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From folk culture to modern British

Desdemona McCannon
Glyndwr University, d.mccannon@glyndwr.ac.uk

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FROM FOLK CULTURE TO MODERN BRITISH

A Folk Art revival is quietly inspiring artists and illustrators, but as **DES MCCANNON** discovers, Folk Art means more than drawing owls or men with beards. It has nothing to do with extreme right wing politics. The illustrators currently inspired by Folk Art are not only reshaping their idea of illustration, they are rethinking ideas of nation

STEVEN HELLER, THE AMERICAN DESIGN critic, has said of illustration that it is the "people's art". This could go some way to explaining why so many 'trained' illustrators are drawn towards folk art as a source of inspiration. As Jonny Hannah, a successful proponent of a bold folk-inspired illustrative style, says, 'folk art offers us something we can't find in the establishment'. Hannah's illustrations for book covers and for The Daily Telegraph demonstrate the excitement, vigour, decorative quality, and a bluntness of message found in folk art.

Chris Brown, whose bold lino prints have been used as packaging for Carluccios, bookjackets and limited edition letterpress cards, wonders if, "perhaps we tired of the 'slick' and somewhat artificial work that has been in fashion recently, it appears similar and to some degree lacks a personality. The images and work produced by folk artists appeals to illustrators, as it is the antithesis of computer generated imagery." Mark Hearld, another artist who references past styles in the prints, collages and ceramics which he sells via the St. Jude's gallery in Norfolk, and Godfrey and Watt's in York, characterises folk art as having 'a blatant, bold directness, in an image of an animal there would be the essence of the thing'. There is an intuitive design sense found in folk art which is untutored, unself-conscious. "Folk art," says Hearld, "is made by an assured hand," for example the painting on a Harvest Jug. "Life resonates from these artefacts."

FOLK AND THE ILLUSTRAT E OF SELF

Folk art is "made by and for the people amongst whom the artist lives and works" wrote Noel Carrington in his 1945 English Popular Art. This role appeals to illustrators who see themselves as working within a trade. Jonny Hannah says, "When people ask me what I do I say 'by trade I am an illustrator'. I think it's important to make the distinction. I have had an apprenticeship, it's a trade, I do a job."

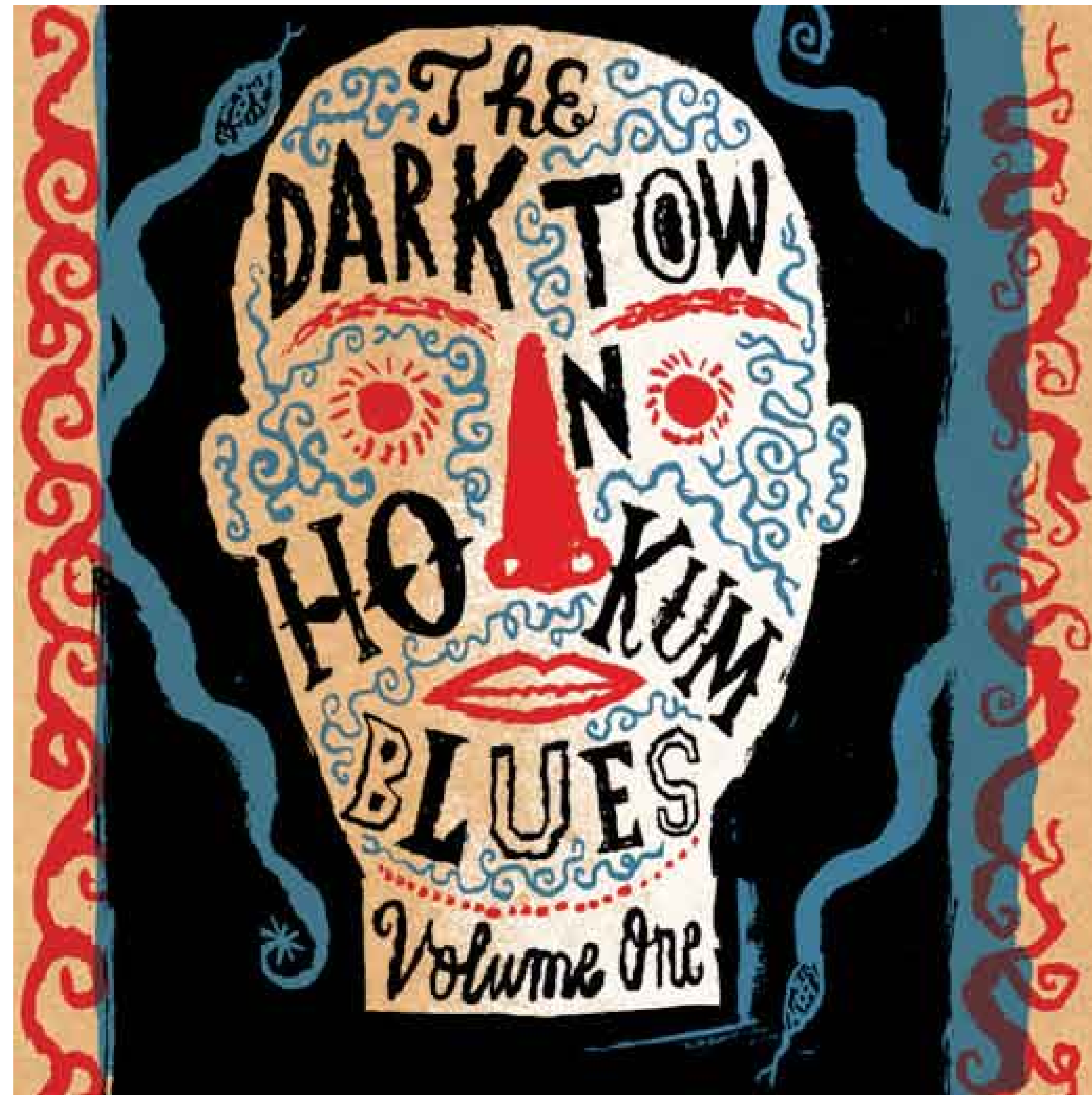
This 'working man' ethos is shared by companies such as the small workshop-based clothing manufacturer Old Town, set up in the 1990's who produce clothes "that make you look like you are doing something useful" for people prepared to pay for quality and wait a few weeks for their order to be made up. They use designs from traditional workwear of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as staples of their collection. The gallery and textile producer St. Jude's also references mid-century motifs on their products, such as Nissan huts and railway flags. There is a shared sense of nostalgic utility, but a playfulness too, a sense that the past is something theatrical that can be worn on your sleeve. "In some ways it is romanticising the working man image," says Jonny Hannah, "looking at the past from a safe place." However, the fact that these companies share a desire to keep the production within the UK is also significant. "In the last few years there has been a great shift towards the idea of things being made in England," says Hannah. "Let's do it ourselves, take the bull 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 brash 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 immediacy," 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, coining 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 cruder, vernacular alternative to the



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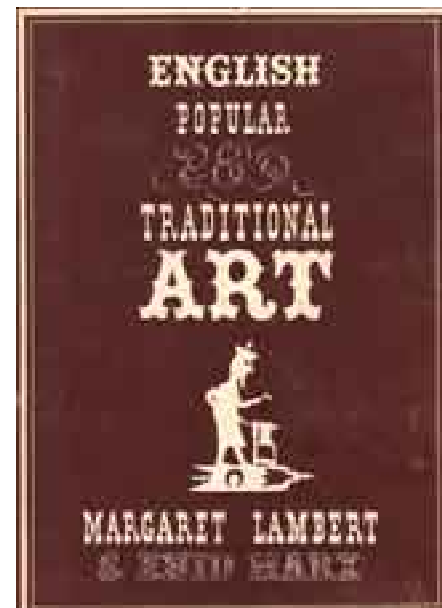
establishment, the use of folk art in mainstream design has also been associated with a backward-looking, nostalgic take on 'Englishness'. In 1951, The Festival of Britain attempted to characterise British identity through a series of themed exhibitions, in particular The Lion and the Unicorn pavilion. These heraldic animals were shown as being representative of the fearless eccentricity of the nation. There is a whimsicality 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 fiction, as Richard Lewis in his 1997 book The Magic Spring recounts in his year spent, "learning to be English". Many of the festivals he attended were created in the early twentieth century by folk revivalists such as Cedric Morris, and members of the newly formed National Trust. They were seen as a way of promoting a nascent heritage tourism for the newly industrialised masses, a reason 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 patrician re-enactment of the past has often given the whole idea of 'folk' a whiff of fakery, of nostalgic commercialism. The Victorian anthropologists were the first to try and record the vernacular traditions of song and dance in Britain, and their attempts to codify these activities formally created a self-consciousness, a schism in the cultural performance of authentic 'folk' culture.

The 1951 Festival of Britain used for its promotional material and signage, typefaces that knowingly referenced 18th and 19th Century 'fat' fonts as a way of signalling a revival of vernacular tradition, and as a visual antidote to both the modernist aesthetic and the militaristic use of sans serif fonts during the war. As The Great Exhibition of 1851 was the commemorative premise of the 1951 Festival, the use of traditional typefaces made this link with the past eloquently. The artists involved in the decoration of the Festival site were enthusiastically aware of this Victorian heritage, and the 'intelligent gaiety' that they appropriated from Victorian design has become a defining characteristic of graphic artists from this period. Edward Bawden, Kenneth Rowntree, Barbara Jones, Enid Marx all shared a fascination for the vitality of the English vernacular expressed through popular art. As Tate Museum curator Martin Myrone says in his article, 'Instituting English Folk Art', "Folk art and Victoriana were pitched as sources of vital energy, to be set against the enervation of the 'machine age'."

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



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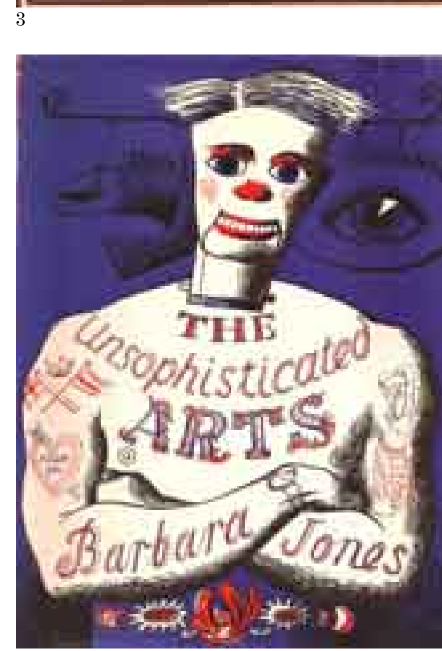

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THE PARADOX OF 'FOLK'

Many of the artists associated with the Modern British style of galleries such as St. Jude's, and Hornsey's in Ripon are working within a recognisable 'English' tradition. "I suppose the people, places, objects that have either influenced me or appeal to me are quintessentially English," reflects Chris Brown. "I find more pleasure in looking at simple monuments in a graveyard with their wonderful use of lettering and carved imagery than a monument by Roubilliac. Bawden, Marx, Ravilious, all looked at folk arts and crafts and when they started collecting it was against the accepted taste of the day. They looked at Staffordshire figurines and delighted in their quaintness and quirkiness."

The mass observation Recording Britain scheme enlisted artists during the Second World War. Artists such as Ravilious, Jones, Bawden and Rowntree were sent around the country to encapsulate in images what was worth defending about Britain. There was a real sense of crisis, that the fabric of the country could be destroyed. They came back with images of the village inn, the high street, damp chapels and village greens. The myth of a pastoral, idyllic 'England' was born from these artists' views, their documenting of selective aspects of rural life. The paradoxical relationship we have with the idea of 'England' is partly because it has always been purveyed from the point of view of the urbanite.

A similar paradox – of trained artists looking to a tradition in art which is defined as variously 'outsider', 'naive' or 'folk' is not lost on Mark Hearld, one of the leading artists associated with the Modern British style. He says, "I'm not quite an illustrator… but I wouldn't describe myself as a folk artist as I am trained. Perhaps I would call myself an 'artist designer'. My work is not ironic, there are no clever double meanings. It is a sincere response to things I care about. In this sense I have a connection with a folk sensibility."

FOLK AS POPULAR MEMORY

Barbara Jones's 1951 exhibition Black Eyes and Lemonade, held at the Whitechapel gallery at the same time as the Festival of Britain, was intended to display folk art as way of preserving popular memory. She said in 1976 of the exhibition:

> We brought the whole popular art scene right up to date and so far as I know this was the first time it had ever been done: things currently on sale in the shops and posters on the hoardings, plaster and plastic ornaments and a fine 1951 fireplace in the shape of an Airedale dog were all displayed as works of art. People began to realise that indeed they were. Visitors were eased into the idea by a row of ships' figure heads and cases of other acceptable art-objects, and were brought gradually to accept comic postcards and beer labels. All through the exhibition the new and commonplace were seen near the old and safe.

Her classic book on the vernacular tradition in the arts, The Unsophisticated Arts, was published at the same time, and described art forms that were normally overlooked or at least looked down upon. Fairground art, canal barges, decorative ceramics, toys, funeral wreaths, pub signs, taxidermy and tattooing were all categories of art that she called into notice. Like a Victorian museum of cultural curiosities, there is no coherence to Jones's collection, rather a magpie-like fascination with traditional art forms made by artists that have not been through a formal training.

In 1948, Enid Marx, whose collection of folk art now resides at the Compton Verney gallery in Warwickshire, bemoaned the fact that "England is one of the few countries where folk art has not found a recognised place in any of our great national collections." In 2008 Simon Costin the internationally respected Art Director and set designer found the situation largely unchanged, and is now endeavouring to set up a Museum of British Folklore to address this situation, saying, "It is a surprising fact that there exists no properly funded centre in Britain to research and celebrate our native traditions and vernacular arts." Costin has spent the summer of 2009 taking a potted version of his museum housed in a vintage caravan painted in fairground finery around various festivals, both folk and literary, to bring the message of the vitality and importance of these enduring festivities to an increasingly receptive audience. Helped by his friends in the world of fashion (sporting an eccentric tall hat made by the milliner Stephen Jones) he embraces the theatricality of 'folk' customs, their nod to pagan and occult activities, their plain silliness. "Simon Costin is a bit different," says Jonny Hannah, who designed the logo and a promotional poster for the museum. "He is setting up his own museum. I like the attitude that if the authorities won't give you the money, do it yourself. Don't wait till someone knocks on the door." Costin's aim is true to the spirit of folk art, taking it to the people and welcoming all-comers.

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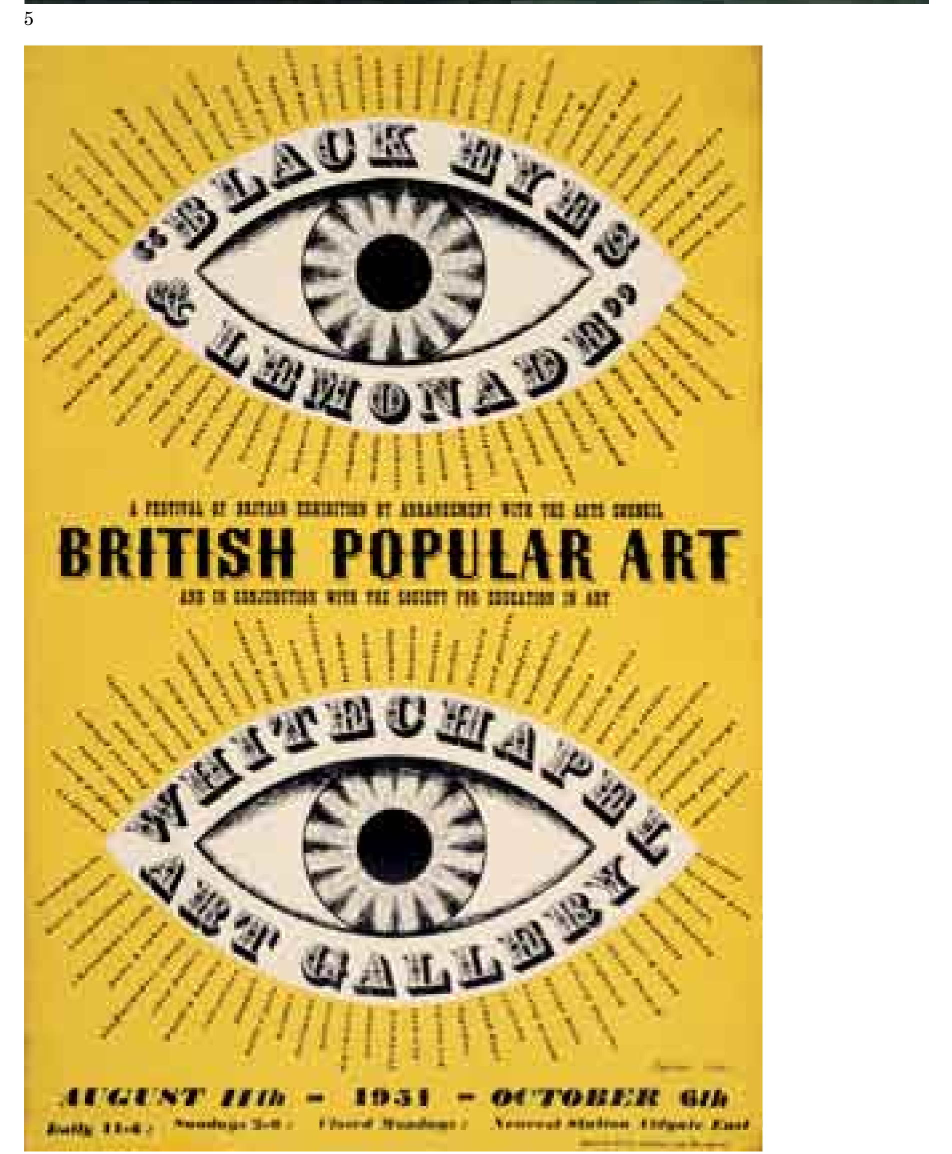

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6. Barbara Jones, *Black Eyes & Lemonade*
Poster for the Whitechapel Art Gallery 1951
IMAGE FROM NEW RETRO BY BRENDA DERMODY & TERESA BREATHNACH PUBLISHED BY THAMES & HUDSON

The idea of John Betjeman & John Piper driving around Wales creatively documenting lonely chapels was something that provided him with an imaginative trigger

ILLUSTRATION, INSPIRATION & POPULAR XXX

I recently visited Ilfracombe museum, a tiny eccentric place on the north coast of Devon. Records of hairdressing products from the 1950s, food packaging from the war years and Victorian paper theatres nestled in with Ostrich legs and model ships. Unlike Grayson Perry's recent exhibition The Charms of Lincolnshire, which re-creates 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 munificence, 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, "lino cuts, chapbooks, popular woodcuts, Dora Carrington (a painter obsessed by British Inn signs), Victorian glass painting, room schemes, domesticity, Cedric Morris, Kathleen Hale". His map of associations, produced to accompany the exhibition shows how enmeshed the popular arts are within the illustrative tradition.

Stephen Fowler talks about responding to the 1930s Shell Guides to Britain in his own work. The idea of John Betjeman and 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.

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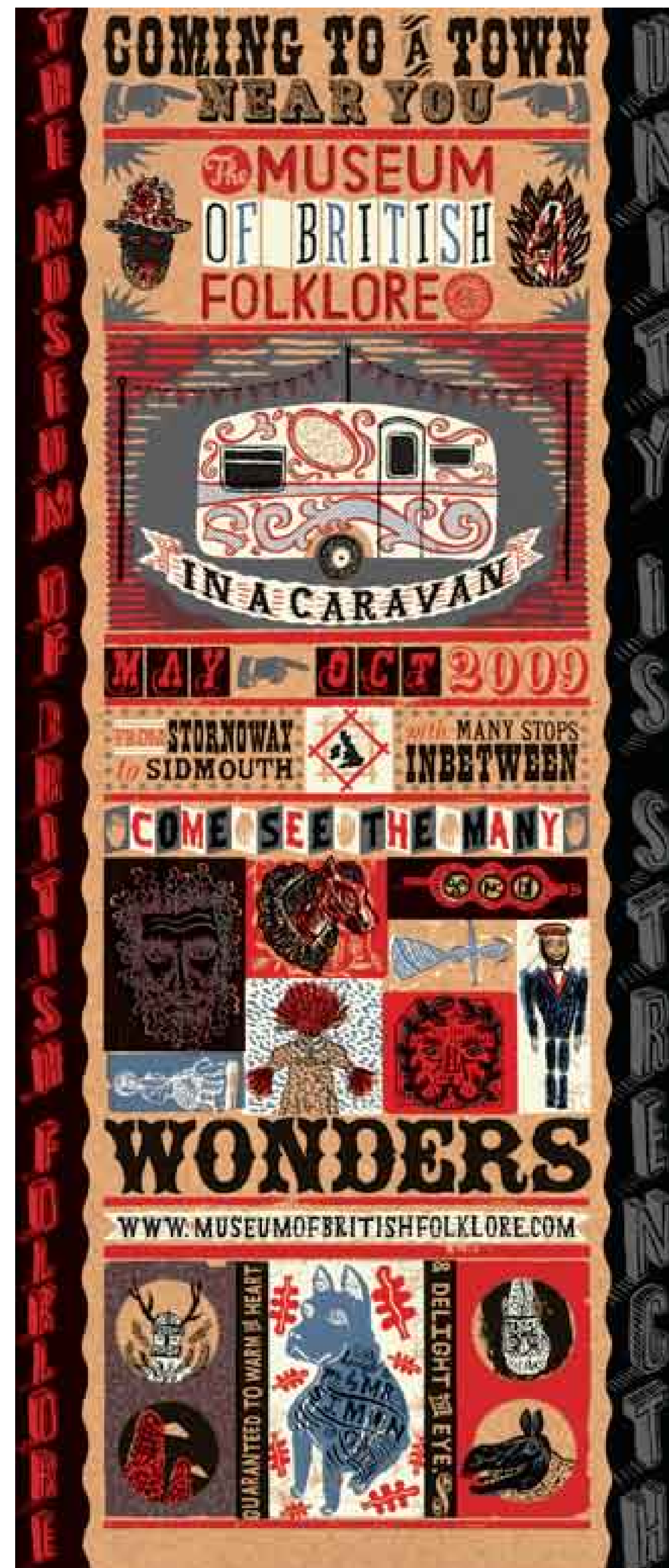
FOLK AS MESSAGING

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 wild 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. Illustration does 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, and owes much to the physicality of the task, sewing fabric into complex patterns for example, in smocking, or creating swooping interlocking 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 Rennie, whose eponymous Folkestone gallery specialises in vintage posters and decorative objects from the 1940's and 1950's, says in his book about souvenirs from The Festival of Britain, printed ephemera provides "evidence of something that has disappeared and that we can no longer imagine." Popular or 'people's' art does not expect longevity. Perhaps this is part of its vitality and charm.



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Popular art is and always has been validated by its function within people's everyday lives. The similarities with illustration practice are striking. Illustration is not always at its best displayed on gallery walls. As renowned illustrator Peter Bailey (a long time collector of work by Ravilious and Bawden whose recent work illustrating Phillip Pullman's His Dark Materials for The Folio Society shows an affection for Ardizzone and the colours of old printed books) says, "How can a tiny woodcut compete with a large-scale oil painting?" Illustration is at home in a domestic setting, covering paper, ceramics and curtains, creating an atmosphere through colour and pattern. It has no high cultural agenda, it creates a shifting patina that enhances the collective memory of times and places. In the case of both folk art and illustrated ephemera, what Barbara Jones describes in the introduction to Black Eyes and Lemonade as "the museum eye' must be abandoned before they can be enjoyed.

Whereas artists such as Jeremy Deller, Grayson Perry and Tracey Emin may present 'folk art' to us in a museum or gallery setting, and conceptualise it in order to present it as having value, the 'artist/designers' and illustrators who reinterpret folk art within their own practice offer us a truer sense of its spirit. Mark Hearld says of the difference between his and Deller's response to folk art that Deller "has more of a Fine Art agenda, it is the kitsch ironic appeal that he highlights. He has an anthropological approach to popular art, he is a collector rather than a participator in tradition."

Artists referencing a naive or folk idiom are doing so as a conscious aesthetic choice. It is however difficult to present yourself as an 'outsider' artist if you have been to art school. Chris Brown says, "There is an obvious danger in becoming too influenced," warns Chris Brown, "after all, most illustrators are not Folk, Outsider or Primitive artists. We can be seduced by the charm of the work and be too concerned with style." As Stephen Fowler puts it, "if you draw someone with a beard or draw an owl it doesn't make you a folk artist." Mark Hearld agrees, "if you call yourself a folk artist, you most likely are not one."

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Most illustrators are not Folk, Outsider or Primitive artists. We can be seduced by the charm of the work & be too concerned with style

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 scientitic 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 recogniseable, 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. (!)

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