



MAKING IT BETTER

Folk Arts in Pennsylvania Today

Shaping Community

What does tradition have to do with it? Constructing cultural identity and community today

by Lisa Rathje
Institute for Cultural Partnerships

Growing up, I entertained multiple dreams regarding the occupation where I might find myself in the future. One of my more romantic ideas was that of the bank robber, à la Robin Hood. It seemed challenging—a good opportunity to work for everyday people and defeat large, faceless institutions. As a youngster, I had tacked to my walls a Tom Robbins quote from *Still Life With Woodpecker*: “Outlaws are the can openers in the supermarket of life.” As a folklorist today, I recognize that there exist cultural tools and art forms within all of our diverse communities that facilitate opportunities for empowerment and for strengthening the social networks of “everyday people”.

These social networks may include one’s occupation, ethnicity, geographic location, spirituality, and a host of other cultural communities. For the Grkman band, family is one of the significant networks: four generations make up their Slovenian ensemble, GRKMANIA. The patriarch, Joe Grkman, Sr., was born in Yukon, a coal-mining community in western Pennsylvania. As a young boy, he was constantly surrounded by music because community members sang and played traditional Slovenian songs. He identifies the role that song has played in strengthening and affirming cultural identity in his own community: “Through the years many things have changed, but the basic necessity for people to be proud of something and to have a cultural identity still remain. My generation needs to do everything possible to preserve and perpetuate the culture of our immigrant parents.... I am proud of my heritage and utilize all of my efforts to perpetuate my culture to society and future generations.” These efforts have included not only sharing this music within his own cultural community, but a goal of GRKMANIA is to bring polka music to venues and audiences which have never featured nor experienced it live.

The exhibition *Making It Better: Folk Arts in Pennsylvania Today* provides each visitor with a privileged glimpse into the myriad cultural communities that thrive in Pennsylvania today. Exploring the stories and art of the artists, I was reminded of the “supermarket of life” metaphor above. I harbor a vision of life that does look a bit like a supermarket—a place full of products mass produced and artfully marketed to the consumer, sitting next to products that are grown locally or produced by a family-owned business. *Making It Better* celebrates the many artists who create significant objects and performances, including those art forms which shape the very character of their local communities. At the risk of taking the metaphor too far, this exhibit not only introduces a larger public to things that they may have been unsure of before by opening a variety of cans from life, but it also showcases how a community’s “foods” will be a source of pride for those who prepare and enjoy them.

As Antonella DiIanni reflects on making the intricate designs found in her bobbin-lace she finds that, “Lace-making represents the pride, values, and artistic expressions of both my Italian heritage and myself”. This statement, linking present to past, presents identity as something actively constructed. It suggests that using, appreciating, and practicing ones traditions evokes a strong sense of pride that transcends simple identification with ethnic heritage.

The role that these traditions play in fostering this sense of self and pride may not always be clear to its practitioners, however, because so many of these crafts represent something that “is just done” as one aspect of being a member of a specific group. For example, Ms. DiIanni was invited to display her work at the National Folk Festival when it came to Johnstown, Pennsylvania. She notes that, “There, more than ever, did I come to realize what a rare, unique, and valuable talent I had in my hands.” Likewise, Paulett Simunich has been decorating eggs for Easter for over fifty years. She first learned from her Baba when she was tall enough to safely dip into the wax sitting on the stove. As fewer people take the time to learn this very old tradition, Ms. Simunich has realized the significance of her role in many other people’s and families’ traditions due to the high demand for her eggs at Easter.

So much in popular culture carefully “brands” products as being the “next best thing” or containing some new nutritional formula that must be consumed. Yet many people in our communities are nurtured and shaped through their own knowledge which often comes from within their everyday lives and practices. As artist Diana Meng points out about her Chinese paintings: “It’s not just for decoration. To me, painting is like the Chinese saying *shā shing yuñ sen*, which enables you to maintain good health and inner peace by quieting your heart.” She continues, saying “You just sit there, make yourself do the stuff, and you make yourself independent.” The power of this statement becomes more evident as I thoughtfully consider its import. Namely, Ms. Meng suggests that through this traditional art—by creating and practicing this traditional art—a person can achieve a greater sense of herself and her own individual identity.

All of the featured artists in *Making It Better* create meaningful, beautiful, objects and performances for use and enjoyment. Each art form is significant because of its context—who makes the art; who appreciates the art; the season, ritual, or event that may evoke the art; and so forth. In fact, a popular definition of folk or traditional art forms suggest that these are traditions that are passed down from generation to generation because they are so meaningful, beautiful, and necessary to a specific culture or community. I want to probe this definition further, however, to reveal the power that these art forms both create and perpetuate.

The networks that form our many social and cultural communities are vast, inter-connected, and complex. To simply assert that traditions can be passed down through generations does not always adequately describe the nuances of how each network empowers individuals to claim cultural identity and strength from the significant practices found within. To consider the ways in which something as personal as identity is shaped through folk arts and traditions, care must be taken to respect the diversity of ways in which we all come to use our dress, food, work, spiritual practices, interior decorations, music, and dance to construct who we are and how we wish the world to see us.

For example, Diana Meng now tutors students in the Harrisburg area in both Chinese calligraphy and painting. Many of her students are Chinese, but are growing up in Pennsylvania. Some are young girls adopted from China. Others may have fathers from the United States and mothers who are from China. Knowing the strength that can be gleaned from not only these art forms, but also the language and other aspects of Chinese culture, Ms. Meng sees her work to pass along these traditions as very important. As she says, “It’s not just paint.” It is about knowing the significance of cultural traditions relative to knowing ones own identity.

Yolanda Lorya creates beadwork worn for Latuko dances—an artform that she learned from women in her family before the civil war in Sudan. Moving first to a refugee camp in Kenya, and then resettling in Erie with her own family disrupted the tradition that had been so dear to the community while she was growing up. Her tribal beadwork may not have been something that was consciously cherished when she was a youth—it was just something that was done—but after not making the beaded objects for over twenty years she realized that something significant was missing from her life. As she began to make beadwork again, other Latuko in the United States noticed. She now takes orders from across the country, and a

tradition that was primarily one practiced within a family and close-knit community is now strengthening many cultural communities of Latuko. Tradition, therefore, should not always be understood as a linear process, but rather as a dynamic process that adapts with the communities through time and space. This, in part, is where the strength of tradition lies.

The beautiful handmade dresses of Dosina Blemahdoo illustrate this process. Born into the Ga tribe in Ghana, she later attended a technical school to learn to sew. After moving to Pittsburgh she was skeptical that there would be a community who would want to wear clothes that she made using her own cultural aesthetic. However, she continued to make them and wear them herself. Friends and acquaintances began inquiring about her clothing, and soon not only African, but also African-American women were buying enough clothes from her that she had to open her own store. According to one of her clients, “While consumers flock to department stores and boutiques for any type of Afro-centric item, individuals go to Dee in search of history. The quality of her work satisfies the community’s sense of connective-ness and binds them closer to their African ancestry.”

The role of tradition in fostering ones own cultural identity and in strengthening the networks of our many communities is demonstrated throughout Making It Better. Some may worry that relying on tradition as a significant catalyst for identity may be stifling due to its connection to the past. Others may see tradition’s role as unduly conservative. However, these artists help demonstrate the vibrant and dynamic role tradition may play in empowering individuals and communities. The real challenge that some of these stories instead suggest, is how young people in our own cultural communities can be encouraged to reach out for their “local, homegrown” art forms and traditions rather than those products actively being advertised as being something that “you can’t live without.” Traditions do matter, and are something that our rich cultures “can’t live without.”