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From folk culture to modern British

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Folk Art means more than drawing owls or men with thinking ideas of nation politics. The illustrators MODE RN quietly inspiring artists CULTURE and illustrators, but as reshaping their idea of BRITISH Folk Art are not only currently inspired by illustration, they are for quality and wait a few weeks for their order to be made up. They use designs from the 1990’s who produce clothes “that made in England,” says Hannah. “Let’s do it ourselves, take the ball by the horns. It is more expensive, but it’s about spending good money on good things. It’s not a class thing. My dad was a working man and he had a tailor-made suit. It’s about longevity and quality. Really nice things that last.”

The underlying desire to be involved in ‘something useful’ offers a cultural snapshot of perhaps a post-consumerist reaching after values that connect us with making, growing, saving, with a sense of our own utility. The brush consumerist years are over, these products say. People are turning to the handmade, the locally produced, small editions; and in ever-increasing numbers are looking to learn a craft as a way of connecting creatively with their own lives and immediate community. “In times of economic hardship people see the value of immediate,” argues Mark Hearld, “there is something reassuring about craft.”

The artists involved in this turn toward the ‘handmade’ are often engaged in exploring traditional printmaking techniques and creating their own editions of work. Jonny Hannah’s Cakes and Ale Press is a good example. “Anybody can afford something from the Cakes and Ale Press,” says Hannah. £3 for a wee box to £300 for a print. It’s exciting to have products. Sometimes when I am up late stapling all these wee books I ask ‘why?’ But the answer is that people want to buy them. It brings out the salesman in me. It comes back to what George Orwell said about Britain being a nation of shopkeepers. I would love to have my own shop.”

Mark Hearld produces editions of prints, fabric designs for St. Jude’s, who specialise in the aesthetic surrounding artists such as Edward Bawden and Eric Ravilious, coin- ing the term Modern British to describe this. Hearld’s decorative ceramics also have a utility as well as beauty. The robust but exquisite hand-printed books and posters that self-publishing illustrators Stephen Fowler and John Broadley produce are the modern day chapbooks and broadsides, sold at fairs and sometimes literally from the pockets of the purveyor.

FAKE FOLK
Although true ‘folk’ is naturally subversive, the cracker, vernacular alternative to the
establishment, the use of folk art in mainstream design has also been associated with a backward-looking, nostalgic take on Englishness. In 1951, The Festival of Britain attempted to characterise British identity through a series of themed exhibitions, in particular The Lion and the Unicorn pavilion. These heraldic animals were shown as being representative of the fearless eccentricity of the nation. There is a whisicality to some of the exhibits, the register dipping into what could be called ‘quaint’.

Seeing ‘folk’ traditions as a way of tracing the roots of Englishness is a form, as in the Festival of 1851 was the commemorative

The 1951 Festival of Britain used typefaces that knowingly referenced 18th & 19th Century ‘fat’ fonts to signal a revival of vernacular tradition

The mass observation Recording Brit-

Many of the artists associated with the Modern British style of galleries such as St. Jules’s, and Hornsey in Ripon are working within a recognisable ‘English’ tradition. They came back with images of the village

THE PARADOX OF ‘FOLK’

Many of the artists associated with the Modern British style of galleries such as St. Jules’s, and Hornsey in Ripon are working within a recognisable ‘English’ tradition. They came back with images of the village

JUST AS A REFINED EXAMPLE OF VERNACULAR TRADITION

St. Jules’s, and Hornsey in Ripon are working within a recognisable ‘English’ tradition.

To visit the countryside other than to live and work there. Rather like a coal miner being re-employed as a living exhibit in a historical theme park, this dislocated patrit-

The Mass Observation Recording Brit-

Many of the artists associated with the Modern British style of galleries such as St. Jules’s, and Hornsey in Ripon are working within a recognisable ‘English’ tradition. They came back with images of the village

Her classic book on the vernacular tradition in the 1951 festival now resides at the Compton Ver-

Folk culture

Folk culture
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The idea of John Betjeman & John Piper driving around Wales creatively documenting lonely chapels was something that provided him with an imaginative trigger. Artists such as Chris Brown, who was Edward Bawden’s studio assistant for a time, are referencing an English tradition in printmaking and illustration.

Folk as Messaging

This response to the work of past artists, particularly those documenting a sense of Englishness, is heartfelt rather than cynical, a sensitive re-thinking of the same themes. A love of the same ‘folk’ objects, an interest in the landscape of Britain, its wildlife, animals, its seasons, a preference for the theatrical in the everyday, and a sense of the past as something inspiring new work rather than something to emulate. “What I love folk art for,” says Jonny Hannah, “is that there is always a story around it. The ship existed, it’s telling a story, old printed books do this too. I always tell the students – if you are not getting the message across you are not doing your job.”

Historical events are commemorated symbolically through rituals and traditional imagery, passing ‘folk’ memory down through the generations. There is a sense that the artwork produced is of secondary importance to the event or tradition that it celebrates. Claiming authorship is unimportant. It is a shared experience, a collaboration, a community experience. Folk art is also associated with the decoration of everyday things, such as clothing and furniture, food and crockery, embellishing the fabric of everyday life. The rhythm in pattern echoes the rhythm of vernacular music, or owes much to the physicality of the task, sewing fabric into complex patterns for example, in smocking, or creating screenprinting or silk-screening designs in wood, using the whole arm to carve, a visceral activity. The words ‘folk art’ and ‘craft’ are often found together, as both consider the activity of making, an understanding of the materials and processes of production as of paramount importance. This often means the pieces in question are made by hand. They combine utility with aesthetic concerns. The home, domesticity, and the immediate community are the focus of attention. Cultural identity is not something academic, learned from galleries and museums, but is read out from the forms and patterns of everyday things, a vernacular visual tradition.

Folk Isn’t a Style

The material evidence of folk art is often overlooked by critics of art and design, as being too mundane or thought to be of too poor quality to have value. But through looking at folk or popular art, different histories can be heard. As Paul Renfroe, whose

ILLUSTRATION, INSPIRATION & POPULAR XX

I recently visited Ilfracombe museum, a tiny re-conceptual place on the north coast of Devon. Records of hairdressing products from the 1930s, food packaging from the war years and Victorian paper dolls nested in with Ostrich legs and model ships. Unlike Grayson Perry’s recent exhibition ‘The Charmes of Lincolnshire’, which recreates this kind of chaotic cornucopia of objects, the display did not have an intellectual agenda, it presented the objects as one would a harvest, delighting in its miasma, an incoherent delight in diversity, viewed with innocent eyes. It is this ‘magpie’ approach to material culture that I feel the illustrator most identifies with. The illustrator responds to these objects like Saki’s child in the lumber room – as a springboard for imaginative conjecture and wonder. Mark Hearld’s recent exhibition ‘The Magpie’s Eye’ made this point manifestly through a curated miscellany of inspirational objects. He counts amongst the things that inspire him, “tin cuts, chapbooks, popular woodcuts, Dora Carrington (a painter obsessed by British eccentrics of inspirational objects. He counts amongst the things that inspire him, “tin cuts, chapbooks, popular woodcuts, Dora Carrington (a painter obsessed by British eccentrics of inspirational objects. He counts amongst the things that inspire him, “tin cuts, chapbooks, popular woodcuts, Dora Carrington (a painter obsessed by British eccentrics of inspirational objects. He counts amongst the things that inspire him, “tin cuts, chapbooks, popular woodcuts, Dora Carrington (a painter obsessed by British eccentrics of inspirational objects. He counts amongst the things that inspire him, “tin cuts, chapbooks, popular woodcuts, Dora Carrington (a painter obsessed by British eccentrics of inspirational objects. 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The previous generation of folk-inspired artists fell out of favour. The simple, honest, homely quality they admired and emulated in traditional folk art became unfashionable in an age of booming consumerism, new scientific discovery, ‘post-modern’ intellectual sophistication and financial optimism. Now that those days of prosperity may well be behind us, perhaps we recognise in the values expressed in folk art, and the ‘craft’ orientated methods of its production a utility and practicality that we want to aspire to. The artists’ continuing to reference folk art in their commercial work, and the self taught folk artists making such things as high street café signs, and handmade objects provide us with a lexicon of ordinary, everyday images with which we can define ourselves, a recognisable, Englishness that has nothing to do with extreme right wing political views. As George Orwell put it in his 1941 essay ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’...

...there is something distinctive and recognizable in English civilization... It is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own. Moreover it is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature. What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840? But then, what have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps on the mantelpiece? Nothing, except that you happen to be the same person.

The contemporary illustrators whose commitment to the aesthetic values of British folk art, are reaching into this identity and finding a benign, eccentric, witty and heartfelt mode of creating images within the folk art tradition.