

## Folk Art & Neo-Folk Art

WCA Panel, Jan. 30, Washington, DC

Judith Stein, Univ. of Pa., mod.; Betty MacDowell, Mich. State Univ. ("The Legacy of the Lady Limners: Folk Portraiture by American Women"), Rachel Maines, Center for the History of American Needlework, Pittsburgh ("The Designer and Artisan: The Ancient Contract"), Pat Ferraro, San Francisco State Univ. ("Quilts in our Lives"), Miriam Schapiro, Amherst College, and Melissa Meyer, NYC ("Femmage," *Heresies*).

□ The first WCA panel program, "Folk Art and Neo-Folk Art," was both exhilarating and illuminating. Panelists touched on important points of original research, while much of the territory explored was new. Well-chosen slides introduced the work of unknown women past and present and relevant pieces by well-known contemporaries. A cloud of doubt may still linger as to where and when folk art and naive give way to professionalism, however. MacDowell and Maines asserted that *training* is the key, but Ferraro, Schapiro, and Meyer freely interspersed untrained artists' work with that of others, without identification. One was left to make one's own deductions.

In her introduction, moderator Stein said that Folk Art as a subject was "discovered" in the 1920s and that the topic was a first for both CAA and WCA. She suggested that this might be because art historians have trouble dealing with Folk Art as art. Now feminism makes us aware that women have long studied, collected, and documented (primarily for themselves and their families) artifacts and objects of folk art by other women. In a sense, then, art history has been a means of social control. Then again, much of this art is made with relatively cheap materials and/or discards, and it is possible that art historians really had difficulty understanding and appraising it. Now there appears to be a growing revolution in taste allowing us to begin, at last, to evaluate and document.

Betty MacDowell, author of a new book, *Artists and Aprons*, pointed out that 18th- and 19th-century women's folk art was shaped by American culture. Rigid roles in marriage and parenthood meant that women's lives were filled with domestic responsibility. Their education stressed needlework, penmanship, and watercolor along with the "social graces." Fine arts as a field was discouraged, for women were not to study the live nude male model! Women channeled their creativity into the domestic scene; portraiture was a natural exploration—familiar and available faces of family and friends could be done quickly in pastels or water-



photo: Carole Rosen

colors, between chores. Women took the scissors of domesticity to cut paper profiles, also. MacDowell said repeatedly that the art had to fit around the accepted patterns of a woman's life; it rarely even approached a full-time activity.

By the mid-1800s, demand for portraits by self-taught artists lessened, due to the advent of the camera. People preferred the likeness of photography to record friends and family. The disappearance of the naive artist began.

Rachel Maines traced the professional relationship between designer and artisan. While the individual artist has been important since the Renaissance, little has been written about the division of labor between the creator of an idea and the maker-constructor, a division that may in Europe and America be made according to class and sex. The designer has always reigned over the technician. Mechanization of textiles reduced the artisan's role to mere machine-tender (and began the producer-consumer division). The designer-artisan contract was originally intended to resolve technical problems encountered in the initial design stage.

In early history, embroiderers tended to be at a higher level socially. The designer was part of the staff in wealthy households, and full-time employment included not only designing the intricate details of clothing, but also devising patterns for linens, curtains, rugs, and furniture. Folk embroidery, however, was produced from designs without direct contact between artist and designer. Folk artisans borrowed motifs freely from many diverse traditions and sources and tended to combine them. Samplers were the work of students learning stitchery and thus held even more incongruities.

The earliest commercial needlework used charts for needlepoint and was done in quadrants. At first the designs were hand-painted; later they were printed. Thread and yarn manufacturers discovered the advantage of professional designs, hiring women to draft patterns derived from popular magazines and pamphlets. After 1870, charts were available for beadwork, filet lace and crochet, and

counted cross-stitch.

In the late 1960s, a change began. Now needleworkers and textile artisans often want concept and design wed together, although some do still favor the designer-artisan division.

Pat Ferrero traced the life transitions of women folk artists through their quilts. Baby quilts could be utilitarian or elaborate or both at the same time. Quilting skills were passed from generation to generation, older women teaching young children. The engagement party was often the occasion for quilting, while the "masterpiece" was usually the wedding quilt—carefully conceived and painstakingly rendered during the engagement. The widow's quilt drew on a rich store of memories. Ferrero showed a quilt made from a Victorian mourning coat, which had been opened up to become a ground for both quilting and embroidery. A coffin in the center was surrounded by vignettes of the quilter's life.

Grace Earl, a transplanted Chicagoan now working in San Francisco, was seen in several slides with an incredible array of patterned fabrics of every description, which, sitting in her crowded one-room apartment, she pieces into intricate coverlets of exquisite skill and conception. (Ferrero has also made a film on Earl.)

Mimi Schapiro and Melissa Meyer developed their thesis of "femmage," and also had a document on the subject, which they handed out to the audience. This included their definitions of collage, assemblage, decoupage, and photomontage as background for their jointly coined phrase, "femmage." The basic premise here is that "leftovers" are essential to a woman's experience. Schapiro pointed out that most of the classic written works on collage refer to male artists. Therefore, she and Meyer developed "femmage" to mean the same form made solely by women.

Meyer and Schapiro listed several criteria for "femmage," but were careful to state that not every one need appear in each object. But for the work to be "appreciated" as "femmage" at least half of the criteria must be met. These include: being made by a woman, recycling of scraps, saving and collecting, themes relating to the life context, covert imagery, diaristic nature, celebration of private or public events, expectation of an intimate audience, drawing or handwriting "sewn" in, silhouetted images fixed on other material, inclusion of photographs or printed matter, recognizable images in narrative sequence, abstract pattern elements, and the possibility of a functional as well as an esthetic life for the work. ■ —Barbara Aubin

### SUBSCRIPTION FORM

I enclose \$ \_\_\_\_\_ as follows:

- Regular subscription—\$6 a year
- Student (or Group: 5 or more) \_\_\_\_\_ at \$4 each
- Institutional subscription—\$8.50 a year
- addl postage—Canada \$2.80; other foreign (air) \$7.30 / (surface mail) \$3.60
- renewal (please enclose mailing label)
- single issues @ \$.75—months/yrs: \_\_\_\_\_
- \$\_\_\_\_\_ tax-deductible additional contribution

name \_\_\_\_\_

address \_\_\_\_\_

city \_\_\_\_\_

state \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

WOMEN ARTISTS NEWS March 1979  
P.O. Box 3304, Grand Central Station, NYC 10017

Midmarch Associates

Women Artists News

Box 3304 / Grand Central Station

New York, New York 10017

NONPROFIT ORG.

U.S. Postage

PAID

New York, NY

Permit No. 8166