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SUSTAINING CULTURAL VIABILITY: WHEN FOLK ART BECOMES FINE ART

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Folklorist, Simon Bronner, states in, "Folk Objects," that the way human communities and individuals express cultural connections and viability is through their material artifacts and objects. Elliot Oring defines "the folk" as something touched and transformed by human experience—ordinary humans leading ordinary lives. Artistic expression of "the folk" arises through a variety of mediums and expressions—anything from stone houses and gravestone designs to mailbox decorations that become defined as "folk art." There is no clear definition except that these forms of "art" become expressions of 'ordinary humans leading ordinary lives.' However, what happens when these "ordinary" expressions fall into the realm of what is later considered "fine art?" Who defines this category and how does this new category still express human continuity and connections? Recently, a quilt exhibit opened in the Braithwaite Fine Arts Gallery on the Southern Utah University campus in Cedar City, Utah. The quilts were elaborate expressions of life experience and cultural expressions, made from a complex variety of textiles and mediums. The quilts took years to complete and were shipped to the gallery from all over the world. They were all sizes, from large wall tapestries to micro-quilts—small "quilts" that were 3 by 5 inches. The variety of content was extensive—from Native American expressions of cultural viability and importance to broader expressions of identifiable images that connect us in our common human experiences. This paper seeks to interpret and define when "folk art" becomes "fine art"—when the categories of human experience move from "the ordinary" into something much more elaborate and time-consuming. The experience of viewing the quilts provides a medium of human feelings and emotions. One cannot view these without awe or a feeling of commonality with the creator of the quilts and designs. This would suggest a "folk" perspective. Yet, the artists insist they are not "the folk" and have moved beyond this category. In this paper, I further discuss the importance of cultural artifacts as expressions of human sustainability—bridging all cultures and traditions, yet respecting each as significant in an increasingly global world.