The Well Wrought Pot:
Folk Art and Folklore as Art

Michael Owen Jones

"The Well Wrought Pot" was suggested by my friend and colleague Robert A. Georges to whom I'm indebted not only for the title of this paper but also for some of the ideas expressed herein.[1]

Obviously I'm concerned with the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of folklore. But who isn't? This is certainly a major direction in folklore scholarship for the present and the future as indicated by works in the recent past, among them the essays by Jansen on classifying performance, Bascom on verbal art, Dorson on styles of folk narrators, Abrahams on a rhetoric of everyday life and on playing the dozens and rapping and capping; the books by Ives on singers like Larry Gorman, Browley on Bahamian storytellers, Lord on epic singers, Rosenberg on the art of American folk preachers; and the article by Ben-Amos on the definition game in which he contends that folklore is "artistic communication in small groups."

The affective quality of behavior has probably attracted most investigators to folklore and its study, although this has never been adequately examined: either the folklorist's interest in the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of folklore, or folk art. Strangely, more attention has been given to delineating types of stories, songs, and objects than to ascertaining style; to describing technological processes in production than to analyzing creative ones; and to setting forth the folklorist's personal reaction to songs and stories than to determining the performer or audience's response.

Part of the explanation for this situation is that the study of folk art or folklore as art has been impeded by two basic assumptions, both of which are wrong: that the investigator is dealing with the lore of a folk or of the folk, and that lore is an entity or art is an object. There are other assumptions in much of the literature but they seem to follow from these two, and many of the models, techniques of data-gathering, and analytical methods are based on these two assumptions that folklore or folk art consists of entities or objects made by the folk.

In a recent essay on storytelling events Georges objected to this "persistence of the premise that stories are surviving or traditional linguistic entities," and "the a priori assumption that the means of discovering the meaning and significance of these entities is through the collection and study of story texts." Nearly a decade earlier Edmund Carpenter had noted that "Eskimo are interested in the artistic act, not in the product of that activity. A carving, like a song, is not a thing; it is an action." Carpenter admonished that "It's senseless to assume that when we collect these silent, static carvings, we have collected Eskimo art...."

Of course we tend to feel more comfortable in analysis when the subject under discussion is tangible and visible, as in the form of a well wrought pot or a song text that has been written down, for then we can, we suppose, better understand it. After all, it exists in physical reality, it affects our sensibilities in some way, and it certainly is not so elusive as thought processes. No one can deny that the objects are there or that a "story"--at least the linguistically

coded part--has been transcribed on paper from a tape recording of the event. But is art just a thing and may we content ourselves with the collection and study of artifacts or linguistic entities? No.

How often has someone shown you an object or a typed copy of a story and asked, "Is this folk art (or folklore)"? And how often have you been unable to answer because there are simply no distinguishing physical attributes that ensure immediate recognition of the object or text as folklore, as there are obvious physical traits by which horses may be distinguished from trees? Before you can answer this question you have to ask who made the object or told the story, where, when, and from whom the individual learned his skills; and in what circumstances the activity occurred. The object or text is of little consequence either in attempting to explain what folklore is, or in trying to understand the object itself. What is significant is the human being who behaved in a certain way. To deal with folk art or folklore as art, we must, as Franz Boas wrote 45 years ago, "turn our attention first of all to the artist himself."

The output is in one sense a manifestation of the production or performance which signals the existence of this process. The output sometimes precipitates an aesthetic response, but so does the making or doing. And the output, even if tangible in the form of a pot or a chair, is not really static, for concrete things change texture and surface quality with handling; change color with ageing or because of differences in the light striking them; and change in appearance and soundness with use and the inevitable restoration or repair. The output, as one aspect of the process of production and consumption (or of performance), has received far too much attention in the scholarly literature with the result that other parts of these processes have been noticed seldom and examined hardly at all.

Georges proposed a new conception of narrative and narration not as story or art or linguistic entity but as "the distinct events within continua of human communication," and he stressed the significance of these "storytelling events" as "communicative events, as social experiences, and as unique expressions of human behavior." Implicit in Carpenter's statement is a more dynamic conception of art that has not been fully exploited. Of central concern would be not the object but the activity, the process of production or performance and all that goes into each; and the process of consumption, use, response, evaluation and all that goes into the appreciation of production or performance and the formation of standards of excellence and preference. Not story, but storytelling event; not pot or chair, but pottery or chair production and consumption; not object but process and event involving producers and consumers and their interactions. In other words, we must begin with the individual and his behavior.

That's the general framework. Now what about such basic constructs as art, folk, and lore?

The essay by Georges on storytelling events and an unpublished paper by Kenneth L. Ketner on "What is <u>the</u> story?" are essential in understanding folk art or folklore as art, despite the fact that the authors do not discuss at length the artistic element in storytelling events. It is, however, this artistic dimension or aesthetic aspect of storytelling, singing, and so on that actually facilitates the communication and social interaction with which the authors are concerned.

"Old Joe Peabody used to be an awful man at telling tall stories," a fisherman in Newfoundland told me. "I couldn't tell it the way he used to tell it. Anyone that is used to this can tell 'em in a different way from what I can, you know, make a lot of fun out of it. I'm, I'm no good to tell a story. You DON'T GET NO KICK OUT A ME TELLIN' A STORY. I don't know how."

Stories can be told rather "artlessly" as we know, but communication is impaired and social interaction impeded. Who likes to listen to a poor storyteller? Or who fancies noise?

"There's some people gifted with music," I was told. "There was a fella here...you had to dance to music he used to give, YOU HAD TO DANCE--you couldn't help it! He could do anything with a 'ccordian."

Or, for that matter, who wants to carry water in a heavy, lopsided jug, or sit on a chair that "has the rickets and cries" because it was fashioned of unseasoned pieces?

"A good chairmaker," said a craftsman in Kentucky, "would have to make 'em slow and make 'em right. You can't just throw a chair together any way and get a good chair out of it." Said another artist about his friend, "He can make a chair so pretty you can see your face shinin' in it."

But this is not to suggest that storytelling or chairmaking is always or even necessarily conceived of as "art" by those who engage in this behavior. "What do you think art is?" I asked a man with whom I had been staying in a Newfoundland village.

"I dunno," he said.

"Well, is it painting? music?"

Rather uncertainly he replied, "I'd say painting, drawing, stuff like that, wouldn't it be?"

"What about music and dance?"

"Music and dances?" he asked; "there's no art to that...is there?"

I dunno," I said, "that's what I'm trying to find out. What about story-telling like Mary Burrage--what about that?"

"I don't regard that...."

"What Mary tells is true, you know," interrupted his wife, "it's, its' Experience."

"But," said the man slowly, "she's got a way of TELLIN' it, yeah."

While some behavior may not be called "art," it nevertheless is taken to be something special often because of the skill involved which itself may generate an aesthetic experience.

"That crippled woman Mary, by Goddamn, mister, you get her a-going," said the fisherman, shaking his head back and forth in appreciation, "she can tell ya. Some of 'em is true, too. Funny stories."

One of the men who had been to a wedding told this fisherman that "after the lunch everybody was tellin' stories, you know, and he said Mary started to tell about the crippled wedding. Well, Mr. Barrow said everybody in the place was groanin'. Some of the women had to go to the bathroom! Oh, my son, t'hear her tell that you'd crow; she got a way of tellin' it....I can't do it."

For present purposes I am using the word "art" mainly in the sense of skill in the making or doing of that which functions as (among other things) a stimulus to aesthetic experience; the output of that skill; and the activity involving the use of that skill. Admittedly, for some arts so conceived the aesthetic aspect is limited (for example, the art of defensive driving). And for a few things that generate an aesthetic experience in someone, accident may be more important than skill (for instance, randomly sorted piles of yarn to be used for rug making which in and of themselves may generate an aesthetic experience because of the balance, harmony, symmetry, and centrality of their arrangement). As a general characterization, though, it would seem that that which is most often taken to be "art" (whether actually called that or not) is something thought to be "special" (usually because of the skill involved), generating an appreciative, contemplative response in the percipient.

Storytelling, then, may be "art" or it may have an artisitic-aesthetic dimension, but the art is not exclusively a story, a linguistic entity, that is the counterpart of written literature--this is one of the most important points in Georges' essay. The Newfoundland fisherman was willing to concede that the ACTIVITIES of storytelling, music, and perhaps dancing that he was familiar with had an "artistic-aesthetic dimension" (my words, not his); involved some special skills which he did not possess; and generated an appreciative response in him when the storytelling or music was skillfully performed (sure some of the women, too, who wet their pants found Mary's storytelling to be "beautiful" or "pleasurable," otherwise they would not have laughed so long and hard). But "it" was not "art" as a class of objects comparable to the "fine arts" ("painting, drawing, and stuff like that") as they are presently conceived--allegedly genteel in nature, befitting the upper classes, serving primarily an aesthetic function, and tending to refine or elevate the mind (all of which seldom obtains, however).

By excluding the element of art from discussion, and by emphasizing storytelling events rather than focusing on narratives as "oral literature," Georges dealt with storytelling for what it is primarily: a communicative process and social experience generated by the interactions of two or more people regardless of socio-economic or educational status; it is simply not art in the usual Western elite sense of the so-called fine arts, a concept that itself is suspect and needs re-examination from other perspectives (unfortunately, every recent study of "primitive" art of which I'm aware distorts and misrepresents the behavior under scrutiny because the investigator has accepted the very assumptions he claims, or would like to be challenging). As Georges wrote about storytelling, "Though it is possible to draw analogies between written narratives and the messages of storytelling events, the same criteria cannot be utilized to judge both, nor can both be subjected to the same kinds of study and analysis." The skills in each are learned and practiced in quite different situations. Namely, in the case of folklore, one involving face-to-face interaction; and the mode of behavior is conceived of differently by participants in the interaction and it serves different purposes.

There is irony here. The student of folk or primitive art investigates what he calls "art" by which he usually means "fine art"; for example, Herta

Haselberger, in her methodological essay on primitive art study, noted that "The term 'art' is used here only for the so-called fine arts...." She then listed painting, sculpture, drawing and "stuff like that." The actual producers or performers and their immediate customers or audience usually do not, however, conceive of their skills and activities in this way. As Ralph Altman admitted, "The concept of art in our civlization today in this case, a particular academic tradition of art study and the concepts to which the researcher has been conditioned has no true equivalent in any of the cultures with which we are here concerned.' Our attitude toward tribal objects that we call art differs from that of their makers and users."

Precisely. That's the point.

Attempted definitions of folk art have generally failed, in part because as Mamie Harmon suggested, "Too many different kinds of art produced in too many different circumstances are involved." Harmon herself seems to conceive of folk art as unsophisticated productions, mainly material objects, especially among country people, primarily in Western Europe and America. And that's important, for definitions of folk art have failed, too, because of this object- or entity-orientation of most commentators who focus attention on the formal qualities of a thing, and who assume a priori that folk art--whether verbal or material output--is the inferior counterpart or debased imitation of the fine arts from which folk art differs because of less sophisticated formal characteristics, usually because of the low socio-economic or educational status of those who produced "it" or for whom "it" was intended.

Folk art is usually distinguished from folklore and both from primitive art, first because art is assumed to be objects, and secondly because lore or art is "made" by the or a folk. What I am suggesting is that there is no significant difference between folk and primitive art despite the widely held belief in some circles that folk art is the low art of high cultures and primitive art is the high art of low cultures; and that "folk art" is not limited to objects but includes skill and the use of that skill whether in performance or in the production of tangible outputs.

FOLK does not mean backward, poor, or illiterate people--most folklorists would now agree to that, though some art historians and anthropologists aren't yet convinced, perhaps because they are not familiar with Dorson's notion of "a folk, not the folk" which is "a vitally integrated, like-minded group." But FOLK does not mean "group" either, "like-minded" or otherwise, regardless of the statement by Dundes, in elaboration of Dorson's remarks, that folk is "any group whatsoever having at least one factor in common." A "group" has at least one factor in common, yes, but not everyone who interacts with other people conceives of himself as thus belonging to a "group." Nor does FOLK mean "people generally," as some individuals have vaguely suggested.

I think what Dorson and Dundes really meant to say, and what Abrahams and especially Georges have clearly implied or to a great extent stated, is that FOLK refers to a process of learning and utilizing certain modes of behavior and codes of communication in a situation of face-to-face interchange involving members of a small interactional network. LORE is not song texts or old objects but the units of expressive behavior or the styles, designs, and techniques of a particular TRADITION, the general category of behavior to which we tend to give an identifying label such as storytelling, chairmaking, dancing, or singing, and in which the process has been sustained sufficiently long for several

individuals to have learned and utilized the behavior. "Objects" and "stories" are not "passed on" or "handed down," and "item" is not "in oral circulation," and people are not "active" or "passive" "bearers of tradition"; rather, as Ketner has suggested, "an ability is learned or is demonstrated according to a teacher's guidance or an audience's appreciation, subject to social approval." This does not rule out originality in folklore. Artistic creativity--which is obviously present in much production and performance--is simply the clarification of potentialities already present in the raw materials (whether clay, sounds, or body movements) into activities or objects more completely satisfying aesthetically than the materials themselves; that's why skill is so important.

Singing or dancing or storytelling--as Georges made clear--is a communicative event and social experience primarily. But I'm suggesting that if the behavior is not engaged in with skill then communication and interaction are impeded or prevented. Thus, we need to examine the artistic quality of performance. And the manufacture of pots or chairs is basically industry resulting in outputs serving practical purposes. But one must consider the artistic dimension if one is to account for the remark by Aunt Sal Creech that "Weaving, hit's the purtiest work I ever done. It's a settin' and trampin' the treadles and watchin' the pretty blossoms come out and smile at ye in the kiverlet."

This is not to suggest that folklore is "artistic communication in small groups" because that's not what folklore is and because that exaggerates the importance of the artistic-aesthetic dimension of the behavior diminishing the significance of other qualities and functions.

The emphasis on "folk" as a situation of first-hand interaction in which expressive units of behavior are learned and utilized, however, makes it possible to treat "folk" and "primitive" art as the same phenomenon--which they are--and accounts for the existence of folklore today--which certainly persists in the modern world. And the study of lore as human behavior involving processes manifested by unique events, as well as an examination of production and performance as art conceived of as skill in the making or doing of that which functions as (among other things) a stimulus to aesthetic experience, should make possible a fuller understanding and greater appreciation of the affective domain universally in human relations.

Notes

1. This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society at Austin, Texas in November, 1972, and incorporated, with revisions, in the first chapter of a book on folk art to be published by the University of California Press in late 1974.