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Folk art

Folk art covers all forms of visual art made in the context of folk culture. Definitions vary, but generally the objects have practical utility of some kind, rather than being exclusively decorative. The makers of folk art are normally trained within a popular tradition, rather than in the fine art tradition of the culture. There is often overlap, or contested ground, with naive art, but in traditional societies where ethnographic art is still made, that term is normally used instead of "folk art".

The types of object covered by the term varies considerably and in particular "divergent categories of cultural production are comprehended by its usage in Europe, where the term originated, and in the United States, where it developed for the most part along very different lines.

Folk arts are rooted in and reflective of the cultural life of a community. They encompass the body of expressive culture associated with the fields of folklore and cultural heritage. Tangible folk art includes objects which historically are crafted and used within a traditional community. Intangible folk arts include such forms as music, dance and narrative structures. Each of these arts, both tangible and intangible, was originally developed to address a real need. Once this practical purpose has been lost or forgotten, there is no reason for further transmission unless the object or action has been imbued with meaning beyond its initial practicality. These vital and constantly reinvigorated artistic traditions are shaped by values and standards of excellence that are passed from generation to generation, most often within family and community, through demonstration, conversation, and practice.

Characteristics of folk art objects

Objects of folk art are a subset of material culture and include objects which are experienced through the senses, by seeing and touching. As with all material culture, these tangible objects can be handled, repeatedly re-experienced, and sometimes

broken. They are considered works of art because of the skillful technical execution of an existing form and design; the skill might be seen in the precision of the form, the surface decoration or in the beauty of the finished product. As a folk art, these objects share several characteristics that distinguish them from other artifacts of material culture.

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Folk artists

The object is created by a single artisan or team of artisans. The craftsmen and women work within an established cultural framework. They frequently have a recognizable style and method in crafting their pieces, allowing their products to be recognized and attributed to a single individual or workshop. This was originally articulated by Alois Riegl in his study of *Volkskunst, Hausfleiss, und Hausindustrie*, published in 1894. "Riegl ... stressed that the individual hand and intentions of the artist were significant, even in folk creativity. To be sure, the artist may have been obliged by group expectations to work within the norms of transmitted forms and conventions, but individual creativity – which implied personal aesthetic choices and technical virtuosity – saved received or inherited traditions from stagnating and permitted them to be renewed in each generation." Individual innovation in the production process plays an important role in the continuance of these traditional forms. Many folk art traditions like quilting, ornamental picture framing, and decoy carving continue to thrive, while new forms constantly emerge.

Contemporary outsider artists are frequently self-taught as their work is often developed in isolation or in small communities across the country. The Smithsonian American Art Museum houses over 70 such folk and self-taught artists; for example, Elito Circa, a famous and internationally recognized artist of Indigenouism, developed his own styles without professional training or guidance.

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Hand crafted

All folk art objects are produced in a one-off production process. Only one object is made at a time, either by hand or in a combination of hand and machine methods; they are not mass-produced. As a result of this manual production, each individual piece is unique and can be differentiated from other objects of the same type. In his essay on "Folk Objects", folklorist Simon Bronner references preindustrial modes of production, but folk art objects

continue to be made as unique crafted pieces by skilled artisans. "The notion of folk objects tends to emphasize the handmade over machine manufactured. Folk objects imply a mode of production common to preindustrial communal society where knowledge and skills were personal and traditional." This does not mean that all folk art is old, it continues to be hand-crafted today in many regions around the world.

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Workshops and apprentices

The design and production of folk art is learned and taught informally or formally; folk artists are not self-taught. Folk art does not strive for individual expression. Instead, "the concept of group art implies, indeed requires, that artists acquire their abilities, both manual and intellectual, at least in part from communication with others. The community has something, usually a great deal, to say about what passes for acceptable folk art." Historically the training in a handicraft was done as apprenticeships with local craftsmen, such as the blacksmith or the stonemason. As the equipment and tools needed were no longer readily available in the community, these traditional crafts moved into technical schools or applied arts schools.

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Owned by the community

The object is recognizable within its cultural framework as being of a known type. Similar objects can be found in the environment made by other individuals which resemble this object. Without exception, individual pieces of folk art will reference other works in the culture, even as they show exceptional individual execution in form or design. If antecedents cannot be found for this object, it might still be a piece of art but it is not folk art. "While traditional society does not erase ego, it does focus and direct the choices that an individual can acceptably make... the well-socialized person will find the limits are not inhibiting but helpful... Where traditions are healthy the works of different artists are more similar than they are different; they are more uniform than personal."

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Utility of the object

The known type of the object must be, or have originally been, utilitarian; it was created to serve some function in the daily life of the household or the community. This is the reason the design continues to be made. Since the form itself had function and purpose, it was duplicated over time in various locations by different individuals. A groundbreaking book on the history of art states that "every man-made thing arises from a problem as a purposeful solution." Written by George Kubler and published in 1962, "The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things" goes on to describe an approach to historical change which places the history of objects and images in a larger continuum of time. It maintains that if the purpose of the form were purely decorative, then it would not be duplicated; instead the creator would have designed something new. However since the form itself was a known type with function and purpose, it continued to be copied over time by different individuals.

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Aesthetics of the genre

The object is recognized as being exceptional in the form and decorative motifs. Being part of the community, the craftsman is well aware of the community aesthetics, and how members of the local culture will respond to his work. He strives to create an object which matches their expectations, working within (mostly) unspoken cultural biases to confirm and strengthen them. While the shared form indicates a shared culture, innovation allows the individual artisan to embody his own vision; it is a measure of how well he has been able to tease out the individual elements and manipulate them to form a new permutation within the tradition. "For art to progress, its unity must be dismantled so that certain of its aspects can be freed for exploration, while others shrink from attention." The creative tension between the traditional object and the craftsman becomes visible in these exceptional objects. This in turn allows us to ask new questions about creativity, innovation, and aesthetics.

Materials, forms, and crafts

Folk art comes in many different shapes and sizes. It uses the materials which are at hand in the locality and reproduces familiar shapes and forms. In order to gain an overview of the multitude of different folk art objects, the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage has compiled a page of storied objects that have been part of one of their annual folklife festivals. The list below includes a sampling of different materials,

forms, and artisans involved in the production of everyday and folk art objects.

Fine art

In European academic traditions, fine art is art developed primarily for aesthetics or beauty, distinguishing it from decorative art or applied art, which also has to serve some practical function, such as pottery or most metalwork. In the aesthetic theories developed in the Italian Renaissance, the highest art was that which allowed the full expression and display of the artist's imagination, unrestricted by any of the practical considerations involved in, say, making and decorating a teapot. It was also considered important that making the artwork did not involve dividing the work between different individuals with specialized skills, as might be necessary with a piece of furniture, for example. Even within the fine arts, there was a hierarchy of genres based on the amount of creative imagination required, with history painting placed higher than still life.

Historically, the five main fine arts were painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry, with performing arts including theatre and dance. In practice, outside education the concept is typically only applied to the visual arts. The old master print and drawing were included as related forms to painting, just as prose forms of literature were to poetry. Today, the range of what would be considered fine arts (in so far as the term remains in use) commonly includes additional modern forms, such as film, photography, video production/editing, design, and conceptual art. One definition of fine art is "a visual art considered to have been created primarily for aesthetic and intellectual purposes and judged for its beauty and meaningfulness, specifically, painting, sculpture, drawing, watercolor, graphics, and architecture." In that sense, there are conceptual differences between the fine arts and the decorative arts or applied arts (these two terms covering largely the same media). As far as the consumer of the art was concerned, the perception of aesthetic qualities required a refined judgment usually referred to as having good taste, which differentiated fine art from popular art and entertainment.

The word "fine" does not so much denote the quality of the artwork in question, but the purity of the discipline according to traditional Western European canons. Except in the case of architecture, where a practical utility was accepted, this definition originally excluded the "useful" applied or decorative arts, and the products of what were regarded as crafts. In contemporary practice, these distinctions and restrictions have become essentially meaningless, as the concept or intention of the artist is given primacy, regardless of the means through which this is expressed.

The term is typically only used for Western art from the Renaissance onwards, although similar genre distinctions can apply to the art of other cultures, especially those of East Asia. The set of "fine arts" are sometimes also called the "major arts", with "minor arts" equating to the decorative arts. This would typically be for medieval and ancient art.

Origins and development

According to some writers, the concept of a distinct category of fine art is an invention of the early modern period in the West. Larry Shiner in his *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (2003) locates the invention in the 18th century: "There was a traditional "system of the arts" in the West before the eighteenth century. (Other traditional cultures still have a similar system.) In that system, an artist or artisan was a skilled maker or practitioner, a work of art was the useful product of skilled work, and the appreciation of the arts was integrally connected with their role in the rest of life. "Art", in other words, meant approximately the same thing as the Greek word *techne*, or in English "skill", a sense that has survived in phrases like "the art of war", "the art of love", and "the art of medicine." Similar ideas have been expressed by Paul Oskar Kristeller, Pierre Bourdieu, and Terry Eagleton (e.g. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*), though the point of invention is often placed earlier, in the Italian Renaissance; Anthony Blunt notes that the term *arti di disegno*, a similar concept, emerged in Italy in the mid-16th century.

But it can be argued that the classical world, from which very little theoretical writing on art survives, in practice had similar distinctions. The names of artists preserved in literary sources are Greek painters and sculptors, and to a lesser extent the carvers of engraved gems. Several individuals in these groups were very famous, and copied and remembered for centuries after their deaths. The cult of the individual artistic genius, which was an important part of the Renaissance theoretical basis for the distinction between "fine" and other art, drew on classical precedent, especially as recorded by Pliny the Elder. Some other types of object, in particular Ancient Greek pottery, are often signed by their makers, or the owner of the workshop, probably partly to advertise their products.

The decline of the concept of "fine art" is dated by George Kubler and others to around 1880, when it "fell out of fashion" as, by about 1900, folk art was also coming to be regarded as significant. Finally, at least in circles interested in art theory, "fine art" was driven out of use by about 1920 by the exponents of industrial design ... who opposed a double standard of judgment for works of art and for useful objects". This was among

theoreticians; it has taken far longer for the art trade and popular opinion to catch up. However, over the same period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the movement of prices in the art market was in the opposite direction, with works from the fine arts drawing much further ahead of those from the decorative arts.

In the art trade the term retains some currency for objects from before roughly 1900 and may be used to define the scope of auctions or auction house departments and the like. The term also remains in use in tertiary education, appearing in the names of colleges, faculties, and courses. In the English-speaking world this is mostly in North America, but the same is true of the equivalent terms in other European languages, such as beaux-arts in French or bellas artes in Spanish.

Cultural perspectives

The conceptual separation of arts and decorative arts or crafts that have often dominated in Europe and the US is not shared by all other cultures. But traditional Chinese art had comparable distinctions, distinguishing within Chinese painting between the mostly landscape literati painting of scholar gentlemen and the artisans of the schools of court painting and sculpture. Although high status was also given to many things that would be seen as craft objects in the West, in particular ceramics, jade carving, weaving, and embroidery, this by no means extended to the workers who created these objects, who typically remained even more anonymous than in the West. Similar distinctions were made in Japanese and Korean art. In Islamic art, the highest status was generally given to calligraphy, architects and the painters of Persian miniatures and related traditions, but these were still very often court employees. Typically, they also supplied designs for the best Persian carpets, architectural tiling and other decorative media, more consistently than happened in the West.

Latin American art was dominated by European colonialism until the 20th-century, when indigenous art began to reassert itself inspired by the Constructivist Movement, which reunited arts with crafts based upon socialist principles. In Africa, Yoruba art often has a political and spiritual function. As with the art of the Chinese, the art of the Yoruba is also often composed of what would ordinarily be considered in the West to be craft production. Some of its most admired manifestations, such as textiles, fall in this category.

Conclusions

Sources

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folk_art
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fine_art