

Simon J. Bronner, *Grasping Things: Folk Material Culture and Mass Society in America*

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Simon J. Bronner, *Grasping Things: Folk Material Culture and Mass Society in America*. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1986. 247 pp., ill. Cloth \$24.00, ISBN 0-8131-1572-8.

Simon J. Bronner's *Grasping Things* is an interesting and informative approach to the subject of folk art and material culture studies in America. The book is a valuable contribution to the field of material culture studies and will be of interest to both the historian and museum professional who wishes to be stimulated into examining behaviour or process versus objects as forms of folk art.

Bronner is no stranger to the subject of folk art or material culture studies. He is an associate professor of American studies and folklore at Pennsylvania State University, Capital Campus, and he is editor of the journal *Material Culture*.

The foundations of the book stem from fieldwork Bronner conducted between 1977 and 1985 in Indiana, Pennsylvania, Mississippi, Michigan and New York. The fact that Bronner lived and studied in many of these areas is reflected in the diversity of the examples he has selected to support his arguments.

The book is divided into four chapters followed by an epilogue. In chapter 1, Bronner stresses the importance of touch and sight in the interpretation process of material culture and how objects are actual "expressions of ourselves" (p. xii). The second and third chapters examine the architectural features of certain houses to show change over time and our transition from a society reliant on handwork to a highly mechanized society. The final chapter deals with the consumption of food, goods and services as direct reflections of different cultures. The highlight of this chapter is his defence and explanation of folk art as a true form of material culture. Since the subject of folk art has been the centre of serious debate among folk art professionals and material culturalists, Bronner's defence adds another interesting dimension to the debate.

Bronner uses several unique examples to substantiate his claims that folk material, such as the houses we live in, the objects we make and the food we eat, are reflections of our

society. His statements regarding folk art as an expression of a community's identity are justifiable in principle. However, the reader has to question whether the examples used to illustrate his views are all traditionally acceptable forms of folk art—for instance, carved tombstones, primitive paintings, an estranged house painter from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and the consumers and preparators of turtle soup in Indiana.

Part of the problem, of course, lies in the fact that professionals, including Bronner himself, frequently disagree over what constitutes folk art. The carved tombstones by Michael Durlauf and the primitive paintings by Anna Bock support his theory that these folk objects tell us something about the people who made them, the people whom they were made for and how they now serve as a visual account of the communities in which they were made.

Each chapter of the book contains a selection of photographs or line drawings that coincide with the topics of discussion. The absence of plate numbers for each photograph causes confusion in certain instances and there is a noticeable imbalance in the number of photographs in each chapter. For example, chapter 3 contains 41 photographs and chapter 4 has only 12 photographs. A section of coloured illustrations located in the centre of the book is also more appropriate and appealing to the reader than the black-and-white photographs. The book also contains extensive footnotes and an excellent index for easy reference. Unfortunately, the book does not have a bibliography.

From a curatorial point of view, it is difficult to defend or judge the validity of behaviour, such as house painting or consuming soup, as having serious historical applications. Objects such as gravestones or paintings can provide us with some very concrete information about the people and the communities in which they were made. However, it is much more difficult to substantiate information based on the behaviour of an individual in a community, like Cal, the house painter from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, as it has been analyzed and presented by Bronner.