

CHINESE FOLK ART

Tseng Yu-ho Ecke

Creative art has many manifestations. Just as religion and philosophy in a society are practiced both collectively and individually, so, too, is art. On the one hand, there is that mode of art that is the expression of the artist's individual identity. Such works of art are often patronized by royalty and the aristocracy, sponsored by wealthy religious sects, or simply initiated by outstanding individuals. The luxurious art created for noble patronage in China, including the bronze art of Shang and Chou, illustrated their attempts at making their sponsored works ornate and their art materials overly refined. The art works of the intellectuals — painting and calligraphy — were likewise motivated essentially by the quest for prestige and a desire for individual identity. Interwoven with the self-consciousness of the wealthy literati and with philosophical statements too profound for the laymen's understanding, these works of art were very complex. Too, the educated class controlled the publication and distribution of the printed word, and, in turn, dominated the written history of Chinese Art.

In contrast to these, however, Chinese Folk Art is the product of the collective experience of the people. It has been produced in great quantity, in all media, and with a wide range of skill. From the beginning of Chinese civilization to the present, Chinese folk art traditions have been passed down orally — and from generation to generation. This is not to say, however, that these traditions are conventional and limiting; out of these have come an astonishing amount of inventive enterprises. In fact, folk art embodies the best portion of the "collective wisdom" — silently holding a certain part of art history which is not to be underestimated.

To understand this, folk art must be distinguished from "primitive" art — which is the art produced by a totally non-literate society. Folk art, in contrast, may flourish in the midst of an urban civilization, and it may even interact in a mutual exchange of forms and ideas with the literary circles of that society. But folk artists themselves, however, are never inquisitive as to the nature of their art's content, and they do not concern themselves with analytical investigation.



"Headrest" 18th century China, bamboo, Honolulu Academy of Arts Collection. *Photo courtesy of the author.*



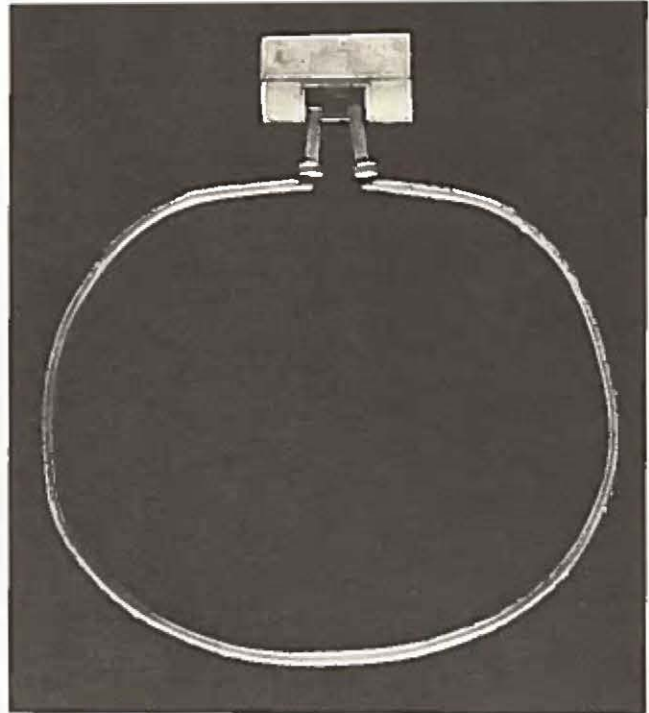
"Leather Box" 16th century China, lacquered leather, Lowell S. Dillingham Collection (Honolulu). *Photo courtesy of the author.*



"Arm Ring" 19th century China, silver, Private Collection.
Photo courtesy of the author.

A further distinction should be made between folk art and popular art — here defined as commercially produced souvenir objects created for tourists. Like the objects of popular art, a fine piece of folk art may be duplicated in large quantity, yet each piece of folk art will be refreshingly naive and pure. "Chiang hsin," meaning a "calculated heart," is a critical term applied to any deliberate work of art lacking naturalness, a fine example of folk art is absent of that "calculation." Most importantly, folk art not affected by the commercialism of mass production, will retain its singular identity, each piece will have a soul of its own. This is because a fine folk artist has a deep understanding of the nature of his material which is shown by the frankness with which he approaches his work. He has magnanimity, consequently, the art work is generous and dignified. The souvenir type of popular art which is calculated and produced with commercial intent, with designs which cater the audience — even with its sameness — became petty and inferior.

The essence of folk art display its craftsmanship with a childlike honesty. Because it has an instinctive respect to the material, it allows the qualities of the material to speak for themselves. Without intellectual elaboration, the intrinsic qualities of the material are evident, and the maximum result is achieved within a limited means. Folk art can be modest yet dynamic, rustically original and awkwardly elegant. There is a wholesome, unassuming spirit which preserves the greater vitality and deeper sense of humanity seen in folk art; a vitality and humanity which is often lacking in the more calculated art. This tangible quality, in fact, became embodied in the aesthetics of Ch'an (Zan) art in its more sophisticated later stage. In fact, folk motifs were the chief themes used in Ch'an art, where clumsiness — in all its inherent wisdom and profundity — was pursued.



"Necklace" 19th century China, silver, Private Collection.
Photo courtesy of the author.

The appreciation of Eastern folk art in our age has been directed largely toward Japan and Korea. Since, for centuries, East Asians have shared common cultural ties and social organizations, it should come as no surprise that the folk art of China should resemble that of its neighbors to the south, east, and north.

Tseng Yu-ho Ecke was born in Peking, China, and received her B.F.A. from the Catholic University in that city. Receiving her Ph.D. from the Fine Arts Institute, New York University, in 1972, Dr. Ecke's thesis, Far Eastern Art History, won that year's NYU Foundation Day Honor Award for Outstanding Scholarship. A painter, art historian and teacher, she divides her time among these three areas. Her own creative works have been exhibited in Asia, Europe and the United States, and listed in Chinese and Japanese Art (Great Art and Artists of the World Series, by M. Sullivan, 1965) and Artists in Hawaii (Francis Haar and Prithwish Neogy, 1974 [book], 1976 [movie]). Her most recent works, large wall-paintings at the Honolulu International Airport and the Campus Center, University of Hawaii-Hilo, were commissioned by the Hawaii State Foundation on Culture and the Arts.

Dr. Ecke is also eminently recognized for her organizing of art-historical exhibitions. Notable among these are: Chinese Calligraphy (Philadelphia Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Nelson Gallery of Art in Kansas City, 1971-72). Selection in Hawaii, No. 1 (Inaugural Exhibition, Art Gallery, Department of Art, University of Hawaii-Manoa, 1976), and Han and Tang Murals, from the People's Republic of China, 1977.

Chinese Folk Art is an exhibition commissioned by the China Institute in New York in 1976 and currently circulating throughout the United States. It will be shown at the Spalding House Gallery in Honolulu, the San Francisco Asian Art Museum, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. In reviewing the exhibition, the Oriental Art Magazine (London), said: "It is probably the first exhibition to focus upon the subject in any depth . . ."