

Bergey, Barry and Tom Pich. 2018. Folk Masters: A Portrait of America. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

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Volume 86, 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1062479ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1062479ar>

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Publisher(s)

Cape Breton University Press

ISSN

1718-1259 (print)

1927-9264 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Stewart, S. (2017). Review of [Bergey, Barry and Tom Pich. 2018. Folk Masters: A Portrait of America. Bloomington: Indiana University Press]. *Material Culture Review / Revue de la culture matérielle*, 86. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1062479ar>

in order to fix his 'deformity,' Washington was willing to compromise his bodily integrity and to risk bringing parts of uncouth African Americans within his body" (406). This early republic presidential persona was then communicated via a series of portraits and engravings of the new leader. These allowed subscribers, often women who were barred from participating in politics, to demonstrate their allegiance to the new American nation and its success via the "perfect civility"

(408) of Washington's presidential body—an assemblage of objects that was both "civil and savage" (406).

This beautifully illustrated and engaging work uses the material turn and excellent research to build upon earlier scholarship in thought-provoking, new ways. It is well worth a place on the bookshelf of anyone interested in the material culture of the 18th century Atlantic world and empire.

SANDI STEWART

Review of

Bergey, Barry and Tom Pich. 2018. *Folk Masters: A Portrait of America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Pp. 264. ISBN: 978-0-253-03233-1 (hardcover), \$30.00

Folk Masters: A Portrait of America provides a genuine glimpse into the lives of traditional artists who have been awarded a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The main focus of the text is a diverse series of portraits of one hundred National Heritage Fellows captured by photographer Tom Pich over a 25-year period. During this time, "he has visited and taken portraits of more than 214 National Heritage Fellows located in forty-five states and territories" (6). Barry Bergey, former Director of Folk and Traditional Arts at the NEA contextualizes the photographs, providing insight into both the lives of the artists and the images captured. As Bergey notes, the "common threads" connecting the featured Fellows "are artistic excellence and a lifetime of contribution to our cultural heritage" (13).

Many of the subjects—the bearers of folk and traditional arts—practice their craft anonymously and perform best in their own space. Vernon Owens, a central leader in a regional pottery revival in North Carolina, said it best when asked how things were going during his demonstration

at the annual celebratory concert for the National Heritage Fellowship: "It'd be better at home" (90). Each photograph therefore highlights maker and craft in the environment in which traditional techniques and performance is cultivated, practiced, and performed. Pich captures each subject in their natural environment where they have practiced their traditions, giving life to the space. His photographs transport the audience into the subject's space, whether it be the home, workshop, or community where stories and moments are shared. Pich clearly immersed himself in this environment, foreign to him but so familiar to his subjects, establishing a strong bond, which is evident by the relaxed demeanor of the Fellows in each portrait.

Bergey and Pich offer a snapshot of folk and traditional arts both in motion and standing still. The connections they have made with the National Heritage Fellows is evident in their work. In particular, I appreciate Pich's passion for capturing genuine moments with his subjects and sharing their stories during his journey to photograph the Fellows. The authors also examine

the history of craft use (such as sacred objects used during ceremonies), analyze the evolution of teaching methods and gender roles, and reflect on sustainability of craft and performance. The skills, techniques, and methods of construction are all important elements in traditional arts, and *Folk Masters* provides insight on various processes, including: weaving, rosemaling, carving, and forging, among other methods. An emphasis on hand-made items and the use of local materials is a repeated theme. Ultimately, their work demonstrates the beauty of diversity in folk and traditional arts, and how each maker has deep roots in their own communities, strengthening sense of place and identity through traditional arts.

Throughout the text, Pich sheds light on practices to avoid during fieldwork. During his visit with Wallace “Wally” McRae of Forsyth, Montana, a well-known cowboy poet, Pich discovered that a “videographer had come to ... [McRae’s] ranch and disrupted his work routine. While McRae was out feeding his cattle, the offending documentarian asked him to reenact throwing a bale of hay off the back of his truck.” McRae’s response [was]: “Come back tomorrow at exactly the same time and I’ll be doing it again” (62). In contrast, Pich’s approach is to capture moments instead of reenactments. He makes it a point to be present for key moments to provide authenticity in each portrait. He also stresses the importance of adaptation and amending plans when in the field.

Pich and Bergey are invested in learning about the individual artist by immersing themselves in the subject’s everyday life, providing a comfortable space for sharing stories. For example, they show how music has a profound impact on someone’s life through Julius Epstein of Sarasota, Florida. A member of the Epstein Brothers and a performer of Klezmer music in the 1950s-1960s, he was able to recount memories of past performances when given a snare drum. Epstein, whose memory was affected by Alzheimer’s disease, demonstrated the power of music in this moment (95). The snare drum is symbolic of Epstein’s cultural identity, and is featured in his portrait. The background of the portraits often contains items symbolic of the subject’s craft. The symbolism of the made object continues throughout *Folk Masters* as baskets,

pottery, ceramics, textiles, wooden carvings, and musical instruments all act as symbols of the maker’s craft and performance.

Many of the book’s subjects are teachers, ensuring continuity from generation-to-generation. Pich’s portraits reflect this importance. For example, the image of Eppie Archuleta from San Luis Valley, Colorado, “illustrates the generational continuity of the weaving tradition” (29). Archuleta holds her granddaughter while her daughter, also a weaver, stands in the background. Bergey and Pich suggest this important link between the present and the past, and assert the need to give new life to folk and traditional arts, as well as methods of teaching. New methods, such as offering workshops, ensure that the knowledge is being passed down and is alive and well.

Bergey and Pich provide a more realistic representation of the life of a maker rather than a romanticized vision. For example, Peter Kyvelos of Bedford, Massachusetts specializes in the making and repair of ouds. Each oud “requires about 125 hours to make, which amounts to about \$7 an hour for his labor” (119). One can appreciate the labour involved in Kyvelos’ work as the backdrop of his portrait is engulfed in layers of tools, much like other shops photographed by Pich. The notion of supplementing income is also addressed. Henry Arquette, of Hogansburg, New York, a retired Mohawk ironworker who constructed bridges and skyscrapers in the northeastern United States, supplements his income by making ash baskets (207). I appreciate that Bergey and Pich do not dismiss the idea of sustainability and profitability, and that for many makers, practicing traditional arts is a financial necessity, but their work is frequently undervalued.

Bergey and Pich also address hardships of the past and the path that led some makers to where they are today. Although sometimes grim, it is important to discuss what has taken place in the past in order to appreciate the maker’s journey that much more. For instance, the authors write that Yary Livan [of Lowell, Massachusetts] is probably “one of only three Cambodian master ceramicists to have survived the Khmer Rouge genocide in the 1970s. His knowledge of building kilns and firing roof tiles saved his life, because members of the Pol Pot regime realized that they needed his skills to make roof tiles for the purpose of construction” (211). Through stories

like Livan's, the reader recognizes the intersection between craft and narrative. Bergey and Pich look to uncover what's beneath the surface. The subtleties in the portraits are enhanced by the subjects' stories and are enriched by Pich's approach to fieldwork.

The discussion on the foundations of artistic practice and its ability to develop a deeply-rooted sense of purpose and place is what is most appealing about this book. *Folk Masters* provides a glimpse into the multi-dimensional layers of a diversity of folk art forms in the brief introductions for the subjects, and shows how different cultural influences have shaped the artists' lives in meaningful ways. By providing an overview of the evolution of music and craft in the subjects' everyday life, the portraits are that much more powerful. The stories captured by Bergey and Pich not only highlight the achievements of the National Heritage Fellows but also pay homage to their journey. I highly recommend exploring this book because of the various stories woven into Pich's photographic work. It was truly difficult choosing examples to highlight because each portrait offered its own insightful narrative. This portrait series is a result of thoughtful, story-based fieldwork, and sets the path for future documentation of folk and traditional arts.