When we think of art, most of us perhaps think of the great works of painting and sculpture created by master artists. This is called fine art. It is created by talented individuals who often spend years in art schools learning formal artistic techniques. But fine art is actually only a very small percentage of the art that is made around the world. Every country and community has its folk art. Folk art includes paintings, carvings, furniture, textiles, and other objects produced by people using traditional techniques passed down to them through the generations. Most folk artists learn by watching their elders or by becoming apprentices in a craft. Others are self-taught. Some folk art is simple, undecorated craftwork created for everyday use. Some is highly decorated, specially painted or carved art made for an important purpose.

Throughout history, each culture has produced its own varieties of folk art. This article focuses on American folk art. In particular, it discusses the folk art of the English-speaking people who settled in the eastern part of the United States in the 1600's, 1700's, and 1800's. These original European immigrants were the first to produce a large, identifiable type of folk art. It is now known as "Anglo-American." Later, they were joined by other European peoples, as well as Africans and Asians. All these people brought their own styles of folk art with them to their new country.

**Painting**

Most folk painters of the 1700's and 1800's were professionals trained in the traditions of their craft. Multitalented artists, they did many different kinds of painting to earn a living. These included portraits and landscapes as well as tavern signs, houses, furniture, room interiors, and sailing ships.

Before photography became popular in the late 1800's, people were eager to have painters make portraits of family members. Thus many painters traveled from town to town, offering their services to people in each place they stopped.

Many folk portrait painters showed high levels of skill and talent. Others worked quickly with poor results. The portraits generally followed a standard format. They showed people in stiff poses. For example, the people were seated or standing, often holding a book or some other object. Children were shown in these formal poses, too. They sometimes held their favorite toys or pets.

In most folk art portraits, the greatest attention was given to the face, to capture a likeness of the subject. The rest of the figure and the background often had a flat, simplified look. The portraits were very popular, especially in small towns and rural areas. Today they provide a fascinating record of the clothes and furnishings of the past.

The large portraits painted by traveling artists were hung in the parlors of many homes, where visitors would see them. As a hobby, many people also made small watercolor portraits of friends and family members. Silhouettes cut from paper were another popular way of capturing a likeness.

Folk art painters also produced landscapes, seascapes, and other scenes. Seascapes generally showed famous ships or naval battles. Most landscapes were peaceful, idealized views of homes, farms, and towns.

Historic events and scenes from the Bible were also favorite subjects for folk painters, both amateur and professional. So were still-life scenes of flowers, fruit, and everyday objects that were painted by girls as part of their schoolwork. In the 1800's another kind of painting became popular: the memorial. These works were made to mark the death of a family member. In somber tones, they generally showed family members gathered around the tombstone of the departed one. Sometimes they showed people draped across the stone, sobbing with grief.

Births, marriages, and other important life events were often recorded on documents decorated by folk artists. In Pennsylvania and some midwestern communities settled by German immigrants, these documents were called fraktur. A fraktur combined decorative lettering with elaborate and colorful watercolor designs. These included hearts, flowers, animals, and human figures. Fraktur birth and marriage certificates hung on the walls of many homes. Fraktur techniques were also used to illustrate Bible stories and other favorite legends and tales.

In many fraktur pieces, the writing is as pretty as the design. In fact, before the days of typewriters and computers, penmanship was an art form. This art form is known as calligraphy. Schoolchildren were drilled in penmanship techniques by professional penmanship masters. People who had mastered those techniques often showed off their skills by creating gifts or presentation pieces for friends and relatives. In these works, the words take second place to the elaborate pictures and designs formed entirely by the calligrapher's free-flowing pen strokes.

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