

BOOK REVIEWS

Beyond Necessity: Art in the Folk Tradition. By Kenneth Ames. Pp. 131, annotated bibliography, black and white photographs and color plates. Winterthur, Delaware: The Winterthur Museum, 1977. \$14.95 cloth.

Reviewed by Betty Jane Belanus

The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, a virtual bastion of eighteenth and nineteenth century American decorative arts, sponsored a 1977 exhibit of folk art at the Brandywine River Museum, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. This book is step two in a grand plan to present a "four-fold approach to folk art--exhibition, essay and catalogue, conference, and conference report." The book is handsome in the manner of museum catalogues: profusely illustrated with good black and white prints interspersed with excellent color plates. Yet, it is not just another coffee table art exhibit catalogue, since Ames' long essay is intelligent and sensitive, and provides some insight into the problems run across by the scholar interested in "folk art."

Putting together an exhibit of folk art is not as easy as it sounds, since the term has no satisfactory definition, even though everyone from the art dealer to the folklore scholar has had a crack at positing such a definition. Ames' mission, then, has been to attempt to piece together not only the various past definitions of the term, but also the philosophy behind the individual components of the term: "folk" and "art." We can hardly envy the task. The author does a decent job of pulling the term apart and putting it back together after examining all of its facets, and makes some pertinent observations along the way. For instance, Ames isolates five "myths" pervading the popular conception of the folk artist: the individuality of the artist, the idea of the "poor but happy" artisan, handicraft versus simple machine work, the notion that "folk art" is proof of a conflict-free past, and the misconception of national uniqueness in American folk art. In the section on "Influences on Folk Art," Ames looks closely at tradition, decoration, and competence in a commendable, psycho-functional fashion.

Perhaps the most praiseworthy aspect of Ames' work, however, is the jab he makes at the popularizers of "folk art": the art dealers. One is reminded of Richard M. Dorson's fight for the legitimizing of genuine American folklore texts, and the temptation to call what the art dealers have in the past promoted as "folk" art by the term "fake" art is strong. The sentimentalization of "naive," or "primitive" art--two of the alternate terms utilized by art dealers and collectors--is, indeed, roughly analogous to the "gooey confections" American folk narratives were reduced to in the various **Treasury** collections issued in the 1940s and '50s.* Like the pseudo "folk" character, Paul Bunyon, some of the so-called items of "folk" art were not genuine, but passed as such because of their supposed similarity to genuine items and their display of the characteristics popularly assigned to such items.

Ames has consulted the works of folklore scholars specializing in folk art research (most notably Henry Glassie and Michael Owen Jones) in preparing his essay. Yet the fact that Ames himself is not a folklorist is obvious. The items in the exhibit are almost universally dated pre-1900 and, basing his essay on these items, Ames' historic bent overpowers his brief but astute observation that an examination of living folk art in context can result in more than speculation based on historic research (p. 87). Ames is limited by his materials: like a folklorist working with the bare texts from an historical period, he must surmise a great deal, and in so doing he can sometimes be found skating on thin ice.

In sum, **Beyond Necessity: Art in the Folk Tradition** is not the definitive work on folk art that scholars interested in the subject eagerly await. The work is, however, valuable, and should not be overlooked by students of folk art. Scholars should also be on the lookout for the forthcoming report of the conference that made up the fourth step of the ambitious Winterthur plan. My guess is that the two works will complement each other and, together, will help redirect the frustrating study of what Ames aptly calls "the paradox of folk art."

* See Richard M. Dorson, **American Folklore and the Historian** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 5.