

FROM NEGLECT TO CONCEPT:
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF
MATERIAL ASPECTS OF AMERICAN FOLK CULTURE

Simon J. Bronner and Stephen P. Poyser

Object-oriented folklife researchers in the United States who in the 1960s devoted much published space to complaints that folklorists neglected material evidence for the study of American folk culture have witnessed in the time since a substantial growth of research on America's material heritage. While it is true that the ethnographically-minded folklife researcher has always stressed comprehensive collection and documentation, recent studies by folklife scholars have also raised significant theoretical questions concerning folkloric behavior. The essays presented in this volume on "Approaches to the Study of Material Aspects of American Folk Culture" reflect the work of contemporary folklife researchers who combine the careful methods of documentation intrinsic to material research with theoretical interpretations and methodological suggestions.

The inherent emphasis on multidisciplinary approaches in material culture studies has precipitated significant research that addresses cross-disciplinary questions. Much of that research has contributed to the development of folk studies in the United States as evidenced by the growing incorporation of material research in folklore collections and publications. Some folklorists may be quick to criticize their colleagues for relying upon other disciplines for theories while failing to generate new concepts out of their own data. Such a criticism contains a legitimate foundation. We do not feel, however, that folklore, or any discipline, can afford to be so myopic

as to ignore advances made by others. In our view, the study of material aspects of American folk culture provides a lesson in the value of multidisciplinary contributions that enable folklorists to frame their own particular disciplinary perspective.

In the present compilation we have attempted to bring together into a single volume several essays which represent current trends and new directions in material culture studies. The introductory essay, "Concepts in the Study of Material Aspects of American Folk Culture," by Simon J. Bronner, presents an overview of the various approaches to the study of American material culture. Bronner's essay illustrates the point that although folklife scholars may study quite similar data, the approach they utilize, as well as the results they obtain, are largely determined by their theoretical orientation. Toward the goal of arriving at a unified concept for material research, however, the assumptions and preconceptions that underlie the different approaches need to be understood in order to formulate and evaluate interdisciplinary constructs.

From the general we move to more specific case studies that pose conceptual questions. In Dell Upton's "Toward a Performance Theory of Vernacular Architecture: Early Tidewater Virginia as a Case Study," he argues that the elitist idea that architectural styles gradually filter down to the folk, who employ them as an imitation of high style, is erroneous. By drawing upon models employed in sociolinguistics Upton asserts that the early inhabitants of Tidewater Virginia had available to them alternatives which enabled them to intentionally choose the form which the building was to take. These "codes," as Upton refers to them, enabled the builder not only to construct buildings which were morphologically predictable, by conforming to community standards,

but also to introduce modifications to the structure which were precipitated by changes within the society. Thus, as society became more complex the need to adapt to this complexity was reflected in the architectural styles.

If we accept the notion that the individual played an important role in the type of building he chose to construct, then we must recognize the fact that individuality can, and frequently does, influence the final form of the structure. This human variable typically occurs when we are faced with the task of attempting to classify a structure according to typologies developed by scholars of material culture. The terms "I house," "saddlebag house," and "dogtrot house" are all abstractions which refer to structures that more or less conform to our notions of a certain architectural style, usually based on the floor plan. Often we are able to identify structures on the basis of their conformity to one of these recognized abstractions, but what of those objects that do not readily conform to the morphological typologies posited by folklife researchers? Elizabeth Mosby Adler and Thomas A. Adler consider this issue in the next essay in our volume, "Folk Architectural Teratology: Problems in the Study of an Indiana Farm." The Adlers argue that a fundamental problem exists with the classificatory system used by material researchers. The system, which is roughly analogous to the phylogenetic classification system used by biologists, may be adequate for the natural world, but it ultimately fails for folklife researchers' purposes because it does not account for the cognitive system of the individual who created the structure. A reciprocal relationship appears in previous classifications

between the house and the mind, the natural and the cognitive. Instead, argue the Adlers, we need to employ a "biperspectival" view of both the structure and the mind that created it, one more akin to semiotics than genetics.

The final essay in our volume by Wilhelm F. H. Nicolaisen deals with several enigmatic modern objects--lawn ornaments and decorated mailboxes, for instance--frequently encountered by field researchers. Historic preservationists are quite fond of the term "adaptive re-use," and use it quite frequently to refer to the modification of an existing structure to serve some new and different function. The deteriorating structures on traditional Main Streets throughout America, for example, are often converted into exclusive shops and apartments which cater to the affluent and the historically-minded. But what of the common, everyday, garden variety of artifact: the wagonwheel, the milkcan, the empty plastic bleach bottle? Can we speak of adaptive re-use for these items? Wilhelm F. H. Nicolaisen presents a provocative explanation as to why these items are recycled and what functions they serve in his essay on "distorted function" in material culture. According to Nicolaisen these artifacts symbolize an age of innocence, whether real or imagined, before the pressures of urbanization and increased societal complexity when life was perceived to be simpler. Nicolaisen thus implies that objects can possess a potency that can not only reflect, but also affect, behavior. This last point relates to the broader organizing principle of much material research: questioning the role of objects in people's lives. With the increased American concern for its dwindling resources, Nicolaisen's consideration of modern folk methods of adaptation and recycling is a timely and revealing essay.

Appended to our volume on material culture studies is Gary Stanton's translation of Gösta von Schoultz's article, "Construction Techniques and Interior Layouts of Swedish Folk Houses." Although his essay deals with an area outside the United States, von Schoultz presents an overview of Scandinavian folklife researchers' problems and theories that should raise heuristic comparisons with American research. A reading of von Schoultz's essay suggests the debt that American material researchers owe to Scandinavian ethnological research, and suggest a need for more translations of foreign material studies--studies that are not only multidisciplinary by nature but also international in scope.

Material study's multidisciplinary nature means that articles and others works on material culture appear in scattered scholarly sources. Major American journals including the Journal of American Folklore, Landscape, Geographical Review, Journal of Popular Culture, and the Journal of American History occasionally feature articles on objects, or folklife in general, but a more fruitful place to begin research is two journals that specialize in material culture: Pioneer America and Winterthur Portfolio. The latter journal does not emphasize folk culture, and neither journal directly addresses the disciplinary concerns of folklorists, but Pennsylvania Folklife, New York Folklore, and Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin regularly include articles on material folk research. In addition, Southern Folklore Quarterly, Keystone Folklore, Mississippi Folklore Register, and Cooperstown Graduate Association Proceedings have published or prepared significant special issues on artifactual studies.

A good general survey of American material culture has not yet been written, but Don Yoder's American Folklife (1976), Henry Glassie's Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States (1968), Richard M. Dorson's Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction (1972), and Ian M. G. Quimby's Material Culture and the Study of American Life (1978) provide possible starting points. Most of the essays in these books present generic discussions which are essential for defining the scope of material culture study.

Because material study is couched in the study of folklife, a familiarity with the development of American folklife scholarship is vital. Don Yoder's "The Folklife Studies Movement" in Pennsylvania Folklife (1963), Norbert Riedl's "Folklore and the Study of Material Aspects of Folk Culture" in the Journal of American Folklore (1966), and Howard Wight Marshall's "Folklife and the Rise of American Folk Museums" also in the Journal of American Folklore (1977) offer succinct discussions of folklife study's development in America.

Folklore bibliographies have traditionally omitted material culture titles from their listings, a situation that has created a crucial need for bibliographic aids for material study. Robert Wildhaber's "A Bibliographic Introduction to American Folklife" which appeared in New York Folklore Quarterly (1965) was an early attempt to discuss the basic texts of material research. Henry Glassie's bibliography in Pattern is more extensive, but the lack of subject guides detracts from its usefulness. Merle Simmons' annual folklore bibliographies for the Folklore Institute Monograph Series (1973, 1974) comprehensively list material culture titles, but they also lack specific subject breakdowns. However, Jan Harold Brunvand's brief bibliographic

essays on architecture, art, crafts, and costume in The Study of American Folklore (1978) give useful generic references for beginning students.

Specific subject bibliographies are available for specialized areas. Simon J. Bronner's A Critical Bibliography of American Folk Art (1978) and his bibliography of black material culture, Thomas A. Zaniello's "American Gravestones: An Annotated Bibliography" in Folklore Forum (1976), and J. C. Camp's bibliographies of architectural theory for folklife in New York Folklore (1976) and foodways in the Journal of American Culture (1979) are valuable reference works for an awareness of common material culture genres.

Although familiarity with folklife genres such as architecture, art, craft, clothing, and food and their forms in different parts of the United States is essential, we favor a conceptual knowledge of the field in order to realize how abstract genres relate to the whole of material culture and to gain an understanding of material scholarship's significance. One means of learning the field's concepts consists of reading the works of the leading figures in material study.

Henry Glassie's publications indicate what he himself refers to as the "organic development" of his thinking about material culture. Pattern addresses the problems of determining regions, finding relationships between different aspects of material culture, using geography in folklife, tracing the movement of ideas through history, and suggesting systematic collecting methods. His essay on folk art for Dorson's Folklore and Folklife four years later showed a shift to thorny philosophical issues of design, style, aesthetic, creativity, and worldview in material study. His identification of the concepts of bilateral symmetry

and art-craft dichotomy deeply affected folklife research at the time. Following that piece was another significant essay, "Structure and Function: Folklore and the Artifact" in Semiotica (1973) which discussed the roles of structuralism and functionalism in the study of objects as well as comparing the differing methodological perceptions of research that focus on the individual, society, or object. These ideas had their culmination in Folk Housing in Middle Virginia (1975), a revolutionary work in material study that provided a fresh theoretical framework adapted from Lévi-Strauss and Noam Chomsky. His most recent publication may be his most dense theoretically. "Meaningful Things and Appropriate Myths: The Artifact's Place in American Studies" in Prospects (1978) brings together ideas on relationships between verbal and nonverbal traditions, evaluations of individuals' roles in shaping culture, probings for deeper meanings of artifacts, and identification of philosophical differences between history and folklife. In the ten years between Pattern and "Meaningful Things," most of the important conceptual issues of folklife study are raised and evaluated. Thus, a reading of Glassie's works indicates the conceptual development of material study.

Don Yoder's contributions also deserve consideration. His early attempts to encourage material research in the United States are reflected in "The Folklife Studies Movement," an important survey that complements his "Folklife Studies in American Scholarship" in American Folklife thirteen years later. Both articles outline conceptual bases of folklife study as Yoder viewed them at different times. In addition, his essays on "Folk Cookery" and "Folk Costume" for Dorson's Folklore and Folklife pushed for a regional, sectarian, and ethnic research approach that continues to be discussed in material study.

A reading of the works by Fred Kniffen, leader of cultural geography's contribution to folklife, Warren Roberts, formulator of materialist functionalism, Louis C. Jones, an important figure in folk art and museums, and E. McClung Fleming, an influential historian and artifact expert also indicates significant conceptual questions. Kniffen's "American Cultural Geography and Folklife" in American Folklife summarizes his basic methods and theories, but "Louisiana House Types" written for the Annals of the Association of American Geographers (1936) and "Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion" also in the Annals (1965) continue to have an impact on folklife research. Warren Roberts' documentation of the Whitaker-Waggoner log house for American Folklife is a model for folklife documentation. Other important statements of his appear in "Function in Folk Architecture" for Folklore Forum (1971) and "Folk Architecture in Context: The Folk Museum" for the Pioneer America Society Proceedings (1973). Louis C. Jones' many articles on the folk museum complex at Cooperstown relate to the application of folklife research; his folk art research in New Found Folk Art of the Young Republic (1960), Queena Stovall: Artist of the Blue Ridge Piedmont (1974), and "The Genre in American Folk Art" in Papers on American Art (1976) show the development of his aesthetic approach to material culture. E. McClung Fleming's "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model" in Winterthur Portfolio (1974) presented a careful method for research based on symbolist and functionalist thinking. He applied this method in an important essay, "Symbols of the United States: From Indian Queen to Uncle Sam" which appeared in Frontiers of American Culture (1968), and which also brought out the ongoing uniqueness of America debate.

Michael Own Jones' formulation of a behavioral approach to folklife study deserves special attention. The Hand Made Object and Its Maker (1975) is filled with challenges of folklorists' preconceived notions, presentations of bold interpretations, and suggestions for a behavioral methodology. Jones also does an excellent job of summarizing the concepts of folk art study in "The Study of Folk Art Study: Reflections on Images" in Folklore Today (1976). He is obviously aware of a conceptual framework for folklife study, and his numerous publications speak to a disciplinary introspection.

Other figures demand consideration in any conceptual understanding of material study. John Vlach's Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts (1978) opened up the question of ethnic contributions to American culture, and their deep meanings in the American consciousness. Similarly, William Ferris' "Vision in Afro-American Folk Art" in the Journal of American Folklore (1975) presented behavioral questions arising from material study pertaining to the black American experience. His special concern for augmenting knowledge of the American experience with the Afro-American cultural contribution is displayed in a volume of essays he edited, Afro-American Folk Arts and Crafts (in press). Roger Welsch's Sod Walls (1968) and Austin Fife, Alta Fife, and Henry Glassie's Forms on the Frontier (1969) address the particular conceptual problems in studies of a neglected western material culture. Howard Marshall's "Material Culture and the Museum" in the Association for Living Historical Farms and Agricultural Museums Annual (1977) along with his previously mentioned article on folk museums are significant statements on the role of museums in material research. In addition, Marshall's collaboration with John Vlach, "A Folklife Approach to American Dialects" for American Speech (1973) presented a careful

argument for the value of material culture to verbal research, and its implications for identification of cultural regions.

Obtaining access to reports of material research still presents a problem for the folklife scholar wishing to corroborate his research or to learn new information, but more platforms in the forms of publications, films, exhibits, and videotapes on material culture are becoming available. A kind of folklife iconography--floor plans, elevations, construction details, process photographs, distribution maps, to name a few--emerges from a survey of the literature on material culture. Reading floor plans and maps provides tools for folklife scholars just as the motif-index offered aids to generations of "literary" folklorists. Thus, understanding the concepts of folklife also includes acquiring an awareness of the skills and tools used in material research. The growing number of courses on material folk culture in universities, and the increasing sophistication of American museums indicate the expanding scholarly recognition of material study's skills, methods, tools, and concepts, a movement that has already encouraged numerous publications by young students of the field. Indeed, object-oriented folklorists have moved from calls of neglect to advancements of significant concepts that profoundly affect the modern study of folklore and its allied fields.

REFERENCES

- Adler, Elizabeth Mosby, and Thomas A. Adler. "Folk Architectural Teratology: Problems in the Study of an Indiana Farm." Folklore Forum 12 (1979), special issue.
- Bronner, Simon J. A Critical Bibliography of American Folk Art. Bloomington, Indiana: Folklore Publications Group, 1978.
- _____. "Concepts in the Study of Material Aspects of American Folk Culture." Folklore Forum 12 (1979), special issue.
- _____, ed. American Material Culture and Folklife: A Symposium. Cooperstown: Cooperstown Graduate Association Proceedings, forthcoming.
- Bronner, Simon J., and Christopher Lornell. "Sources for the Study of Materials Aspects of Afro-American Folklife." In Afro-American Folk Arts and Crafts, ed. William Ferris. Boston: G. K. Hall, in press.
- Brunvand, Jan Harold. The Study of American Folklore, Second Edition. New York: W. W. Norton, 1978.
- Camp, J. C. "Architectural Theory for Folklife Study: A Bibliographic Guide." New York Folklore 2 (1977):29-42.
- _____. "Food and American Culture: A Bibliographic Essay." Journal of American Culture 2 (1979), in press.
- Dorson, Richard M., ed. Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- Ferris, William. "Vision in Afro-American Folk Art: The Sculpture of James Thomas." Journal of American Folklore 88 (1975):115-32.
- _____. "Don't Throw it Away: Folk Culture and Our Dwindling Resources." Yale Alumni Magazine 37 (1974):
- _____, ed. Afro-American Folk Arts and Crafts. Boston: G. K. Hall, in press.
- Fife, Austin, Alta Fife, and Henry Glassie. Forms Upon the Frontier: Folklife and Folk Arts in the United States. Logan, Utah: Utah State University, 1969.
- Fleming, E. McClung. "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model." In Winterthur Portfolio 9, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974. Pp. 153-75.

- _____. "Symbols of the United States: From Indian Queen to Uncle Sam." In Frontiers of American Culture, ed. Ray B. Browne, Richard H. Crowder, Virgil C. Stafford. Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1968. Pp. 1-24.
- Glassie, Henry. Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968.
- _____. "Folk Art." In Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, ed. Richard M. Dorson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972. Pp. 253-80.
- _____. "Structure and Function, Folklore and the Artifact." Semiotica 7 (1973):313-51.
- _____. Folk Housing in Middle Virginia. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975.
- _____. "Meaningful Things and Appropriate Myths: The Artifact's Place in American Studies." In Prospects 3, ed. Jack Salzman. New York: Burt Franklin, 1978. Pp. 1-49.
- Jones, Louis C. The Farmers' Museum. Cooperstown: New York State Historical Association, 1948.
- _____. "Education Through the Outdoor Museum . . . The Farmers' Museum at Cooperstown." Art in America 43 (1955):34-39, 71-73.
- _____. Queena Stovall: Artist of the Blue Ridge Piedmont. Cooperstown: New York State Historical Association, 1974.
- _____. "The Genre in American Folk Art." In Papers on American Art, ed. John C. Milley. Maple Shade, New Jersey: The Edinburgh Press, 1976. Pp. 41-60.
- Jones, Louis C. and Agnes Halsey Jones. New Found Folk Art of the Young Republic. Cooperstown: New York State Historical Association, 1960.
- Jones, Michael Owen. The Hand Made Object and Its Maker. Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.
- _____. "The Study of Folk Art Study: Reflections on Images." In Folklore Today: A Festschrift for Richard M. Dorson, ed. Linda Degh, Henry Glassie, Felix J. Oinas. Bloomington: Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies, 1976. Pp. 291-304.

- Kniffen, Fred B. "American Cultural Geography and Folk-life." In American Folklife, ed. Don Yoder. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976. Pp. 51-70.
- _____. "Louisiana House Types." Annals of the Association of American Geographers 26 (1936):179-93.
- _____. "Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion." Annals of the Association of American Geographers 55 (1965):549-77.
- Marshall, Howard Wight. "Folklife and the Rise of American Folk Museums." Journal of American Folklore 90 (1977): 391-413.
- _____. "Material Culture and the Museum." Association for Living Historical Farms and Agricultural Museums Annual 3 (1977):35-38.
- Marshall, Howard Wight, and John Michael Vlach. "Toward a Folklife Approach to American dialects." American Speech 48 (1973):163-91.
- Nicolaisen, Wilhelm. "'Distorted Function' in Material Aspects of Culture." Folklore Forum 12 (1979), special issue.
- Quimby, Ian M. G., ed. Material Culture and the Study of American Life. New York: W. W. Norton, 1978.
- Riedl, Norbert. "Folklore and the Study of Material Aspects of Folk Culture." Journal of American Folklore 79 (1966):557-63.
- Roberts, Warren. "Function in Folk Architecture." Folklore Forum, Bibliographic and Special Series No. 8 (1971), pp. 10-13.
- _____. "The Whitaker-Waggoner Log House from Morgan County, Indiana." In American Folklife, ed. Don Yoder. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976. Pp. 185-208.
- _____. "Folk Architecture in Context: The Folk Museum." Pioneer America Society Proceedings 1 (1973):
- Simmons, Merle. Folklore Bibliography for 1973. Bloomington, Indiana: Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies, 1975.
- _____. Folklore Bibliography for 1974. Bloomington, Indiana: Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies, 1977.

- Special Issue--Material Culture. Keystone Folklore 21 (1976-1977).
- Special Issue--Material Culture. Mississippi Folklore Register 12 (Fall 1978).
- Special Issue--Material Culture in the South. Southern Folklore Quarterly 39 (December 1975).
- Upton, Dell. "Toward a Performance Model of Vernacular Architecture: Early Tidewater Virginia as a Case Study." Folklore Forum 12 (1979), special issue.
- Vlach, John Michael. Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts. Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978.
- von Schoultz, Gösta. Stanton, Gary, translator. "Construction Techniques and Interior Layouts of Swedish Folk Houses." Folklore Forum 12 (1979), special issue. Translated from Schwedische Volkskunde: Festschrift für Sigfrid Svensson. Stockholm, Goteborg, Uppsala: Amqvist and Wiksell, 1961.
- Welsch, Roger. Sod Walls: The Story of the Nebraska Sod House. Broken Bow, Nebraska: Purcells, 1968.
- Wildhaber, Robert. "A Bibliographic Introduction to American Folklife." New York Folklore Quarterly 21 (1965):259-302.
- Yoder, Don. "The Folklife Studies Movement." Pennsylvania Folklife 13 (1963):43-56.
- _____. "Folk Costume." In Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, ed. Richard M. Dorson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972. Pp. 295-324.
- _____. "Folk Cookery." In Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, ed. Richard M. Dorson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972. Pp. 325-50.
- _____, ed. American Folklife. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976.
- _____. "Folklife Studies in American Scholarship." In American Folklife, ed. Don Yoder. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976. Pp. 3-18.
- Zaniello, Thomas A. "American Gravestones: An Annotated Bibliography." Folklore Forum 9 (1976): 115-37.