Entitled, “Folk Art”

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Abstract

American folk art is the heart of this project. Separated into five sections, the topic of folk art is explored through the lens of history, contextual analysis, an in-depth look at a handful of folk artists, folk art outside of the United States, and a look at collectors and the role of collecting in the construction of folk art as a category. What I aim to answer throughout is the question; what is folk art? Before beginning this project, I knew of the category but nothing about its parameters or the people who create under the label. This project utilizes multiple frameworks including formal analysis, social theory, gender theory, in hopes of developing a lens on folk art that is cognizant of the impact of colonial language and capitalist influence. This paper considers the economic and social identities of artists in the folk art field and the impact those demographics have on the success of folk art in terms of monetary value, educational studies, and publicity or popularity in mainstream artistic aesthetics in the United States.
The History of Folk Art

Walking through a gallery into an art museum in any major U.S. city, the onlooker to the spectacle that is art is likely to notice the difference between a drawing and a painting. Even more likely to notice the difference between a painting and a sculpture. Will the viewer notice the difference, however, between a painting by Jackson Pollock from a painting by Clementine Hunter? There are plaques or words stuck to the wall with new minimalist enthusiasm, they tell the public the name of the creator, the date the piece was created, and the size of the piece. Occasionally, there will be a description completed by an art scholar detailing the aspects of the piece that are best viewed in accompaniment to background information or a trained eye’s analysis of the piece’s formal elements. These descriptions will rarely exclude a small look into the background of the artist or a description of the conditions under which they created the piece. These are the elements surrounding the pieces that tell the viewer, no matter who they are, what categorization the artistic creation has been given.

A blurb for Jackson Pollock will note that his career included classical training in New York. Clementine Hunter’s will consist of an explanation that her work stemmed from a mere happenstance in which she came across paint and cardboard. Although the two artists work in similar media and produce sophisticated work, Hunter’s pieces will be displayed and labeled as folk art: the art of the common person. The curator’s definition of folk art is based on the credentials of the artist. For a piece to be considered folk it must be one of the following: a piece created by artists who have not been formally trained or made of non-traditional materials and are normally created on commission basis. Each of these elements can combine in a piece that is considered folk art or can
qualify a piece simply by meeting one of the conditions. But what is it that keeps the art world from destroying these boundaries? The classification of folk is one of honor in craftsmanship and national history preservation. It is simultaneously a classification that devalues both artist and art in the eyes of traditional academia.

Folk art as defined by Charlotte Emans and Paul D'Ambrosio in *Folk Art's Many Faces* is “aesthetically satisfying objects created outside the academic tradition.”¹ Materials such as clay and metals have been in use since the days of B.C.E. era craftsmen, the introduction of academia to the arts in the 1560s ushered in a new definition of the artist. Masters who had built their lives on homemade creations were no longer the only method of learning artistic trades. Apprentices turned into students as crafts transitioned into the sphere of home based activities. Fast forward a few centuries to the rise of folk art in the United States in the 1930s, the same values apply. Folk art in Western art spaces consists of mediums that promote mastery and skill while maintaining a hobby-adjacent social status. While pieces made of paint can be found in fine and folk art collections, it is the methods used and purpose of the piece that create a distinction between the two. The rise in academic art in Europe created a division that separated the art student from the apprentice. While stone was picked for sculpture classes over fabrics, paint remained a medium that could pass in either realm. Artists who worked with found objects and materials that were more commonly found in homes than in higher education institutions gained the title of folk. The people who had been traveling around locally had

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been creating masterpieces in their own respects while those who had begun to travel abroad and learn from people who were given the academic title of master.

Folk art pieces were largely ignored by curators and collectors until the 1930s\(^2\) when people began to take notice of their domesticated charm and quiet mastery. Because of this, many pieces of art that would be considered prime examples of the category are lost to time. Even more often, the pieces have survived due to the work of early collections such as the Gunn collection, but the artists identities have been lost due to a lack of organization and care. It is common that pieces like “Meditation by the Sea” (figure one), in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, are found to be on par with the talents and displays of mastery found in the field of fine art. To the untrained eye, one would not be able to tell that the piece is not considered fine art. However, it is not the artist’s educational background that define this piece, but the conditions in which it was found. Collectors were a very big influence on the rise in recognition of folk as a category for curation. For most pieces that have made it into museum collections, their authors may not be known, but knowledge of their creation via commission could have been retained by the collectors. This is why both the artists, and the history of folk art pieces are what have created the category. For all of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, folk art in the United States consisted of portraits commissioned by wealthy families or paintings and sculptures made by women and people who were enslaved or indentured. It is those who make up the uneducated class that rule the folk art realm. However, to be considered uneducated in this context only applies to those who have not attended a school or university that trains artists in fine art

techniques. As Carrie Rebora Barratt from the American wing of the MET so eloquently put,

“It is common to think of folk painters as untrained, but most were in fact highly trained and multi-talented. Different types of art required different types of preparation, and those artists who apprenticed to craftsmen or to artisans developed a unique repertoire of skills, a distinct vocabulary of subject matter, and a peculiar expressive vision. Most folk artists began their careers painting signs or furniture, which required special techniques to ensure legibility and durability.”

While it is easy to write off folk art as simple art, it is hard to deny the talent and experience that folk artists have continued to show since its appearance in the United States.
It was not until 1957 that folk art permanently moved from mere exhibitions in the MOMA to being contained in a museum dedicated to the craft. Before then, there were four exhibitions that worked to establish and officialize a recognized style for folk art. The exhibitions were as follows: “American Folk Art, the common Man, 1750-1900,” in the MOMA circa 1932, “Provincial Paintings of the nineteenth century,” Whitney Museum of American Art, “Centennial Exhibition of American Folk art,” Albright-Knox Art Gallery, and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller’s donation to Colonial Williamsburg in

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1935. Ms. Aldrich Rockefeller’s contributions to the world of folk art were made possible by her fascination and subsequent extensive collection of folk art pieces. Many of the exhibitions of the time relied on loans from personal collectors, they were kept alive purely by personal passion for folk art pieces. Many of the art seen in museums today was preserved because of its charm and personality. The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum remains one of the largest collections of American folk art. Its foundation cemented the parameters of folk art and established the category as a world of its own. The museum defines folk art as being pieces “created by artists and craftsmen” which references back to its origins in the era of tradesmanship. The establishment of exhibitions and museums for folk art with the idea that folk art must be created by classically untrained or self-taught artists resulted in the creation of an image of a folk artist. For a person to not have been trained by a master or teacher means they did not have access to schooling systems whether the cause be lack of private funds or a minoritized citizen status. The people who were excluded from early universities, trade shops, and secondary schooling were people of color and women. The American folk artist is likely to be a person whose ancestors were enslaved or who was assigned female at birth. The materials that make up the realm of folk art are based in what was available for those populations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; materials that can be considered found objects or crafts. This is still seen in folk art today where artists are inclined to use objects from mud and sticks all the way to different assortments of fabrics.

One of the foundations of folk art is its longevity. Pieces were commissioned and created based off of a personal desire to capture moments. Families commissioned

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portraits of their deceased loved ones while artisans still to this day craft landscapes of the places they love to visit. Despite the nature being to preserve, many pieces of early folk art are lost to time. It is unclear, but very likely, that many pieces created in the Southern part of the United States were damaged during the Civil War. There are also cultural reasons behind the destruction and lack of folk art. Portraits will not be found in the areas Pennsylvania were Mormons and German immigrants settled because of a practice against self-glorification. In other regions like lands belonging to the Navajo tribe who continue traditional practices involving sandpaintings, folk art is created and then destroyed due to a belief in the medium of art to be a temporary practice by necessity so as to avoid looking at sacred symbols for prolonged periods. It seems strange to think of the dualism involved in the definition of folk art. This duality is explained by the sheer expansiveness of the category.

Folk art today is dependent on the academic limitations of the past. Art academia is defined by what it excludes just as much as it includes. While fine art was being developed as a term for pieces created by individuals who used their background in artistic studies to develop new methods of expression, folk art was simultaneously defining fine art to be a realm for the privileged. Folk art is respected in modern times because of the decision of collectors starting in the 1930s to value commission pieces and works done in leisure. While the art and the artists are now respected and memorialized in spaces that have expanded to include art outside of the category of Fine, there is still a connotation of commonality to folk art. The exclusion of academia implies in the national

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social structure of the United States that the category is mundane, and the work is of lesser value than Fine art. Pieces are defined as charming rather than exquisite and the artists, if not unknown, are written as people with self-taught talent. Their common statuses as minoritized citizens are left out of the plaques that hang next to their pieces. folk art does not need professionalism to exist. If there is a will to create and a passion for capturing the feeling of being alive, there is folk.
Context of Folk Art

What is found to be the most consistent in folk art is the ego of the subject and the artist. While art as a discipline is based on expression of personality and beliefs that are better left to visuals, folk art is the epitome. Folk art is created based on the interests of those who create the pieces. It is true that most of what was considered folk art in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were portraits that were commissioned in the interest of the families paying. However, even under those circumstances, artists would paint based on the style they wanted to portray or would offer certain styles based off of payment as in the case of William Matthew Prior. Artists would even add personal touches to the background to make it their own, a common practice across multiple categories in the art history discipline as seen in carvings where artists would add their own likeness or paintings like the Mona Lisa where the subject’s likeness was combined with some of the features of Da Vinci’s male love interest at the time. Folk art is inseparable from its creator and the trends of the time it is created in.

One of the primary reasons behind the creation of folk art, outside of commissioned work, is divinity worship. If asked why they choose to create, some folk artists claim it to be God’s will. This is an example of the inseparable relationship between folk art and personality. What this means is that while pieces created in academic settings have parameters and specific attributes to be considered a piece of fine art, folk art can include any subject in any method of depiction the artist desires. This is

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why folk art is an excellent way of telling the values of the society in which it was created. When we look through the eyes of the artist, we see what they were influenced to value socially and economically. Take, for example, Thomas Worth’s *The Traveling Photography in the Country* from 1871 (figure two). Worth’s central subject shows the new invention of the time: the photograph. In the foreground, a presumably wealthy family displays their lineage, fine clothing, and transportation method to the camera as they all stare in the direction of its lens with faint smiles on their faces. This engraving shows the marvel of the new invention and its everyday use. Besides being engraved in wood, a medium typically reserved for trades like carpentry, the folk quality of the piece is captured in the details. While present, they are not meticulously added. The basic detail in the faces of the women in the carriage and the empty, dark space behind the photographer indicate the artists focus on the message of the piece rather than the fine qualities of it. It is interesting to note that the central focus of the image being photography is ironic due to the mediums impact on folk art in the nineteenth century. The shift from folk art being made up of portraits expanded to images of landscapes, sign commissions, embroidery and more as digitalized portraits grew in popularity. It is likely that the expansion of folk art after the introduction of photography led to even more personalization in the field. Because people were less likely to commission likenesses where artists were limited to personal style and background inclusions being their primary form of personal expression, these aspects came to the forefront of folk art pieces as seen in Worth’s piece.

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There is an enduring relationship between folk art and the nation (The United States) that is built upon societal values like cultural trends, economic ups and downs, and capitalist buying trends and the representation of those values in folk art. The category deals with morality and mundanity. Folk art in The United States is heavily rooted in capitalism. Didactic panels on pieces of folk art ensure that information on the commission or economic status of the artist goes with the piece. While the artists’ classes are never highlighted, their economic status is alluded to through descriptions of their education, background, and the prices they worked for; all of which place the artist in related economic classes. Take, for example, the work of Ruth Henshaw Bascom. An untrained artist and the wife of a minister, Bascom used pastel crayons and pencil to draw...
portraits and occasional landscapes.\textsuperscript{12} Her work consisted of simple side profiles that she charged nothing for besides the occasional material repayment. John and Katherine Ebert’s description of her in \textit{American Folk Painters} (1975) does not outright describe her as a housewife who does not use her ability to paint as a method of financial support, however, the description of her as “not a professional itinerant artist,” as well as the mention of her low price, or no price, for her work places her in the early 1800s middle class. The description of her career in folk art shows the value of her style of living. The importance and continued relevance of folk art is the story of the people behind the pieces. The mundanity of her life as an unemployed woman with a talent for creating likenesses comes out of her work in the flatness of the lines and lack of signature (figure three) while the social status of the pieces shines through the artist descriptions. It is extremely important that folk art be preserved with context due to its nature of being a fine art adjacent that is sometimes only separated from its cousin categories by its origin story. Nonetheless, folk art retains its charm and widespread appeal because of its fundamental simplicity. Viewers do not have to know about the city the piece was made in or the academic status of the artist to see that a portrait of a man shows his value of his possessions seeing as they surround him in the background. The beauty of folk lies in the duality of its position in the art world. Folk is accessible to all in terms of viewing and understanding the pieces while it simultaneously requires contextual analysis in order to be displayed properly.

\textsuperscript{12} John Ebert and Katherine Ebert, \textit{American Folk Painters}, New York: Scribner, 1975.
Folk art is a project of passion. This is evident when we compare the commission wages of the artists to the abundance of their paintings. As mentioned previously, it is not uncommon for a folk artist to have considered themselves called to the field. Some found that it was their religious duty to create, others found it to be a pastime unmatched by any other. The underlying reality of this is rooted heavily in a web of social constructs. If we think of Ruth Henshaw Bascom, her work is described as a passion project for which she did not reap financial benefits from. She was a non-classically trained woman in the early

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1800s, her work as a folk artist is genuinely defined by her social inability to attend university for artistic fundamentals and her personal acceptance of her work as a passion rather than a transaction. We can see this mindset in the case of Clementine Hunter as well. Hunter described her painting career in an interview with Ruth Hill Edmonds in very humble terms. When she was asked about the beginning of her journey painting, Hunter replied that she began painting after being presented with cardboard and some old oil paints from a visitor at the Melrose Plantation where Hunter worked as a domestic servant. As the Creole daughter whose grandparents were enslaved, Hunter did not have access to university. Her role as a domestic servant and a person of Creole heritage barred her from being considered an artist for the peak years of her career. In the interview, it is evident that Hunter saw her work as a passion project more than a professional practice (figure four).

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While folk art is an amazingly diverse display of everyday life, it is all too common for factors such as gender, ethnicity, and race effect the success of the pieces. Often times, the identity of a folk artist will impact the price of the piece as well as its potential to become a collection piece privately and publically. This is seen in the case of Ruth Hill Edmonds and Clementine Hunter mentioned previously both in their extremely underpriced pieces and their overall identities as hobbyists rather than professional artists.

Figure 4. *Funeral*. Clementine Hunter. Nachitoches, Louisiana. American Folk Art Museum. Oil on artist board. 1950. ¹⁵

There is a danger to applying the word folk to pieces created by artists who fall under minoritized identities. The flat qualities of most folk art pieces makes it common for folk art to be viewed as subpar to classical three dimensional pieces. To apply the word folk has the potential to apply a negative view to pieces or equate them to being low quality. In addition to the misconception that folk is synonymous with “less-than”, an artist’s physical, social, and economic identities further the notion that folk art has less value. The application of the term folk to define a range of talents and mediums has charm in uniting pieces with similar motivations and styles. The harm in this label comes from the social implications of folk. Folk art relies on the dismissal of disciplinary pracitces. There is no limit to what can be created or the techniques that can be used and there is no educational institution that can teach people to create folk art. It is a state of being captured by personal drive and found materials or materials that have not been purchased specifically for one time, artistic use. Hence the reproduction of folk as a commoners practice. The lack of educational or financial bars includes anyone in the category who is intentionally creating art for commision, creativity, or spiritual practices. A folk artist can have any skin color, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, or spiritual affiliation because folk art does not have professional pre-requisites that require social and economic privilage to obtain.

Anyone can create a piece of art, there are many questions about the meaning and value of art because of this, but the meaning and value of folk art differs from questions about art in general. There is a particular tone to folk that implies everyone. When we refer to people as folks, a gender neutral method of addressing multiple people, we are enforcing the word folk as a common term with no barrier to who can be addressed this
way in contrast to the use of ladies or gentelmen. In the United States, a lack of barriers becomes a political statement. Folk having no bar to entry lessens the value of the pieces socially. In economic terms, there is no degree that sets a minimum compensation rate, in other words, there is no institutional backing to provide grounds for higher prices or compensation for confirmed educational quality. The populations who are continuously excluded from academia are those whose skin color and ethnic heritage differ from those of the dominant social group. This is further explained by Min Zhou and Yoshinori Kamo in their article on earning patterns. The pair discuss the discrimination model which, “percieves American society as intrinsically built on a racial and ethicnic hierarchy that basiclaly ranks categories of people on ascribed rather than achieved characteristcs.”

The model demonstrates the social rewards and positions that are more easily achieved with a status that has no social friction in the national society of the United States. An artist who is white presenting and ethnically caucasian will expierience less boundaries to getting fair compensation and recognition for their art. While folk artists are more likely to be paid less then their degree holding collegues, BIPOC folk artists are likely to expierience a greater, negative economic impact as a negative consequse of the social preference towards higher education.

Folk art’s social distinction can be felt across all mediums. John Blacking’s book, How Musical Is Man?, examines the application of folk in terms of musicallity. While music is a form of art, the term folk has a sightly different application when talking about sound and the time and space it occupies. Still, the application of folk to a song is to imply that the sounds have a different quality than pop, rock, or other common

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categories. When evoking the thought of folk music, one may find themselves thinking of nontraditional instruments and multiple signers. The category may also imply similar social standings as sculptural and image folk art; those being low socioeconomic standings. Blacking argues that there is a conceptual error to the categorizations in the creation of difference betweeen them. In other words, the terms folk and pop or folk and fine imply a specturm of quality and put two categories at odds rather than being comparisions of one another. This argument is struck at by the quote, “Currently recognized divisions between art music and folk music are inadequate and misleading as conceptual tools. They are neither meaningful nor accurate as indices of musical differences; at best, they merely define the interests and activities of different social groups.”

The categorizations of folk, fine, pop, jazz, etc. are useful in detecting social preference or even studying national habits and bias, but they are not indices of quality. Take Speak Out by Rising Appalachia (figure five) and No Body, No Crime by Taylor Swift (figure six) for example. Speak Out is a folk song that encourages listeners to “Step up, speak out, show up, (and) be loud,” which is in reference to social and political protest against white supremacy, war, and capitalism. It is a social critique made with string instruments from a band with multiple members. No Body, No Crime listens similarly to a murder podcast in which Taylor Swift tells a story in which she avenges a female friend’s murder by killing the friend’s husband, “I think he did it but I just can’t prove it.” It is sung by Swift herself and her featured artist, HAIM. The track uses audio

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snips and string instruments with a heavier bass than Speak Out. Both albums speak out on sociopolitical issues such as environmental policy and femicide and they both include string instruments. Using Blacking’s argument, the two songs being labeled as folk (Speak Out) and as Alternative/Indie (No Body, No Crime) cannot tell which is more artistically created or which has more professional quality. Instead, the categories indicate the difference in the social circles the two songs circulate in. One is popular amongst activists and those who prefer less drums and more vocal range in their music taste and the other is massively popular amongst individuals in Gen Z and a group who refers to themselves as “Swifties.” What is interesting about the dichotomy of the two compared songs is that Swift’s album “evermore” has a sister album titled “folklore.” This title implies that the track will be related to folk, so it will contain non-classical storytelling and capture the mundane through a casual lens. Neither of the albums are defined as being folk like “Speak Out” is, yet the title and sound of some of the songs would suggest otherwise. It is worth noting that Taylor Swift’s song has a significantly higher number of streams on multiple platforms including, YouTube and Spotify, which leads to the question of how many of America’s top artists are folk artists. There are, of course, charts for all categories so that there is a top rock artist and top K-pop artist and so on and so forth, but in terms of what songs are the most popular across the nation, very few, if any, are folk songs. This is perhaps the most interesting social phenomena folk art creates. It is based in the common desires of real people; the embodiment of entertainment and enjoyment just for the sake of it, yet it is also largely overlooked as a category as seen by the lack of nationally recognized and beloved folk art/folk music.
Figure five. Cover of Rising Appalachia’s “Leylines.”

Figure Six. Official lyric video for Taylor Swift’s “No Body, No Crime.”

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Folk Artists

Oftentimes, humans use tangible elements of an activity or the product of an activity to justify its use in society. For example, Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry was built with the Parthenon in mind; the columns that line the front are a perfect representation of this aesthetic inspiration. The museum is designed to display importance by referencing one of the world’s most well-known and important structures. The aesthetic elements that define the museum’s value in society are in its referential design and this importance is enforced by a societal agreement to value ancient Greek architecture aesthetics. It is this framework I will use to put folk art in perspective. The visual qualities of a folk art piece combine with an understanding of the materials used to create a value for the piece. The elements of folk art that are considered in this informal, social appraisal are the commonality of the base materials (i.e., wood, yarn, clay, etc.) and the structure of the visuals (three dimensional, flat, etc.). What is often left out of the conscious analysis is the social appraisal of the artist. Knowing the demographics of the artist has an impact on the way will be defined, viewed, and handled, especially in the case of folk art. Because folk art is the practice of those who are not degree holding or non-classically trained, many of the artists are those who come from minoritized social groups who have less access to educational resources whether it be due to underfunded neighborhoods, lack of transportation, segregationist practices. This list can include any other institutional way of barring certain people from achieving the same goals as the people in the dominant or favored social group- those with physical traits and ethnicities that are praised by people who hold power and have held power for generations. This is the reasoning behind taking a deeper look into the lives and practices of folk artists. Their
stories and careers are holders of history and personal proof of these inequalities inside and outside of the art world.

One of the most common attributes of folk art in the realm art history is an unknown artist. This is common due to the casual and commission nature of the artisan category. While there are many commissioned works and passion projects that are signed and dated, there are many more who created pieces that were, for various reasons, left anonymous. Despite the lack of artist identification, art historians are still able to identify pieces based on formal similarities to other established pieces of folk art. What is significant about the lack of artist identities is the remaining social context behind the pieces. We cannot interview the artist or read more about their purpose in creating folk art or pieces with significance in either a formal style aspect or a social activism message. What we miss in not knowing the identity of the folk artist is the demographics they bring to their piece. While commission work is not inherently personal and actually in some cases strives to remove the artist as much as possible i.e., not signing the piece, there is personality in the style, format, colors, and subject of the piece. Every artist has their own color palette based on the pigments they can get their hands on or the hues that match in their eyes. The loss of the educational element in folk art is a gain of personality that is intertwined in every piece based on the artist’s need to mentor themselves through the process of developing artisanship.

To not know an artist is to not be able to apply their experience to their piece. While strict formalists would say that the origins of the artists are irrelevant to the piece because viewers will ascribe their own meaning and those meanings are more powerful than the context of the piece, it is not the case in such a personal field as folk. This is not
to say that folk art cannot be displayed and viewed without context, but that an accurate historical documentation of folk art and its creators is lost without social context. If we were to imagine pieces created by people whose ancestors were enslaved or pieces created by people who didn’t make money off of their work because of their gender, aspects of their lives are embedded in the pieces. The central theme of folk art is to see the daily lives of people as seen by other people. Without social context, a deeper sense of meaning in folk art and an understanding of folk artists is lost. If the viewpoint of the person creating the piece is omitted, the piece becomes open to interpretation, but it also loses valuable lessons in social commentary.

Another commonality in folk art is a lack of extensive bibliographies. Folk art, in its nature, has an intense reflection on the nation. It is created by the people and for the people, it is easy to relate to or find interest in because of its approachable and personal formal qualities. An example of this can be found in figure seven, a print done by Addie A. Harrington in response to the Harper’s Weekly print, “Thanksgiving Day 1863” done by Thomas Nast (figure eight). The comparison between the original and Harrington’s response is an amazing example of the simplicity of folk. Harrington chose to highlight the subject and the emotional tones of the piece rather than divulging in the small details. The flags on either side of the main circle in comparison to Nast’s piece are shown with plain shading and simple line work whereas in Nast’s piece, one cannot recognize that the images are flags until further inspection because of the hyper realistic shading and intense overlay of the flags on top of one another. While Harrington’s piece is a great example of the approachability of folk art, her career as an artist and more information on her work is abysmal compared to that of Thomas Nast. Nast has a Wikipedia page and a hefty
number of books and articles associated with the search of his name in library records. Harrington has a short artist biography in the information section of Artsor’s display of her print. Ultimately, folk artists create images that are easy to impress personal narratives on. While the identity of every folk artist is important and plays a role in the art they create, the subject matters are so mundane that a biography of the artist, especially an artist with no formal training, will not have a great impact. Nast had the benefit of being a white man with an education who was given the opportunity to work with Harper’s weekly in 1862. 22 His talent in printmaking is unquestionable, but his large presence in art history biographies and cartoon studies in comparison to Harrington’s calls for social analysis. Little is known about Harrington other than she was a folk artist who created a response print to Nast’s print that simplified the carving and put her own personal spin on the piece. Her style is in line with that of other folk artists in being two dimensional23 in addition to the fact that she was a woman in the 1800s, it can be assumed that her schooling in the arts was minimal or perhaps based in the home and taught in the way of causal apprenticeship. She didn’t come up with the original design for the piece, but her identity as a female folk artist has an influence over the piece that changes the context and readings. Thinking of Manet’s Olympia, the eyes in his piece change the perception based on where the gaze of the subject is located. In Manet’s case, his Olympia caused outrage in part because her gaze is aimed directly at the viewer rather than located somewhere off of the frame. Viewers could not look without the subject looking back at them. In Nast’s piece, the main subject, a woman on her knees looking up to the sky with closed hands supposedly in prayer, is not looking at the viewer.

23 Museum Of American Folk Art Encyclopedia of Twentieth-century American Folk Art and Artists.
Harrington’s piece doesn’t challenge this gaze and continues to have the woman looking up, but the child in the bottom right corner has had a shift in gaze. It is unclear whether the child in Nast’s original is staring at the viewer or not or even if the figure to the far left of the small oval is even a child, but in Harrington’s piece it is clear that the figure is a child and evident that the child is looking back at the viewer. This brings a wonder to the piece and calls for the viewer to think of what they are looking at and the ways in which they are staring. It’s significant that female artists can create these awkward viewpoints because of the social phenomena in the States that “men watch women and women look at themselves being watched.”24 While artists like Manet are able to capture this, Harrington is able to subtly include it in her rendition because of her societal position of being the watcher and the watched, it is a more natural inclusion because of her familiarity with the phenomena. With so much social context between these renditions, why is there not more literature on Harrington’s piece? Again, she was a woman in the 1800s with little to no formal education, her identity as a folk artist was minute in the time period she was active in, she may not have even thought of herself as a folk artist or an artist at that. The societal value that could have been placed on her rendition of “Thanksgiving Day 1863” seems to have been spent on Nast’s original.


Hirschl & Adler Galleries, Inc., 1863. ARTSTOR.  

25 Addie A. Harrington, “26 November 1863,” ARTSTOR.
While Nast and Harrington are known for their prints and cartoons, there is another section of folk art known as ornamental painting which is best known through the artist, William Matthew Prior. Prior, like Nast, was a white male who received some formal education in painting from the studio of Charles Codman in 1824. His work is popular because of his ability to switch styles based on the desires of his customers. He is

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known for his work in portraits and has the ability to work in both three-dimensional and two-dimensional painting styles. His ability to change his style is best seen between figures nine and ten. While the differences are not drastic between his portraits of Reverend and Mrs. Lawson and William Whipper, there are subtle variations in the shading and detail between the pieces. One drastic difference can be seen in Nancy Lawson’s portrait which has an intricate and highly decorated background scene that goes in stark contrast to the dark blue background of Whipper’s portrait. Nancy Lawson’s portrait contains many examples of fine training seen in the highlights in her hair and on her face. Prior maintains the folk art two dimensionality by portraying the fabric of the dress in a similar way that a paper puppet would have shading that does not give three dimensional effects, but the face of Mrs. Lawson contains shades under the chin and on her nose that give the effect that she is actually sitting down in front of the viewer because of the hyperrealism. While Whipper’s portrait contains shading and goes into great detail in the clothes and book the man is holding, the face lacks the minute details seen in figure nine. The detail in the ears is minute but create a difference in style that patrons would pay for accordingly. Prior was an artist that made a living off of selling his talent at different price ranges. He believed that everyone should have access to portraits and art without having to be from a nobility or wealth. A biography in *The Encyclopedia of Folk Art* wrote that his, “entrepreneurial approach helped to democratize the art of portrait painting, bringing likenesses, both staring and otherwise, within reach of all those who desired them.” Prior was talented in creating his oil works on glass, a medium that is outside of the normal materials in academic painting practices. His work embodies the

28 Museum Of American Folk Art Encyclopedia of Twentieth-century American Folk Art and Artists
spirit in folk art by being accessible to all and made out the artists personally developed skills and resourcefulness. His demographic is something of note; as a man in the 1800s, he was afforded the luxury of an education/apprenticeship and even though it was not in classical training, it did give him an advantage in creating works that were visually pleasing to both casual viewers and viewers with a trained eye. He was able to sell his works for prices that he controlled and created without barriers based on race and sex in the United States. For that, art historians today have multiple biographies on him, and his works are well preserved and can be viewed in museums across the country.


30 William Matthew Prior, “Mrs. Nancy Lawson,” 1843, ARTSTOR.
Unlike the other artists covered thus far, Clementine Hunter was a well-known folk artist who lived and created well into the 1980s. Hunter was a plantation worker or Creole decent whose grandmother was enslaved. She worked at the Melrose Plantation where she was given paints by a visiting female artist and began to paint scenes of Plantation life on cardboard. Her work is an amazing folk art collection because of her

31 William Matthew Prior, William Whipper, 1835. ARTSTOR
ability to capture the emotion and practices of daily life. Her work depicts plantation workers picking cotton and apples, washing clothes, dancing, and attending weddings. She was deeply religious which is obvious in her work, something she has in common with William Matthew Prior who was also very devout to his religious practices. Her work is influenced by her position as a cook on the Melrose Plantation, her status as a Black woman in the United States, and by her extraordinary view of her surroundings. Figure eleven is a prime example of her artistic vision. The piece is from 1975 and contains a photo of the artist herself in the center holding another one of her pieces entitled, “Baby Jesus and Three Wise Men.” The short strokes in a circular motion around the photo are abstract and colorful. There are figures in the strokes that are completely up to the viewer to discern what they are, like the bottom right corner that contains slightly compacted strokes with more symbols and a thin red line that could read as being glasses on a head. It can be assumed that the picture within the painting is one that Hunter has a fondness for because of the obsessive strokes that surround the picture and strokes that lead the eye to the center.

Clementine Hunter’s work is a true example of folk art. Hunter spent a great deal of time cooking at the Melrose Plantation and received no formal training in the arts. She differs from William Matthew Prior, Thomas Nast, and Addie A. Harrington in that her paintings are completely her own style. She did not marry into a family of artists or get an apprenticeship. Her work reflects the daily life of a plantation worker and proves to be an amazing example of the values, traditions, and lives that she saw firsthand at the plantation. Her status as a plantation worker is intrinsic to her work. As a Black woman

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in the United States where most of her work was done in the pre-Civil rights era, her work was not held to the same value as that of white male folk artists. In an interview with Hunter done by Ruth Edmonds Hill, she says that she would give away her work or sell pieces for twenty-five cents.\(^{34}\) Whether this was an account of a personal air of causality surrounding her work or perhaps on account of Hunter being unable to read or write\(^{35}\) is unclear, but it does speak to the inequalities women, especially women of color, face in terms of economic compensation for their pieces. This economic trend is also proven by works done by Addie A. Harrington and Ruth H. Bascom, neither of whom received compensation beyond quarters for their pieces. Unlike Bascom and Harrington, however, Hunter’s pieces have been very well documented by art historians and art archives, such as ARTSTOR, and her pieces have been viewed in many museum exhibitions. What is so captivating about her scenes is her ability to convey emotions and tell stories without the ability to write these stories down. She was a self-made Creole woman whose folk art has defied the social standards and prevailed in an art scene where white male Americans traditionally dominate.


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Art cannot live without artists. While it is true that formal analysis paces art outside of its social contexts and takes away the viewpoint of the artist, both of which are valid approaches to art analysis, there is no doubt that the artists social identity plays a key role in the reception of a piece, especially in public art. When we look at the Vietnam memorial, the fact that Maya Lin designed it does not change the ways we view the piece.
formally. The wall is made of black stone and engraved with the names of the American soldiers who died in the Vietnam war. However, knowing that the wall was designed by Maya Lin allows for questions to be asked of the artist about the design or the methodology behind the material choice. The fact that she is an Asian-American changed the press reactions to the piece and, therefore, the public’s reception of the piece. Knowing the artist is an opportunity to discover the identity of the piece and its origins. It’s also a method of unpacking the social impact of the piece and the ways in which the public and art historians will treat the piece based on the social and economic status of its creator. While an art piece can stand alone without its creator, it is without a doubt that the creator’s status in society will impact the reception of the piece. This is seen in the pay contrast between Clementine Hunter and William Matthew Prior and the academic recognition between Harrington and Nast. In the world of folk art, social reception is key. When we look at pieces done without an author’s signature, it could be hard to discern if the piece is folk or not. The categorization of the piece then depends on formal analysis and comparisons to other well-known pieces. Without an author to impact the social reception of the piece, aesthetics must fill in the gaps. While the terms can be used interchangeably between all categories of art, in this context mastery refers to educated practice that would deem a piece to be fine and its creator to be a master while craftsmanship is referring to folk art being of quality due to personal practice outside of an academic setting. The question at heart here is: who is considered a master? What kind of piece is deserving of a label of excellent craftsmanship or of being masterful? Folk artists who are female presenting and folk artists of color consistently create works that are of high quality but are rarely given the same praise or pay for their work as their
white male peers. The pieces that are created by these artists as well as the pieces that are labeled folk art because of their formal folk qualities are less likely to be received as works worthy of the praise given to those labeled as works of mastery.
Folk Art Around the World

Across the globe, there are many forms of folk art that vary depending on the materials that are popular in their respective geographic regions, the religious practices within various different cultures, and the architectural and social needs of different countries. In the United States, folk art is made up of paintings of funerals, statues of figures that are images from the Christian God, quilts, and more. In contrast, folk art in India can vary from Madhubani, ornamental painting, to different styles of scroll painting. What remains true about folk art no matter the region it originates from is that the art will reflect the values of the society. Folk art is always developed by artists who create based on the desires of the population, they make what is commissioned of them or what they want to see. While fine art is controlled by Western academic standards, folk art is in the control of the people. The ways in which folk art manifests in each country, region, and culture shows the values of the people that make up those places. The economic structure can be seen in the payment and economic demographics of the folk artists, the structural and personal aesthetic values of the population can be seen in the formal elements of the pieces, and the value the societies place on academic values based in the idea of the “Global West” can be seen in the value of the folk art in terms of historical documentation, viewings, and price ranges. Folk art is a valuable tool to discover the ways in which people interact with their surroundings and each other in larger society because of its direct connection to the popular majority through uneducated artists. From China to Italy, folk art captures the things that artists find beauty in.

Whether that be ships that are sailing in with goods or forests on a calm day, folk art is

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simple in conveying a message of appreciation for both the craft and the subject. There is much to be learned about a culture through the images created by those who experience the social depth of society firsthand. American folk art is one of many folk art practices around the globe that has the ability to capture the essential essences of the society their creators experience.

A favorite scene of folk artists across the globe is ports. Artists in the Mediterranean in the 1700s used watercolor and gouache to paint ships sailing in with goods for commissioners from the United States (figure twelve) while painters in China created ports that “favored flat renditions done with fine detail but using only elementary perspective,” (figure thirteen). Ports continue to this day to be an essential link between countries. For folk artists to paint these popular sites of trade is to place a causal importance on the locations. The existence of paintings of ports by people who paint for sport or commission shows the space as having an economic and social value to the point where artists commemorate the activity of the ports in paintings that are preserved through the centuries from the 1700s to the modern day. The amount of port commissions also shows the interests of wealthy citizens to commission detailed oil works of specific rigs.

The social phenomenon of folk art being representational of cultural values and societal structures is not exclusive to the United States. Author and researcher, Wang Jiabao argues in his book on folk art in China that folk art has evolved into being coined as folk culture because of its increased relevancy and representations of traditional Chinese values through festivals, songs, prints, and more. He states that, “Parallel with

traditional practices, both folk literature and folk customs—once regarded as “old,” “feudal,” “primitive,” as well as “superstitious” and excluded from Chinese cultural history—are now cherished as national treasure. This indicates that folk culture is, for the first time in history, being recognized as a “tradition” that represents Chinese culture and the Chinese nation.”

Unlike art created and studied under the guidelines created by institutional art and art historians in China, folk culture art captures what it is like to live in China based on the oral history passed through generations and the everyday practices taught through parental guides that make Chinese citizens more than just citizens; folk art captures the practices, foods, viewpoints, and so much more of people who are the culture of China, those who make up the systems that create culture. Going back to the simple paintings of ships that were sent to the United States by Chinese folk artists, the paintings were an easy method of conveying to other countries what it was like to see these ships sailing from the lens of someone who saw the ship with the “street knowledge” of what that ship meant for Chinese citizens in terms of trade, aesthetic priorities, and personal cultural image (how Chinese citizens see themselves when considering the viewpoint of another non-Chinese viewer).

Besides being a method of cultural bridging and conservation, folk art across the globe is also an indicator of economic values. Take the Fomento exhibit entitled *Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art* for example. The Fomento exhibit travelled from 2001 to 2004 around the United States to display what the event’s curators deemed to be the best quality pieces of folk art from Mexico. The art in the exhibition was chosen based on its social and economic status, “While folk art was not initially a collecting priority, in 1996,

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the Fomento inaugurated its Folk Art Support Program to generate private financial
support for what in Mexico is called ‘arte popular/popular art’, a symbolically hallowed
but economically threatened segment of national cultural production.”

The exhibit was groundbreaking in being a transnational production dedicated solely to folk art. Not only did it display folk art under the term of mastery, which is more commonly seen in descriptions of works produced under institutional art sanctions, but its creation shows the social and structural similarities between folk art in the United States and folk art in Mexico. Folk art in Mexico is created by artists who are self-taught and consists largely of ceramics and paintings, both of which were represented well in the traveling exhibition. The conception of the exhibition, shown in the quote above, exposes the disparity between referring to a piece as one of master quality and acknowledging its primary function as a representation of culture and the wages artists receive for such works. While folk artists from the United States, Mexico, and China are all regarded as members of society who are able to record and articulate en captivating and accurate visual depictions of society and culture in their respective areas of the globe, the artists themselves are not regarded with the same posterity as their educated peers.

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Figure 12. Michele Felice Cornè, “Capt. Sterrett in the Schr Enterprise paying tribute to Tripoli, August 1801,” 1801.\(^{41}\)

\(^{41}\) Michele Felice Cornè, “Capt. Sterrett in the Schr Enterprise paying tribute to Tripoli, August 1801.”
Figure 13. “Ship Huntress of New York,” Artist Unknown. Oil on Canvas. Marine Arts, Salem Massachusetts.42

Collections, Collectors, and Conclusions

The state of folk art in the United States today is best described by Hank Chase, “Largely displaced by history and marginalized by the fine-art canon, folk art is today found, if at all, in occasional exhibitions gracing our major museums or in the homes of an appreciative, largely white, urban elite.”\(^{43}\) What brought folk art to such a state? Long ago, folk art was simply art. There was no formal institution in place to decide which paintings will be considered mastery of a subject and which will be works of skill in a craft. But with the educated also come the non-educated. The division created the category of folk art, but the solidification of the category was done by collectors. The early fine art museum began in the parlors of wealthy elite who had the means and ego to travel the world collecting art items to file into a room full of curiosities. Over the years those parlors were replaced with formal institutions open to the public: museums. The practice of collecting never passed and while fine art was being collected in museums, folk art became the new collector’s passion for the wealthy elite. Collectors like Florence Dibell Bartlett and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller began to purchase folk art according to their tastes and personal parameters for their collections. With enough money to purchase a wide variety of works and travel to find pieces that fit the collection requirements set by the collector, folk art collections created by people like the Rockefellers have the power to set the standard of what great folk art looks like.

The majority of the biggest collections of folk art in the United States have moved on to become museums. These collections contain upwards of 2,000 pieces, more or less, and are usually made up of paintings and sculptures. Folk art that is created with fabrics

and other found materials is hard to maintain like in the case of the AIDS memorial quilt where the fabric frays and tears over time because of its continued use and the base material not being made to withstand the conditions of Western artistic display. An exception to this pattern is the House of Blues clubs, six exceptional clubs to be exact. These establishments hold folk art pieces from various artists and range from ceiling murals to painted pieces of plywood done with mud and molasses by Jimmy Lee Sudduth. The collection sets a new standard for folk art collections that actually taps into collections pre-education institution era. The displays mimic the parlors of old that placed art based on where it fit and where it felt right to display rather than based in exact measurement and eye levels. The pieces themselves show passion and pay homage to personal narratives and community values. This is the beauty of collecting outside of institutional settings. The pieces at the House of Blues clubs are recognized for their creativity and importance to not only the artists, but also the community members who visit and support the clubs. To collect is to make a conscious decision to place value on an art piece based on its formal qualities that relate it to other pieces in the collection and its social value and meaning to the collector and the collections patrons and visitors. This is essential in a field like folk art where the value of the pieces is not guaranteed to be equitable to the artist’s investment in the piece, especially for artists of color and non-normative sexual and gender identities. The House of Blues clubs’ collections are a magnificent example of the positive impact collections can have on the recognition and social and economic value of folk art pieces.

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Another big collection is that of the Gunns. The Gunn collection is large and made mostly out of paintings of children, a vast majority of them unsigned and poorly kept. The Gunn couple lived childless in a large home, this is the suspected reason behind their acquisitions. They kept most of the pieces they collected from various folk artists across the nation in a pole barn in their backyard.\footnote{D’Ambrosio, Paul S., and Charlotte Emans. Folk Art’s Many Faces: Portraits in the New York State Historical Association. Cooperstown, N.Y., 1987.} It wasn’t until their deaths that the pole barn was excavated and the paintings that were salvagable were removed and placed in a museum. What is interesting about this case of collecting, beyond the unusual method of storing their pieces, is the induction of their collection into a museum setting despite their lack of record keeping or care of the pieces. This evolution from pole barn collection to museum installment is best understood by the following quote: “In the case of folk art, it is the collector whose ability to “discover” the realm of the unknown that gets showcased in museums, such as the American Folk Art Museum, where the individual artist often gets subsumed by the ability of the connoisseur’s practice of aesthetic discernment.”\footnote{David Brody, “The Building of a Label: The New American Fold Art Museum,” American quarterly 55, no. 2, 2003, pp. 260.} Rather than the pieces themselves being the reasoning behind the installment, the status of the Gunns and their influence in collecting such a massive amount of folk art had a tremendous influence over its movement from collection to installation. While the pieces in the collection are nicely done, its known as the Gunn collection before being known as the collection of paintings of children by specific and unknown artists. The objects in the House of Blues clubs are collected under the name of Blues rather than being pieces known for their names and respective artists. Collectors have a considerable amount of influence over the ways in which folk art is categorized,
stored, and remembered just by the simple act of acquiring mass amounts of folk art that speaks to their methods of collecting.

All this to say that folk art is the art of the people. While all art forms are created and controlled by people, folk art has a special way of capturing the ways in which people live their lives in relation to their, occupations, surroundings, and their relations with other people. There are little to no parameters binding folk art into being one thing or conveying one message. A folk artist does not strive to compelte something abstract to lull an audience into reflecting on the state of the world and themselves. A folk artist sees the messages of everyday life in spirituality, emotional gatherings, daily tasks and more, conveying those indescribable phenomenons into visual representations that many people can ascribe to. Its popularity doesn’t come from its ability to align with academic standards, but its charm in being a window or even a mirror in certain occasions to the soul of living or the spirit of being alive. Folk artists like Clementine Hunter are paid little, but appreciated by many. From the quilts created to honor lost loved ones to the paintings created for people to document changing times folk art is a dependable and charming medium that delivers on saying the worlds that are hard to speak. Its collected, displayed, created, and documented without the need for formal education or standardized materials. The people who create these pieces are more likely to suffer economically and socially for lacking institutional backing in their pieces because of structures in the United States that favor degrees, standardization, clean cut lines, and identities that align with the picture of an idealized American body. Despite this harsh reality, their creations remain as cherished pieces to those who find value in the hand crafted and homemade arts.
What I didn’t expect out of this project was passion. Finding a topic to write about for four months while doing extensive research is rare and had yet to happen in my academic career until now. “Entitled, ‘Folk Art’” is a personal study on the evolution of my understanding and appreciation for folk art. It encapsulates my career at Kalamazoo College, drawing from as early as my freshman year seminar (Cultivating Community) to as recent as my senior seminar (Ways of Seeing). This project is not tied down to the academic discipline of art history and expands to include teachings from Anthropology and Sociology classes from previous years as well as history classes like my sophomore year class on women’s history from the 1800s on. As the project developed, it leaked out into being less of an academic research paper and more of an analysis of my understandings of the field based on my knowledge of Art history, ANSO, History, and Women and Gender Studies.
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