

Wixted, John Timothy, tr., Okamura Kichiemon [岡村吉  
右衛門], “Simplicity and Sincerity—Folk Art,” *Cha-  
noyu Quarterly* 2.1 (Spring 1971), pp. 15-17.

## Simplicity and Sincerity—Folk Art

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Folk art has been much in evidence lately. Objects passing as folk art are being sold everywhere. Since the term "folk art" covers fields qualitatively different from each other, its usage is difficult. Old and new works of art and even souvenirs and local products are all similarly identified. All folk art should have the common characteristic of being the product of traditional crafts, made without artifice, for use in everyday living. The term has been loosely applied to objects which in fact are not useful for daily living but which superficially seem to have so-called "folk art tone."

Since craft items, especially folk crafts, were originally intended for use in everyday living, there seems little need for the pretention often invested in the term "folk art." Perhaps this reflects contemporary man's need for the human qualities manifested in the simplicity and naturalness of folk art. Often such objects suggest the desire to handle and use them. Their inherent qualities are compatible with living and it is because of this intimacy with life that they are so readily accepted.

Folk art tradition includes those items necessary to man in daily living—utensils for food, clothing, and the containers which he must supply for these. The shape and material for construction of these items is determined by what is suitable for the size, weight, and thickness required.

Man's environment is not limited. He resides in many places—in the mountains, by the sea, in cities, and in the country. North and south, his environment is not the same, and different climatic and geographical factors influence different kinds of community life. In effect, the land, that essential element which shapes the customs of a group, gradually lends individual character, similarly, to the shape and pattern of utensils. As customs develop and native ingenuity is employed, shape, pattern and other such conventions for folkcraft items evolve. The result is an emergence of feelings of

attachment to and familiarity with the objects whose fixed patterns of style were thus developed.

When folkcraft pottery was made by people simply for themselves and their companions for everyday use, it underwent comparatively few changes. However, population growth, the specialization of employment, and the general widened and more complex scope of life have brought about regional distinctions and specialization of types and styles in folkcraft pottery. Regional characteristics are a special feature now of folk art. The role played by geography as well as the patterns of life and customs of a particular group are important in producing and sustaining regional differences. For instance, differences in the soil make the ceramic products from northern Japanese kilns thick and heavy while those from the south are light and seem bright and fresh. This creates differences in the atmosphere and aesthetic feeling with which we view and use these objects. In its local color, its naturalness, its earthen hue, folk art has the power to move men's hearts and create a strong sense of comfort and intimacy. This is the essential, undifferentiated character of folk art regardless of regional differences.

Initially, folk crafts intended for the general public did not demand special technical skill. There were only a few who might be called masters and their works were intended for the upper classes and nobility. Works intended for the common people were made, rather, by those having only a modicum of skill. Rather than skill or artifice, experience was considered the most important quality of an artisan. The importance of work and the value of honest, respectable labor served to foster a moral spirit of kindness and responsibility among these artisans.

Whether an artisan can do something skillfully or poorly, it has been a quality of folk art that it be done without artifice and with a warm, sincere heart. The simplicity and naturalness of folkcraft items is a result of being made with only basic technical skills. This is evident from shapes and designs which are composed of only a few basic elements leaving no room for flowery artifice. In the

application of the designs only basic elements are allowed to come through. This simplicity is the result of experience rather than technical skill.

In evaluating folk art, however, we must be aware that coarse, rough work can easily be mistaken for simplicity. A craftsman lacking in simple, honest skill, no matter how much he may try, cannot aspire to anything better. Conversely, a craftsman technically skillful who is lacking in sincerity and honest simplicity cannot create a genuine work of art. The recent deluge of self-styled folk art demonstrates this point in its lack of ingenuity and simplicity.

Though genuine simplicity has its unrefined aspect, it is not entirely unrefined. It is the natural refined qualities inherent in the materials used that effect genuine simplicity. This naturalness is a necessity in folk art. Machine-made products reflect intelligence but they are cold and shallow. In order to escape the absurdity of this man-made wisdom, many people are turning to folk art and its natural materials for the touch of warmth and the feeling of comfort and relaxation they cannot find in machine-made products.

Folk crafts were originally made by untutored people. Because these artisans lacked refinement, their works have greatly sustained cultural traditions. People who have donned contemporary society's high-level refinements are now seeking folk art wishing to break out of the boundaries of polished individual refinement and experience wider realms of culture. Thus the age is looking to folk art. Present-day living is divorced from nature and dependent on intellectualization, and this appreciation of folk art demonstrates modern man's desire to return to nature and simplicity.

The living, vital quality of folk art and the basis of its appeal to modern man is that it emerges from the turmoil of life—earthly life so difficult to grasp, with its hot, sweaty, bespattered core. This living quality of folk art, as well as its practical everyday use, forms the support and sustenance which have brought about the development and the broad diffusion of this craft and keep it alive in today's chaotic world.