

RESEARCH IN THE NATION'S JUNKPILE:  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOLKLORE STUDY AT THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Rayna Green  
University of Arkansas

To confirm popular belief, I should begin by saying that the Smithsonian is indeed a repository of stuffed and unstuffed critters, some not on public display. It is also a place which offers much to the scholar that neither the public nor the non-scientific, non-art communities are aware of. Particularly, for the folklorist interested in Anglo-American, Latin and Spanish American and Native American material culture, in American popular culture, in the historical and methodological contributions of archeology, museology, anthropology, art history and the study of technology, the Smithsonian offers research and perhaps job opportunities. With some clues to the hazards, debilities, pleasures and profits of work there, the folklorist should be able to use the Smithsonian to good advantage. Let me outline then, the possibilities and problem of research and employment there. This is by no means an inclusive statement of what is there and not there, but an attempt at offering the broad picture.<sup>1</sup>

First, as to research at the Smithsonian. What can be done there by folklorists and how? The how, admittedly, is easier to determine than the what. There is a fellowship program for pre- and post-doctoral students offered by the Smithsonian Research Foundation and administered through their Office of Academic Programs, but I believe the S.I. staff would cooperate with those who wanted to research here with money from another grant or on their own. The S.I. fellowship, at \$5,000 (pre-doctoral) and \$9,000 (post-doctoral) respectively, seems to be a good one.

To get the fellowship, the first step is the proposal of a topic in which research centers around S.I. collections and/or staff. Make a well-written proposal. The competition in these lean years is going to be rougher here, though the Smithsonian staff seems anxious to have folklorists each year and would certainly be receptive to applications. Write the Office of Academic Programs, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560. The deadline for fellowships is usually January 1, so write far enough ahead to get the forms. It would probably be worth a trip here to see what is available and talk to some of the researchers and curators about the things you are interested in. Often, they have some project they want done but don't have the staff or money. You would get the dissertation or monograph out of it, and they would get the project completed. If you know of a particular collection or staff member, write to inquire about the possibilities. It helps your case tremendously when you make the proposal if someone on the staff really wants to see you come and will support you.<sup>2</sup> If your real aim is to work at the Library of Congress or some other agency around Washington, don't make the proposal at all. As money tightens, the Smithsonian Research Foundation becomes less patient with people who take their money and contribute nothing to the research at the museum.

If you get the fellowship, your year will be relatively free of obligations. Several fellows last year presented lectures or papers in seminars offered by staff members, but for the most part the time is your own. In most cases, though I have heard reservations expressed by some fellows -- usually not in the areas where folklorists might work -- you will have adequate office and library space, access to the facilities and services of the S.I., and pleasant cooperation from staff members. Identification of yourself as a Smithsonian fellow even seems to get cheerful cooperation from other agencies in and out of D.C., whose cooperation you might need in your research. The Library of Congress has a close cooperative plan with the S.I., and you'll get a stack pass and study space there if you request it. The S.I. Libraries have useful contacts with libraries in and out of the city, and they'll get anything for you that's not in the S.I. collections. In addition to your fellowship stipend, you'll have a thousand dollar expense fund, with which you can xerox, photograph, travel, record, mail questionnaires and pay for other research-related expenses. My way to the A.F.S. meeting in Los Angeles was paid last year through the fund because I was giving a paper. One could even purchase equipment with this money, though it would have to be returned to the Smithsonian at the end of the year. In all, the fellowship offers a fairly civilized, uncomplicated, welcome arrangement for research.

But again, what could a folklorist propose to do in order to obtain this fellowship? Thus far, three folklorists have held this fellowship. Let me describe what they've done, and then indicate other areas which might be of interest to folklorists.

Richard Lunt (I.U.) has done research in traditional boat building with an authority on American boats in the Museum of History and Technology's Division of Transportation. Also of importance to him were the photographic, lines draft and designers' model collections on small boats. His work had to be vastly supplemented with field work, however, because of the nature of the work he wished to do and because of the limited collections in the Smithsonian. In essence, the value of the S.I. to him was its technological-historical and skilled personnel resources.

Yvonne Lange (Penn.) is doing work on the santos of Puerto Rico, and is using the extensive S.I. collections of Phillipine, New Mexican and Puerto Rican wooden carvings in the Spanish Southwest collections of the Museum of History and Technology. She is working closely with a curator who is interested in folk art, though he is trained in art history and the decorative arts. She has also had to do extensive field work regarding the social context in which these images are used.

As for myself, I am working on popular Anglo-American visual images (representations) of the Indian. I use the primary and secondary sources of cigar-store, weathervane and figurehead Indians in the Museum of History and Technology and The Index of American Design, the huge S.I. collections of paintings by artists who had Indians as their subject, the collections of popular decorative arts available here, and the Anthropological Archives and Libraries. My work is heavily supplemented with information and items from other museums and collectors, and with the holdings, archival and pictorial, at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Library of Congress and the National Archives. In addition, there are several Smithsonian staff members in anthropology and the Division of American Studies who are interested in Indian-White relations, the

interpretation of art and material culture, and in Indians in general who are of great help to me.

Before continuing to discuss further research possibilities, I should indicate something about the Smithsonian staff and their perspectives. There are, in spite of the new-found interest in folk culture at the S.I., no folklorists on the staff. By and large, there are no people who have had either rigorous training or long-standing interests in traditional material culture and folk culture. Thus, the folklorist who comes here must be prepared, in many senses, to make his own way into and with the collections. While curators and researchers will be competent in their areas of specialization, these areas may seem narrow to the folklorist who, by necessity, is eclectic in his research, and folk culture has gotten the short end of the stick in Smithsonian research and hiring. However, there's a lot of willingness to work through problems as well as a willingness to treat you as a colleague who has something to offer them. The reverse is also true. Since there is virtually no retrieval system at the S.I., you must depend on the skilled memories and knowledge of the professional staff for access to the material. With the exception of inventory lists, each collection exists in the minds of individual curators, and you must depend on them. If you're working with one kind of material, your problem will be somewhat diminished, but if, like me, you're working with widely scattered and diverse materials, the right questions to the right curator at the right time are all you have as a research tool.

There are likely to be some "botch-ups" and misunderstandings, particularly if you have any work to do in the decorative or fine arts. Most of the curators in Cultural History, Technology and Art are trained in art history, the decorative arts and in cultural history. Most of their training has centered around "elite" culture with some sop to popular culture thrown in. Most of them, because of the nature of the Smithsonian collections, have been converted to the study of popular culture on some level, but have not yet developed schemes for analysis and interpretation that don't come from an art historical viewpoint (read: elitist bias). Since the Smithsonian has very little that comes from truly traditional culture, folk material culture hardly enters the picture. You will, then, have to reorient your terminological biases drawn from anthropological and folkloric materials in order to get the right answers about particular items or, in fact, to get to the proper material at all. Your insistence on alternative terminologies and interpretive frameworks may have some effect, but you need to get to the material first. For example, in any museum, and the Smithsonian is no exception, there will be paintings termed and presented to the public as "folk art." These naive, primitive, non-academic, vernacular paintings are not by any means folk art nor are most of the carvings and metal pieces so labeled,<sup>3</sup> but if you are really looking for folk art you will have to be more specific about the sorts of things you are interested in and you may have to swallow your impatience with the art historical perspective. We simply have to recognize and understand the position from which most curators operate.

The collections at the S.I. do have some limitations for research by folklorists, though I think they are not nearly as restrictive as most would imagine. I feel that the S.I.'s growing interest in folk culture plus the material that is now here will provide ample room for research for a

number of years. Beyond topics which are traditionally folkloric, however, there are a number which are tangentially but complementarily related to folklore and folklife which could easily be studied here. Here are some of those areas which would appear to be worth investigation.

First, there is the entire collection of the Index of American Design, first compiled by the Artist's Project of the W.P.A. Watercolor renderings of every imaginable kind of architecture, carving, metalwork, costume, ceramic work and so forth were taken from museums and private collections all over the country. These were stored in the National Gallery and can be used to trace pattern, design and form for most parts of the country. No folklorist, as far as I know, has ever done extensive work with this collection, and it would be interesting to know just how many and what kinds of items in the collection are wholly or partially traditional.<sup>4</sup> There are, for example, large numbers of items from the Spanish Southwest, from Pennsylvania and New England which would obviously lend themselves to such a study. Anyone who wanted to do a depth study of a craft should consult the Index and follow the leads contained in the reference material which often accompanies each item. A look at the Index and at the book on the collection might open up other ideas for work with it.<sup>5</sup>

Second, there are in the Museum of History and Technology, in the National Gallery and the National Collection of Fine Arts, large collections of primitive, naive, non-academic, vernacular paintings, carvings and fancy stitchery which deserve attention by folklorists. With particular respect to the paintings of the 18th and 19th centuries, those called "folk art" by the curators, few folklorists have ever attempted analyses of these paintings from a folkloristic or even socio-cultural perspective.<sup>6</sup> Many of these early painters used themes which came from or passed into oral tradition. Many used traditional symbols and references. Many of them participated in and helped formalize the thematic cultural preoccupations of the country or of their particular group or region. These paintings and the other items from the earliest popular culture in the U.S. seem to me to lend themselves to and need folkloristic, interpretive attention.<sup>7</sup> The art-historical framework (the period-style-technique orientation) does not provide satisfactory answers, and will only give over to alternative frameworks which have not yet been offered.

Apart from the vernacular art which invites attention, the general S.I. collections of textiles, ceramics, metal and woodwork in the pre-industrial, cultural history and transportation divisions offer much. Some curators have already been involved that are folkloristic in nature, and there are collections yet to be used. One curator has been working on exhibitions on and materials for Afro-American history, and is seeking methods for the collection and preservation of that history. One was extensively involved in the study of pioneer pottery in California, one with Spanish-American artifacts, and one with recording folk musicians in and around Galax, Virginia. Thus work is being done and could be done by folklorists in American dress and costume, furniture, textiles, ceramics, and pre-industrial technology. Again, the collections of truly traditional materials are limited, but for comparative work and for influence studies in American culture, the S.I. collections would suffice in many areas. Two collections which appear to be worthy of study are the Peters Collection of American Lithographs and the Warshaw Collection of Business Americana which consists of advertising materials from the nineteenth

century. Both collections are repositories of material about daily life, lifestyles, and general orientation to work and play. For example, with the Division of Medical History and the materials in the Warshaw Collection, I should think a project which dealt with the traditional aspects of 19th century patent medicine would be possible.

I do not see why the annual Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife itself could not serve as an object of study and analysis. Apart from the festival as festival, an aspect of revival which should be examined by folklorists, the year-round research for the Festival offers a tremendous opportunity for contact and work with a large number of traditional craftsmen, singers, musicians, tale-tellers, dancers and just plain folk who often bring their cooking and farming skills to the Mall for the July event. As Festival, this offers for research the skills and concerns of those who put it together, together with the actual event itself. It is as authentic and representative as anything of this kind is going to be in America, and the audiences, directors, participants and the event itself have much to tell us about their response to tradition -- in this form and in the native context. Some kind of arrangement might be worked out with the Division of Performing Arts. They would, I think, welcome more skilled field workers for the research end of this project. Ralph Rinzler, the director of the Festival, is, himself, a storehouse of information on American folklife, particularly music, and might be of great help in determining the kinds of projects that would be possible.

Because of the lack of a general retrieval system in the S.I., it is difficult to know just what else might be suitable for folkloristic study. For example, anyone interested in the American Indian would want to use the B.A.E. collections and the advice of the expert Anthropology staff in the Museum of Natural History. But beyond what I have listed, I cannot say. It should be mentioned that once here, the Washington area itself provides tremendous resources of both a folkloristic and general nature to supplement the Smithsonian's collections. Besides the general library resources in the Library of Congress, there is the Division of Folk Song in the Library, and its vast resources. In addition, the libraries of five major universities and the library, archival and photographic resources at the Departments of Labor, Agriculture and Commerce, the National Archives, the B.A.A., and the National Collection of Fine Arts are of use. Colonial Williamsburg, the Winterthur Museum and the library and human resources of the Pennsylvania Folklore Department are all easily accessible. Of course, there's the entire Virginia-Maryland countryside, which is lively folklife at its peak. And in the Washington area, again, Rae Korson, Gladys Fry, Duncan Emrich, Joe Glazer, Allan Jabbour and Joe Hickerson carry out the business of folklore. Whatever you do at the Smithsonian can be enhanced and supplemented by all these fine resources.

The resources mentioned above speak as well for obtaining jobs in the area as they do for a year's research here.<sup>8</sup> However, at this point, there are not many possibilities for jobs appearing in the Smithsonian proper. In any case, there would be room for one or two folklorists. Several consult now, but there is no full-time staff member trained in folklore -- so there does seem to be a need for one full-time folklorist. Tight money, though, and a leveling of "priorities" have prevented the hiring of a folklorist even though interest in folklore and traditional material culture is everywhere reiterated. However, for a folklorist who does have training in archeology, anthropology, museum studies, art

history, the decorative arts, or in some area not at all related to folklore, there might be open staff positions which would permit folkloric studies to go on within the duties specified by the particular position. Most certainly these are possibilities which should be investigated by folklorists, not only as jobs **tighten up** but as the discipline expands and re-defines its interests. It should be said that generally curator's pay is low and advancement, in terms of position, quite slow. Most museums are also generally reluctant to hire Ph.D.'s as curators unless it's a big and important scholarly operation. However, at the research level, Ph.D.'s are welcomed. Certainly, for many of us, though, the museum experience would be a good one and would offer valuable training and experience.

In all, the Smithsonian offers much more than **stuffed critters** to the scholar -- and particularly to the folklorist it offers both substance and support for study.

#### NOTES

1

The opinions expressed here are derived from conversations with Dick Lunt, Yvonne Lang and various Smithsonian staff members, but especially from my own experience.

2

Staff members who might especially be interested in folklore and folk-life are Richard Ahlborn, Ethnic and Southwestern Cultural History; Malcolm Watkins, Pre-Industrial Cultural History; J. Scott Odell, Cultural History; Anne Golovin, Pre-Industrial Cultural History; Ralph Rinzler, Performing Arts; and William Sturtevant, Anthropology.

3

See Henry H. Glassie, Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States (Philadelphia, 1968), pp. 28-30 for a brief discussion of this problem.

4

For that matter, it would be interesting to know just what the Smithsonian in general has that is partly or wholly traditional. A survey might be immensely **useful** to them and to folklorists who might want to do work here.

5

See Erwin O. Christensen, The Index of American Design (Washington, 1959) for a subject listing of what the Index has, and for general descriptions of the major collections.

6

See my unpublished manuscript on vernacular art, which was given as a lecture to a seminar of art historians in 1970.

7

See Michael Owen Jones' article on the need for folkloristic attention to American art in general: "Two Directions for Folkloristics in the Study of American Art," Southern Folklore Quarterly 32 (Sept., 1968), 249-260.

8

There are short-term fellowships available, for the three-month summer or for a six-month stay. The conditions of these awards seem to vary, however, and information on them should be requested from the Office of Academic Programs.

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The following back issues of the Folklore Forum Bibliographic and Special Series are still available. The price is \$1.50 for subscribers and \$2.00 for others.

1. Peter Aceves and Magnus Einarsson-Mullarky. Folklore Archives Of The World: A Preliminary Guide. 1968.
4. Larry Danielson. Kaarle Krohn's Die Folkloristische Arbeitsmethode. A Critical Abstract. 1969.
5. Carla Bianco. Italian And Italian-American Folklore: A Working Bibliography. 1970.
6. F. A. De Caro and W. K. McNeil. American Proverb Literature: A Bibliography. 1970.

Number 2, Elliott Oring and James Durham, eds. Perspectives On Folklore And Education, and number 3, William M. Clements, The Types Of The Polack Joke, will be reissued at some time in the near future.