

Crafts and Craftspeople of the Appalachians

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Handicraft has long been associated with the Appalachian region, especially the Southern Appalachians. In the late 19th century, missionary and social service organizations moved outward from more urban, industrialized sections of the United States into the remote “frontier,” a swath of highlands that lay diagonally along the eastern third of the country. A lack of infrastructure—of schools, roads, water, and waste disposal—left the region comparatively impoverished. To some, handicraft appeared as a solution to poverty, if only mountain people could market some of the things they already made to national markets. Some craft workers from outside the region thought that teaching handicraft might expand or improve its production.

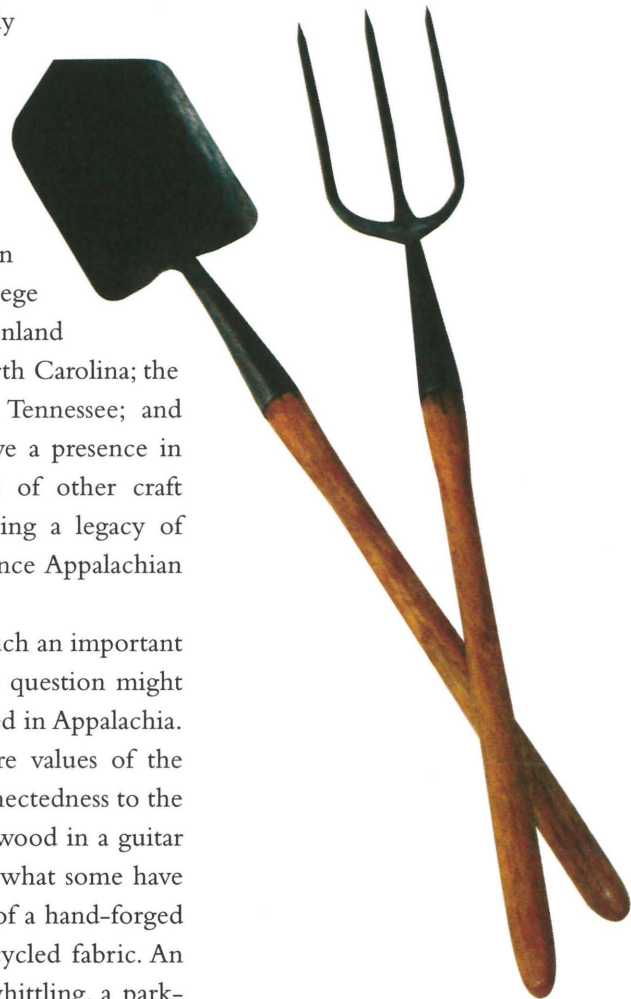
So many craft organizations emerged during the decades from 1890 through 1940 that the period is known as the Appalachian Craft Revival. The Hindman and Pine Mountain Settlement Schools and Berea College in Kentucky; the John C. Campbell Folk School, Penland School, and the Southern Highland Craft Guild in North Carolina; the Arrowmont School (Pi Phi Settlement School) in Tennessee; and Hambidge Center (Rabun Studios) in Georgia all have a presence in today’s Appalachian cultural community. But dozens of other craft production centers and schools came and went, leaving a legacy of historical work and traditions that continues to influence Appalachian cultural life today.

While the question of why and how crafts played such an important role in the culture of Appalachia is important, a better question might be why craft-making has persisted and, in fact, flourished in Appalachia. Reasons for this are not accidental: a number of core values of the region are characteristic of craftsmanship as well. A connectedness to the land shows up in the appreciation of the fine grain of wood in a guitar custom built by a master luthier. A resourcefulness (or what some have called a “make-do” attitude) is revealed in the making of a hand-forged knife from a car spring or in piecing a quilt from recycled fabric. An interest in community is evident in the tradition of whittling, a park-bench activity that is more about swapping stories and comparing pocket knives than about carving animals and figures.

Such sense of community inspires makers to share their skill and acquired knowledge with others through today’s schools and guilds. While essential hand traditions like smithing and weaving were made largely obsolete by newer technological processes, their practice as contemporary art forms has been enhanced.

Appalachian craft—with its traditions of refined manual skill, intimacy with natural materials, resourceful use of scarce raw materials, and a community spirit of sharing with others—embodies the spirit that runs through all creative activity. ■

These salad servers by blacksmith William S. Rogers are made as authentic reproductions of actual traditional farm implements, the pitchfork and shovel. Such contemporary artist’s references to historic forms can be considered a visual pun, a type of Appalachian humor. Rogers operates a forge in Christiansburg, Virginia. Photo by Anna Fariello



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