

***Russian Folk Art.* By Alison Hilton. (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1995. Pp. xxi + 356.)**

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Volume 18, numéro 1, 1996

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087551ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087551ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Klymasz, R. B. (1996). Compte rendu de [*Russian Folk Art.* By Alison Hilton. (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1995. Pp. xxi + 356.)]. *Ethnologies*, 18(1), 137–138. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087551ar>

which moves Pratt outside the antimodernist position.

Some essays display the results of “prospecting” in the various archives. They are “finding” exercises which will be of use to cultural researchers in areas such as art, music and theatre.

The final impression of the book is that the decision to use six subject headings legislates against the identification of common themes across disciplines. The papers tend to be like Leacock’s man who jumped on his horse and rode off in all directions. A much more thoughtful “Afterword” might have integrated the text. Certainly, with McKay pointing the way, this could have been done. In addition, notes on contributors would be useful. While Atlantic Canadians all know each other, those of us who are expatriates do appreciate having disciplines and institutions indicated. We might want to write home.

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Russian Folk Art. By Alison Hilton. (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1995. Pp. xxi + 356.)

“Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Russian Folk Art” could have provided an alternative title for this intelligent, well-written, beautifully edited and handsomely produced foray. With its wealth of detail and interpretive perspectives this is the ideal book for anyone whose Russian language skills are too weak to permit a critical reading of relevant literature ; and in this regard, it is certain that Hilton’s *Russian Folk Art*, like the English-language survey of *Russian Folklore* by Iurii M. Sokolov (1950), will take its place as a prized handbook for readers in search of information written in English. As outlined in the blurb on the inside, front-flap of the paper jacket, Hilton’s book “describes the traditions, style, and functions of a broad range of objects made by Russian peasant artists [...] Beginning with the settings in which folk artists traditionally worked [...] she discusses the principal media they employed [...] and the items they produced [...]” The survey “emphasizes the cumulative originality inherent in Russian folk art, the balance between time-honored forms and techniques, and the creativity of individual artists. It shows how pervasive images and designs evolved from ancient Slavic sources, absorbed elements of church, court, and urban arts, reflected historical events and daily life, and helped to form a Russian esthetic identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Finally, it examines the complex interaction between folk art and high culture: the role of serf artists, the preservation and reinterpretation of folk art by scholars and professional artists, and the new roles of folk art in the Soviet era.”

In spite of this informed vista, seasoned folklorists here and abroad will want to yawn when confronted with statements like : “The fundamental question of the integrity or validity of folk art is addressed throughout the book. Can traditional visual forms remain effective once the traditional structures of folk society have disappeared ?” (p. xvi). Nor will the book titillate area specialists versed in Russian folklore, folkways and folkloristics : they will find the approach and coverage by this American art historian overly and arbitrarily exclusive and occasionally distortive. They will decry, for example, the lack of any reference whatsoever to the synchronic structuralism of the Russian scholar Petr G. Bogatyrev (1893-1971), whose methodological and theoretical insights (1971) constituted true breakthroughs in the field of folk-art studies in Russia and beyond (Ogibenin, 1971).

With its overtones of Russophilism, *Russian Folk Art* wavers between fact and fancy, between now and then, between here and there, and — by surreptitious extension — between “us” and “them.” As Hilton knows, the leap from folklore to politics is an integral part of the Russian experience. And for Canadian folklorists, it is interesting to trace a similar link between folklore and politics operating nearby, south of the border. This potentially sensitive connection is duly acknowledged in *Russian Folk Art* on the backside of the title-page (page [iv]). The list credits the support of several agencies of the U.S. Federal Government including, for instance, the Department of State, which obviously found Hilton’s project “of the utmost importance for the national security of the United States, for the furtherance of our national interests in the conduct of foreign relations, and for the prudent management of our domestic affairs” (from the Soviet and East European Training Act of 1983 [Title VIII], administered by the U.S. Department of State). As for the Russians, a reciprocal work on folk art in the U.S., however desirable, is, alas, hardly foreseeable due to the present climate of debilitating constraints... too bad.

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