultural rights and economic opportunity.

Though cultural displays may try to crystallize and signal what lies beyond them, culture is never bounded by the exhibits in our museums or the performance stages at the Festival. The Festival, as a museum-like event, tries to show this. For museums and their programs to be vital, they must tap into the vitality that is around them. Doing this will always necessitate research and collecting, not only on historical traditions but on emerging forms of expression — for history does not stop. Most of all, as institutions of public life, museums must help nurture and distribute knowledge — a fundamental prerequisite of a truly democratic, free society. Museums can provide the space — real, symbolic, and virtual — wherein people can make their own culture, and make culture their own. The Festival, and the folks from New Hampshire, Romania, and South Africa, do this very well.