

"Making a Go of It": The Art of Survival

Stephen Inglis

Volume 4, numéro 1-2, 1982

Des objets et des hommes
People and Things

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081133ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081133ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)
1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Inglis, S. (1982). "Making a Go of It": The Art of Survival. *Ethnologies*, 4(1-2), 67-76. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081133ar>

Résumé de l'article

Il n'est pas rare de constater la prédominance, parmi les artistes traditionnels de renom, de personnes âgées ou retraitées. La tendance d'associer ces formes artisanales à la pratique antérieure de métiers traditionnels est aussi courante; le bûcheron devenu sculpteur, la ménagère s'adonnant à la broderie, et ainsi de suite. Pourtant la relation entre la créativité artistique et le perfectionnement d'un métier artisanal est souvent plus complexe qu'on ne l'imagine et exige de la part du chercheur une sensibilité particulière à l'égard du sujet et de son oeuvre. Le présent exposé relate le cheminement artistique d'un Ontarien, et démontre comment une forme artisanale qui à nos yeux peut sembler bizarre ou excentrique peut, aux yeux de l'artiste, représenter l'essence même de l'existence.

“Making a Go of It”: The Art of Survival*

STEPHEN INGLIS

On an early spring day, I visited George Cockayne at his farm in Central Ontario. It was our first meeting since the previous fall and he showed me around his house relating stories about his recent creations and the long winter. At one point he stopped, and motioning toward his carvings proclaimed, “These are the result of intense boredom.”

Such assertions by folk artists are not uncommon. Many claim that their artistic work was done “just to pass the time” or “just for fun” or even “for no good reason at all” and folk art enthusiasts, faced with these statements, have often chosen to leave it at that. We have consequently become familiar with what could be called the ‘just for fun approach’ in exhibits, publications, and in the general discourse about folk art. There is something seductive about the notion that someone might put hours or even years of work into forms of creative expression simply for the hell of it. Given our world of hours per week and dollars per hour, the products of such expression take on an imposing quality. When we exclaim “what a lot of work,” we often mean “what a lot of work without pay” or “what a lot of work on something of so little utility.” Comments by folk artists which suggest uncomplicated motivations are one means by which folk art discourse draws nostalgic links with a vision of a past characterized by harmony, leisure, and simple pastimes.

Folk art enthusiasts with ambitions to analyse more complex motives behind creativity and desires to build general theories with which to approach folk art might be dismayed by Cockayne’s comment. In the face of a seeming lack of relevant or meaningful information from the artist, the discourse moves quickly onto a ‘higher’ plane, often encompassing national issues or the ‘common soul’ expressed in folk art. In this case the focus may turn away from the artist and toward the objects

*This paper draws on a presentation given at the FSAC Annual Meeting, Ottawa, June 1982. My research with George Cockayne was funded by the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, National Museum of Man, Ottawa and the results published in the Mercury Series under the title *Something out of Nothing: The Work of George Cockayne*.

alone. Although 'silent,' the objects often seem to offer more scope for theory-building than does a dialogue with their creators.

It is my contention in this paper that those studying the work of contemporary folk artists need be content with neither an interpretation which surrenders folk art to pure whimsy, nor one which seeks meaning "beneath the surface of its images and behind the backs of its producers."¹ In this regard we may learn from those who have studied the so-called primitive and folk arts of non-Western societies that those artists are notoriously vague and often seemingly unable to talk informatively about their art.² It is often in more wide-ranging conversation that the lines of meaning relevant to creativity begin to form. What follows is a short case study drawn from recent research outlining one aspect of meaning in the work of George Cockayne. As will become evident, Cockayne has much more to say about his carvings and inventions than his statement about "intense boredom" would indicate, although what he says is rarely directly about his art, at least in terms to which we are accustomed.

Art and Work

George Cockayne came to Canada from England in the 1920s. He was an orphan and worked off his passage as a hired man on the farms during the summer and in the lumber camps during the winter. This prepared him for the year-round work of a lonely farmer on his own piece of land. Back-breaking labour was the key to making a living on a "rock and bush" farm in Ontario's Hastings County. Clearing land involved moving rocks, burying those too big to move, and blasting those too big to bury; "the place was indescribably stony." There was no family and few friends to help or share in the work. It meant long hours and poor food, but a strong body and pride in hard work as a way of life.

Cockayne still lives on the farm he bought forty years ago, and although there are a neighbour's cows to be tended, weeds to be pulled, fences mended and wood cut, the heavy labour is over. At 75, his eyesight is extremely limited and "old age is starting to creep up with aches and pains." Although a whittler all his life, Cockayne has devoted much of his increasing leisure time to carving and painting during the last ten years.

Most contemporary folk artists whose work has come to notice are

¹J. Fabian and I. Szombati-Fabian, "Folk Art from an Anthropological Perspective" in M.G. Quimby and S.T. Swank, eds., *Perspectives on American Folk Art*. Winterthur: Henry Francis Dupont Winterthur Museum, 1980, p. 292.

²C. Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System," *Modern Language Notes*, 91(1976), 1476.

elderly and retired, and we have become accustomed to thinking of many folk arts as extensions of occupational skills; the lumberjack takes up whittling or the housewife, ornamental stitching. The ways in which these endeavours grow from previous work, however, may be more complex than they first appear. To what extent can we follow the artist's interpretation of seemingly whimsical and bizarre creations toward an understanding of the relationship between art and a working life?

Tools

For Cockayne, the skills of working with axe, saw, chisel and knife are familiar to the extent that one finger is permanently bent from years of clutching an axe handle. One set of tools has been sufficient to chop wood, split fence posts, and more often these days, make carvings. Cutting out figures and images has become the primary reason for maintaining the tools, implements which have been the means of sustaining life. Their central importance becomes apparent in that elaborate sharpening and preparation has become an indispensable part of a carving demonstration. That the tools are in use is as important as the use to which they are put. The crucial continuity of use extends to the workshop itself, a place Cockayne describes as his "holy of holies." In contrast to the lonely house, the work shop is a beloved place, essential to life in the past and kept alive now through carving.

Skills

In a similar way, the maintenance of working skills is as important as the ends to which those skills are directed. With logging work in the past and farming work limited, more emphasis is now placed on the skill that grew out of both, that of the handyman. Cockayne's habitual manner of working has always been closely akin to that of the *bricoleur* described by Lévi-Strauss as "adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks," unhindered by "the availability of raw materials and correct tools" and bringing to every project the ideas of surplus of the previous one."³ With little money or assistance, Cockayne had to build much of what he used on the farm — tools, transport, and buildings. Scraps of iron and wood became his "treasures," the means of carrying out the work, his "inventions." Cockayne became a hoarder of materials and remains of all kinds that others threw away. He also hoarded skills: carpentry, metal work, construction, excavation, caring for plants, for animals, and for himself have all been learned "the hard way" and pursued with the barest

³Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966, pp. 16-22.



Figure 1

Working with the axe

Photo: National Museums of Canada 81-7477, by Stephen Inglis



Figure 2

Cockayne holds a "bug," made of waste wood and aluminum from a broken lawn chair. It is intended to stand by a pathway and guide visitors to the door. Over the door is a "dolphin head" designed to scare off intruders. The fist-shaped carving on a forked stick behind Cockayne acts as a doorstep.

Photo: National Museums of Canada 81-7058, by Stephen Inglis

minimum of advice. Finally, ideas have been hoarded. New inventions spring from old ones and new ideas from previous attempts are incorporated with delight and satisfaction.

In many cases there was little choice. As Cockayne maintains, indicating a device he has designed, "it's not pretty, it's serviceable. Everything around this place is practical. They've always got some use beside how they look. When you're poor and have a farm, you have to be practical. I had \$16 left when I bought this place in '38, nothing wasted. I had to make a go of it." Waste becomes dangerous in this situation. Everything must be used. A flaking mirror becomes a window, a jar makes a light bulb cover and the lid of the jar a dish. "That's how I make things. I see something and wonder what I can do with it and I make something to fit the object. There's no waste as far as I know around this place."

With the coming of old age, the profound skills of the handyman have become applied less to farming and more to what have come to be considered Cockayne's artistic creations. Art is, for Cockayne, an exercise in practicality and imagination, making "something out of nothing." As old farm machinery became fences and old car parts tools, so a useless hollow fence post and two old wheels became a 'cannon' and the 'cannon' became a 'totem pole.' The continuing need to make every creation useful provokes the imagination, sometimes well beyond what may seem credible to the observer.

The Land

Much of the raw material of Cockayne's carving is part of his land and is never thought to be totally extracted from the natural situation of its origin. Each work of art generates the memory of a maple tree, a clump of cedar, or the place where a piece of wood was gathered. After forty years alone on the farm, relationships with particular trees, plants, and vistas are extraordinarily rich and personal. Now that this environmental relationship no longer presents a direct daily challenge in labour, the challenge of drawing artistic creativity from it is maintained and elaborated. In many cases it is the natural shape and quality of the wood which suggest a work of art. In some cases the modifications have been minimal: a knot in a piece of wood suggests a cigar, a bend a neck, or a split a pair of legs. Cockayne prides himself on his self-sufficiency and the skill which puts him "in rapport with the land." Each piece of carving reaffirms and elaborates that tie.

Companionship

Cockayne's art has become a means of continuing relationships with people beyond his farm and dirt road. Most of his original neighbours

have passed away and contact with the other labourers who were his friends has been lost. Working situations were the context in which he met and communicated with others, first on the farms and in the camps, and then in occasional co-operative ventures which are part of the single farmer's work. The chance to meet and talk with people now to a large extent depends upon their interest in his carving. This is reflected in the number of his carvings of the last five years which portray these occasional visitors.

Vitality

Perhaps the most important facet of art for Cockayne is its testimony to vitality and ongoing endeavour. That he describes so many of his pieces as "unfinished" and that many are offered with the suggestion that the new owner could add things or finish them later, indicates that the process is more important than the finished product. Work in process means life to be lived. What is finished is in one sense a threat for one in the latter stages of life. Fortunately for the handyman, nothing is really ever finished as any piece may ultimately be used in another way.

This is not, of course, the whole story. Many other aspects of creativity could be discussed, such as the sources of imagination or the influence of the market. The central theme here is the way that art preserves a personal equilibrium, a feeling of self-worth for a life which has determined its meaning and sense of accomplishment by heavy work. What has been done of necessity and to "make a go of it" continues to be done. The form of work has changed, but the underlying relationships to tools, skills, the land, and other people have retained their meaning.

Cockayne's prediction that he could not last more than a few months "in a town or in one of those old folk's homes" where he would be unable to continue his art now becomes especially meaningful and tinged with a feeling of despair. Far from only something to pass the time, or something born of "intense boredom," carving has become a part of survival. The creativity and imagination it took to "make a go of it" on a backwoods farm is ultimately not far removed from the creativity and imagination in thought, form, and colour that we now recognize as the art of George Cockayne.

Discovering that folk art plays such a central role in someone's life can be a somewhat sobering experience given the common 'hit and run' approach to the collection and study of folk art. A more sensitive approach to the social relations of fieldwork in folk art studies is overdue. The folk art market in which scholars as well as dealers and collectors are involved, whether consciously or not, has been characterized by unstable expectations and relationships. Folk artists have, for example, suffered under the paradox that the more popular they become, the less



Figure 3

Cockayne contemplates his carving of the face of a dealer. The arms of his chair are made from the wings of a failed totem pole.

Photo: National Museums of Canada 81-7067, by Stephen Inglis

likely it is that their work will be considered authentic and thus worthy of interest.

Folk art study has developed a discourse in which frequent reference is made to the value of genuine skills, natural creativity, social cohesion, and national heritage. This discourse grows out of a tradition which takes as its data objects, not people. The methods of research and analysis have to some extent undervalued or ignored completely the motives of individual artists, the creative process, and the original meaning of the objects. We are learning why works of folk art are important to us and we have become skilled in placing them in wide aesthetic, historical, and social contexts. It is also our task to try to understand their importance to the people who create them and to bring together these various perceptions of meaning.

University of British Columbia
Vancouver, B.C.

Résumé

Il n'est pas rare de constater la prédominance, parmi les artistes traditionnels de renom, de personnes âgées ou retraitées. La tendance d'associer ces formes artisanales à la pratique antérieure de métiers traditionnels est aussi courante; le bûcheron devenu sculpteur, la ménagère s'adonnant à la broderie, et ainsi de suite. Pourtant la relation entre la créativité artistique et le perfectionnement d'un métier artisanal est souvent plus complexe qu'on ne l'imagine et exige de la part du chercheur une sensibilité particulière à l'égard du sujet et de son oeuvre. Le présent exposé relate le cheminement artistique d'un Ontarien, et démontre comment une forme artisanale qui à nos yeux peut sembler bizarre ou excentrique peut, aux yeux de l'artiste, représenter l'essence même de l'existence.



A French Oven

Cap à L'Aigle, P.Q., c. 1910. Historical Photo Historique, Public Archives
Publiques Canada.