



MAKING IT BETTER

Folk Arts in Pennsylvania Today

Living Creatively in Your World

Three Perspectives on Art and Environment

by Betty J. Belanus

Several years ago, my family and I visited a man who was building a house deep in the woods of Fulton County, Pennsylvania. It was a big, odd house, full of strange angles and bump-outs, actually incorporating one large tree in the design. On another family outing, we visited Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Water, near Ohiopyle – the “high art” version of the house in the woods which uses local materials and even has a stream running through it. When I was asked to write an essay about how traditional arts refer back to and are informed by the environments from which the artists are rooted, I thought of these two examples.

People, be they famous architects, vernacular house builders, or traditional artists and craftspeople, feel compelled to use the materials at hand to create artifacts that fit into their surroundings or reflect a familiar landscape. They use local materials to craft functional, and often beautiful, artifacts. And they also use materials not found in their immediate environment, or not native to their origins, to create artifacts that nonetheless fit perfectly into their surroundings or satisfy a need to carry on a tradition intimately connected to their environment. In this essay, I will set out to explore the three ways in which traditional artists/craftspeople find methods to incorporate art into their environments, for their own use and for the use of their families and other people lucky enough to acquire and use the artifacts.

Think about these three strategies in terms of cooking, an art in itself. A cook may raise, or even forage for, his or her own vegetables and fruits, keep chickens or a milk cow, fish or hunt, and use the home-grown or locally found foods to craft delicious meals from authentic family recipes. On the other hand, a cook could buy local produce, meat or fish directly from a local farmer or fisherman, or from a farmer's market, butcher or fishmonger to cook equally good meals. Finally, the cook could go to a supermarket or ethnic market, buy items that might be new to her, and combine them with her own culinary knowledge to cook a meal that fills the desire for an authentic, home cooked meal within the family or community. The artists represented in this exhibition, as well as other folk artists and craftspeople with whom I and many other folklorists have had the privilege of working, are masters at all three of these methods. Of course we are always thrilled when we find what some may consider the “most authentic” level; but we realize that this is the modern world. As much as they might like to be able to use only what they find locally at hand or grow on their own land, nowadays folk artists and craftspeople do not always have the time, access, or the possibility of doing so. A Cambodian weaver living in Pennsylvania, who works in silk which she could buy from a local producer back in Cambodia, may have to compromise and use imported silk, or a more readily available and more local fiber. This does not make her weaving less authentic, it just shows how folk arts must change over time to fit the circumstances and environments of a new place.

Dry stone wall builders are among those whose work fits into the environment perfectly. Since field stones are plentiful (sometimes more plentiful than we would like!) in many areas of Pennsylvania, the materials are readily at hand. The skill of wall builders such as Ken Ely from Susquehanna County is to produce walls that, in Ken's own terms, are utilitarian as well as beautiful in their intricate pattern of color and shape. The wall builder uses simple hand tools and must do his or her work outside in all weather conditions. The wall builder lets the stones “speak,” using the natural curve of the landscape, type of stone available, and environmental factors such as rainfall and seasonal temperature variations to

help dictate how the wall is crafted. A folklore friend and colleague of mine recently decided to move to Wales for a few months to work with a traditional wall builder. She is finding that the work is not only dirty, difficult, and muscle-straining, but deeply satisfying as she learns how stone binds to stone to make a graceful barrier. It is no wonder that stone walls “make good neighbors” as Frost wrote, since in their simplicity and perfect fit into the local environment, they create not only a dividing line, retaining wall, or boundary but subtle works of art on the landscape.

The work of waterfowl decoy carvers such as Ross Shourds is slightly more removed from the environment than a stone wall builder’s, but still comes from a tradition deeply rooted in the environment of Pennsylvania and the Eastern seaboard. Shourds comes from a long line of decoy carvers from the New Jersey shore; his uncle Harry V. Shourds, who carved “working decoys” for duck hunting, won a prestigious National Heritage Award in 1989. Harry V. Shourds described the difference between his work, which evoked a duck instead of copying the actual bird, as opposed to carvers who considered themselves artists: “they copy them feather for feather. It’s really model making instead of carving. It’s a nice sculpture when it’s finished. But I like to put a little dream into it.”

Many decoy carvers find it almost impossible to gather their own white cedar or other local wood with which they work, and many also find that the market for their carving today is not among fellow duck hunters but instead, art collectors. However, the spirit of the duck decoy’s function to attract ducks while hunting in the marsh is still intact in the work of Ross Shourds and many other carvers. Each puts his or her own “little dream” into creating a work that is equally at home on a mantelpiece, in a museum case, or on a reedy body of water awaiting a flock of ducks—ducks attracted by the artistry just as we humans are. What makes Shourds decoy carving particularly interesting in Pennsylvania is his adaptation of the “decoy” tradition to a local environmental need, in this case to keep the crows from damaging the cornfields. His crow decoys serve to alert would be corn thieves that the field is already spoken for and to move on.

Two very different artists represented in this exhibition illustrate the third method of adding artistry to their environment – that of combining longstanding traditions with new resources to create beauty. At first glance, the work of these two artists has neither a logical connection to each other nor to the theme of folk art and the environment. In the case of blacksmith Jymm Hoffman, purists might consider him a “revivalist;” a newcomer to his chosen environment and craft, who cannot be compared with folk artists who have multi-generational pedigrees such as Ross Shourds. As for Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun, who is a relative newcomer to the United States, the deeply rooted Lao origins of her exquisite needlework have a strong connection to her new environment in Pennsylvania. Both are “transplants” of a sort, and both have transposed their elegant expressions of history onto new landscapes. .

The centuries-old craft of blacksmithing was not passed down through his family to Jymm Hoffman. Instead he learned as an apprentice at a historical site. His father was a mechanic, so the art of fixing things was in his background. Blacksmithing, however, is seen by many as a historical art kept alive artificially at such historic parks as Ohio Village where Hoffman learned the craft, or at Historic Williamsburg and other sites that don’t have a connection to the “real world.” These demonstrations of historic crafts act as an overlay on the present and offer a glimpse into the past. While he could have continued to demonstrate and teach historic blacksmithing, making a contribution to keeping history alive, Hoffman has chosen to also use more modern equipment and methods including propane gas and power hammers to craft “modern items that can be used by everyday people” as he puts it. His forge produces such items as gates, fireplace end irons, and contemporary tools, much like the blacksmiths of the past. Moreover, although he is not originally from the steel-producing area of Western Pennsylvania, he carries on a craft which was intrinsically tied to the steel mills, and his work has been recognized as such by the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area. Once a part of the very fabric of Western Pennsylvania, working with steel is still an important part of the identity and landscape of the region. The small, useful items that Jymm Hoffman and his own apprentices craft today, then, offer a shorthand for a rich history and culture that had an indelible role in the environment of their chosen region.

I first met Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun when she was chosen as one of twelve “community scholars” in the first Folklore Summer Institute held at the Smithsonian Institution in 1989. While I had been aware of the amazing “story cloths” made by Hmong women through the work of other folklorists, I had never worked closely with a folk artist who produced them. Sikoun immediately impressed me and her fellow community scholars (individuals who, without the aid of any degrees or training in folklore, were carrying on the traditions of their communities in important ways) with her passion for her community and her art, and also with her business skills. Before we knew what had happened, most of us were proud owners of one of her story cloths and very glad of it.

This entrepreneurial talent has served Sikoun well as she has adapted to her new environment. It was in her English classes that she sold her first piece of needlework. She was working on a traditional piece during a class break and her teacher noticed the fine handiwork. She invited her to bring some pieces to an arts sale on campus and they were so well received that her teacher helped her set up a stall at the local street market. It wasn't long before she was selling the work of Hmong women across the country – tapping a deep well of talent to quench the thirst of craft seekers. In 1996 she received a Pew Fellowship and, in an expression of gratitude, gathered several women to create a “quilt.” Each woman made a square in the traditional Hmong style and they were all sewn together into an American quilt pattern. Soon she was noticed by some Amish quilters who invited the women to work for them. For a few years, Sikoun organized the women in a cottage industry creating Amish quilts for sale to tourists from downtown Philadelphia to Lancaster County.

This interaction between Amish and Hmong has influenced the colors and patterns that Sikoun uses and opened the door to a broader market for her work. In turn, she has been able to keep her ancient needlework traditions alive and vibrant. They are a very real part of the environment of her memory and help to pass her culture and history on to her children and grandchildren, as well as to those who admire her work.

In short, from stone walls to duck decoys to ironwork and embroidered cloths, the artifacts in this exhibition and in other collections of folk art around the country and the world reveal stories intertwined with the artists' environments. Whether as heavy and rooted in the landscape as stone or as light as a square of cloth that a stranger can display in his or her home, they carry the weight of tradition and its connection to our lives and our environments. The next time you cook a meal for your family from a recipe passed down from an older relative, think about your own connection to your immediate environment or the environment of your parents, grandparents, hometown, region, or homeland. The dish will seem even tastier when served with knowledge of these connections, as the artifacts in this exhibition will seem more meaningful when viewed in the light of their ties to the artists' environments in the largest sense.