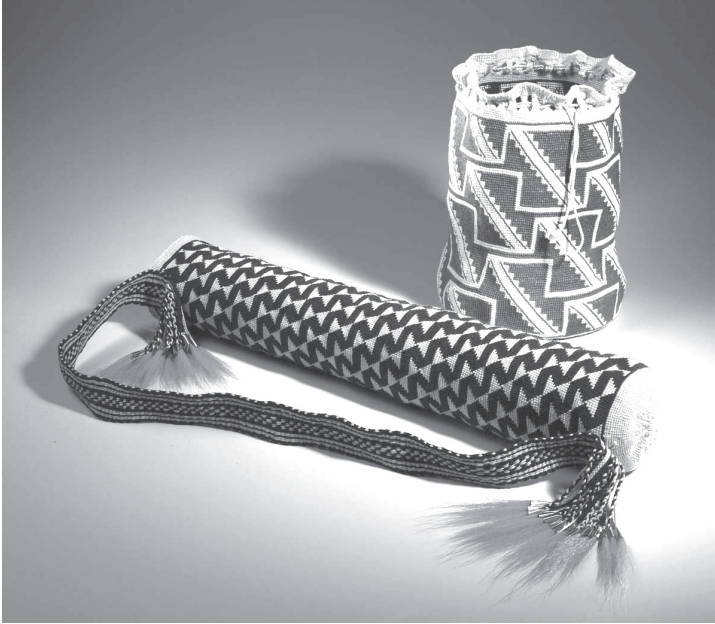


Editor’s Note: Images of quilts, needlework, decoys, scrimshaw, weathervanes, plain painting, and Native American crafts reflect most New Englanders’ conception of folk art. Typical associations include words such as: rustic, primitive, decorative, noncommercial, useful, and simple. According to Holtzberg, the general public has “unconsciously absorbed the academic art world’s conception of folk art, which is one defined by deficiency – art that is unsophisticated, plain, and, for the most part, created anonymously. In other words, folk art is quietly perceived as a poor imitation of fine art.”



Quiver Aquinnah Wampanoag twined basketry by Julia Marden, 2005. Natural undyed linen twine, 3.5” diameter X 22.5; soft-formed basket with drawstring top, Aquinnah Wampanoag twined basketry, 1998, 11” x 7.5 diameter at base. Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center.

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Massachusetts Folk Art: New Immigrants Redefine Tradition

MAGGIE HOLTZBERG



HJM is pleased to present “Editor’s Choice” – a new feature appearing in each issue where we highlight selections from recent works on Massachusetts history that we feel are especially noteworthy and thought-provoking.

*Maggie Holtzberg, Manager of the Folk Arts & Heritage Program at the Massachusetts Cultural Council, is the state folklorist. This selection is excerpted from her introduction to *Keepers of Tradition: Art and Folk Heritage in Massachusetts (2008)*, a beautifully illustrated volume that celebrates the work of a wide array of living folk artists. Traditional art, passed down from person to person within both long-settled and new immigrant communities, involves the shaping of deeply held cultural values into meaningful artistic forms. *Keepers of Tradition* presents material drawn from eight years of intensive field research by folklorists at the Massachusetts Cultural Council. HJM is pleased to be able to share their innovative work with our readers.*

* * * * *

I attended the annual Boston Caribbean Carnival for the first time in 2003. Four years later, enormous crowds gather along Blue Hill Avenue in Roxbury, braving the hot and humid August weather in anticipation of a spectacle. Multiple sound systems on flatbed trucks blast calypso music, and the smell of jerk chicken is in the air. Vendors sell flags and trinkets

from Trinidad, Tobago, Jamaica, Barbados, and a number of other West Indian islands. No one seems to care that the parade rolls out two to three hours past the time advertised.

What the gathering crowd awaits is a succession of *mas* (masquerading) bands from competing clubs that dance their way down the twenty-one-block parade route. A king and queen lead each band, adorned in dazzling handmade costumes of bent wire, steel frames, fabric, feathers, sequins, and glitter. Junior king, junior queen, individuals, and sections of dancing masqueraders complete each club's entourage. The final stop on the parade route is a street stage, where Trinidadian judges observe the celebrants from a viewing station.

Many in the Caribbean cultural community live for carnival. "This is something that people do out of their hearts. It is a cultural thing from where we came from," says Henry Antoine, executive director of the Caribbean Cultural Festivities Association. More than 600,000 attended Boston's 2007 carnival. Yet outside the participating community, most Bostonians are completely unaware that a festival of this magnitude in pageantry, beauty, and spirit takes place in their own city.

Bandleaders tell me it takes considerable time and substantial resources to participate in carnival. Preparations begin in late May and lead right up to the week of carnival. Lacking roomier facilities, most local clubs do the work of conceptualizing, designing, and constructing costumes in basements and backyards. . . . From the street it would be difficult to know that inside the basement of this house fabulous carnival costumes are constructed every year.

Similarly hidden is the Canadian-American Club in Watertown. Known by insiders as the "Can-Am," the club is housed in a nondescript brick and glass-tiled building on Arlington Street. Each month the club hosts dances, seisiüns (music jam sessions), and concerts where an older crowd goes to socialize, listen to music, and dance. Smoking is still allowed downstairs. There is a cash bar but one can also find "tea" (really more a meal of sandwiches and cake) for sale in a room adjacent to the dance hall. You never know who might drop in from "down home."¹

Aside from a small sign outside the Canadian-American Club building, there is nothing to let you know what goes on inside. But if you happen by on a Saturday night and the door is open, you will hear the driving sounds of Cape Breton strathspeys and reels played on fiddle, guitar, accordion,

¹ The Canadian Maritime Provinces include Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island.

and piano. “You hear the feet. The building practically pulses,” says Marcia Palmater, host of Boston radio station WUMB. Finding such a place means suddenly entering a different world. Once inside, you could easily be in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.

A wealth of various fiddle styles flourishes in Massachusetts, Cape Breton being one of them, and what better place to find Cape Breton music than Watertown, known as a destination community for generations of emigrants from the Canadian Maritime Provinces.

Massachusetts has an abundance of these “little worlds” of closely held (living) traditions. Knowing a tradition exists and finding someone who embodies that tradition with artistry and excellence is a folklorist’s dream. While folk traditions are seldom part of history books and the daily news, they are fundamental to who we are. Through family or from community elders, we learn much more than just skills; we absorb the values, aesthetics, cultural history, rules, and behaviors that make us insiders in that community. This kind of folk knowledge is ephemeral. Wonderful bodies of lore, song, dance, and ways of doing work can be lost unless they are documented. Yet documentation is only the first step in preserving cultural heritage; it is the work we do to bring recognition and support to individual tradition bearers that can make the difference in retaining a tradition. A tradition that has been vibrant for many generations may disappear in one generation.

Folk art tradition is the glue of human community – the way it forms, what keeps it together or what threatens it, how it is transmitted, and how it is preserved. Our lifestyles have changed; we tend not to stay in the same community in which we grew up, and with both parents often working, children are less immersed in customs and traditions. We no longer have access to the extended families and lifelong neighbors that once were common. If we are going to keep community a living part of our culture, we need to understand how it works. That is what folklorists do.

In April 1999, with funding support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC) reestablished a folk arts program that would support, preserve, and promote appreciation of the state’s diverse cultural traditions. At the time, eight years had passed since folklorist Dillon Bustin held the position of Folklife and Ethnic Arts Coordinator at the MCC. In the late 1980s, a corps of folklorists had been hired to survey the state folk arts traditions. Original field notes, audio recordings, and images gathered by this corps were archived at the Smithsonian Institution, but copies were also deposited at the Massachusetts State Archives in Boston. . . .

Despite Bustin's good work of establishing an infrastructure for folk arts in the state during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the program was suspended during one of the state's funding crises.² By 1999, unfortunately, little or nothing survived from the work that had been done by the Folklife and Ethnic Arts Program. We were able to obtain duplicates of the Smithsonian fieldwork, but locating additional and more up-to-date information meant basically starting over.

One of the first orders of business was to begin identifying and documenting the Commonwealth's folk art traditions by launching a statewide survey. Over the past eight years, nearly two dozen folklorists have been hired on a contract basis to help conduct fieldwork documenting traditions found in ethnic, regional, occupational, and religious communities throughout Massachusetts. The fieldwork focuses on living traditions that have a link with the past. We are interested in how people come to a tradition, how they learn it, and how their traditional art reflects the values of the community in which it exists. We have sought out individuals who practice expressive traditions that have been handed down to them—music, craft, dance, and verbal lore. We are especially drawn to traditions that are held within families, within work cultures, or within geographical regions that make a place unique. We have documented traditions of long-settled populations (Wampanoag leatherwork and Yankee wooden-boat building), as well as traditions of more recently arrived immigrant groups (Cambodian folk dance and Caribbean carnival). . . .³

“FOLK ART” CONNOTATIONS

To say that there has been a lack of agreement on the meaning of the term folk art is an understatement.⁴ What folk art means depends on who is using the term – gallery owner, art museum curator, artist, collector, or folklorist. For our purposes, folk art is defined as artistic expression that

² Political and economic difficulties in the early 1990s prompted a reduction in the Massachusetts Cultural Council's budget from \$27 million to \$3.5 million within four years; as a result, many discipline-specific programs were eliminated, including the Folklife and Ethnic Arts Program.

³ In the 1960s the field of folklore scholarship underwent a major shift. Prior to the 1960s it was customary to collect, categorize, and analyze items without reference to their cultural context or use. Today, having previously recorded ballad texts (for example), we also document the ballad singer in his or her community.

⁴ For an understanding of the definitional wars surrounding the term “folk art,” see Kenneth L. Ames, *Beyond Necessity: Art in the Folk Tradition* (Winterthur, DE, 1977); Ian M. T. Quimby and Scott T. Swank, eds. *Perspectives on American Folk Art* (NY, 1980); and Henry Glassie, *The Spirit of Folk Art: The Girard Collection and the Museum of International Folk Art* [Exhibit catalog, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe] (NY, 1989).



Wood Duck Drake, working decoy, Native and colonial American hunting tradition by William Sarni, 1986, cedar, 5.75" x 13 x 6.5; **Black-Bellied Plover Shorebird** by William Sarni, working decoy, 1993, pine, 14.5" x 12.5 x 3.5. Collection of the author.

is deeply rooted in shared ethnicity, religious belief, occupational tradition, or sense of place. Our approach to folk art originates with *people* rather than objects, hence the title, *Keepers of Tradition*. For us, folk art is the shaping of deeply held values into meaningful forms – whether those forms are dance tunes, wooden ships, saints’ processions, or cross-stitch samplers.

When we speak of folk or traditional art, we are talking about recognizing a high level of artistic mastery in unexpected media, for example the uniformity and utility of a Nantucket lightship basket, the Native porcupine quill work on a tobacco pouch, the stunning ornamentation and rhythmic variation of an Irish button accordion player. These are things of beauty that not only hold meaning for specific groups of people but that have also stood the test of time.

Yet, the makers of many folk art objects and creators of expressive forms do not refer to their work as “art.” . . . Folk things are thought of in association with the function they serve in daily life: a carved decoy to dupe ducks, hooked rugs to bring color and warmth into a New England home in winter, a gospel song to testify one’s faith, a horned carnival mask to provide playful fright, square-dance calls sung to direct dancers, or a gold-leafed icon to make visible the border between heaven and earth. These are useful things made beautiful.

When we asked a range of people what they would expect to see in an exhibition of folk arts in Massachusetts, they spoke of quilts, baskets, naive paintings, scrimshaw, and Native American crafts. When asked what adjectives came to mind when they heard the phrase “folk art,” the response was, “rustic,” “primitive,” “decorative,” “noncommercial,” “useful,” “poor people’s art,” or “simple.” The general public seems to have unconsciously absorbed the academic art world’s conception of folk art, which is one defined by deficiency – art that is unsophisticated, plain, and, for the most part, created anonymously. In other words, folk art is quietly perceived as a poor imitation of fine art.

ART REFLECTS POPULACE

What type of traditional art does one expect to find in Massachusetts and where? The answer lies in who lives here and how long their ancestors have been here. Successive waves of immigration have increasingly diversified Massachusetts. Areas with high concentration of specific ethnic groups suggest rich centers of traditional arts activity. Various groups of

people living in specific locations develop cultural traditions (craft, customs, music, song, stories, dance, pageantry, vernacular architecture, and more) that, over time, become associated with a place. Early English immigrants carved gravestones with angels and winged death's heads, and built saltbox houses that looked like those they had left behind in East Anglia, England. Italian immigrants terraced the land to raise grapes and peppers in rural areas, and their descendants continue to cultivate urban gardens, make wine, and build temporary altars for display on saints' days. Finns settled near lakes and continued practicing their traditions by building saunas.

Where does one begin looking for traditional art? Imagine narrowing field research to a specific community – the Armenian community of Watertown, for example, or the maritime communities found along the coastal towns of eastern Massachusetts. What to focus on? Folk art scholar Henry Glassie, who has spent a lifetime studying what art is to people in “other” cultures, has observed that in shaping their own styles, all cultures came to emphasize certain media. Spend enough time with people and they will lead you to the “robust centers of culture” where certain material forms or performances are imbued with beauty and power.⁵ Fieldwork in the Polish and Ukrainian communities of the Connecticut River Valley undoubtedly leads to individuals who have mastered the art of *pysanki* (egg decorating) and *wycinanki* (cut paper). Frequent Boston's Irish American neighborhoods and you will discover that creative genius thrives in the rhythmic drive and melodic variation of reels and jigs played at local pubs and dance halls. Within the Chinese community of Greater Boston, you quickly discern a deep appreciation for antiquity, which takes physical form in the graceful practice of calligraphy and the miniaturist art of seal carving. In parts of Springfield and Boston, one discovers that communities originally from the West Indian islands of Haiti, Trinidad, and Tobago spend months each year making *mas*, perfecting oversized sequined and feathered costumes for the annual Caribbean carnival. Polish *pysanki*, Irish reels, Chinese seals, and Caribbean carnival costumes are “robust centers of culture” that attract some of each culture's most gifted individuals.

Our selection has been guided by who the people of Massachusetts are and what artistic expressions they value, not by what is “distinctly Massachusetts” about their art. The distinction reminds me of a conversation I had with a friend. When I mentioned that we had just interviewed two Hmong embroiderers, he responded, “Every time I hear you say something

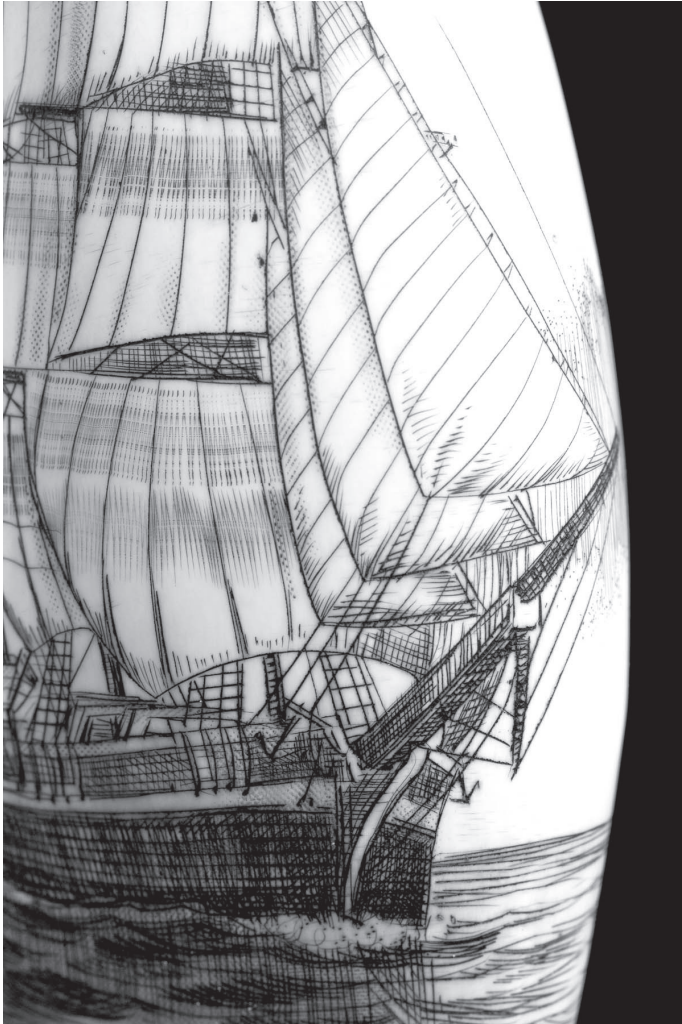
⁵ Glassie, op. cit., 36.

like that my first thought is, what does that have to do with Massachusetts folk art? Just because they live here now – it takes time for something to become part of ‘our culture.’ A few Hmong, the Russian iconographer – their work hasn’t had time to be influenced enough to become something distinctly Massachusetts.” In historical and geographic terms, a Massachusetts folk art would be something like stonewall building, which is English or Yankee. But what happens when traditions are transplanted? When Seua Moua makes a traditional blue Hmong embroidered skirt in Springfield, she is still perpetuating a Hmong tradition, but it is being preserved (or endangered) in a foreign place. It is not a “Massachusetts tradition” *per se* but rather a traditional art with deep roots that has been transplanted and is now practiced in Massachusetts. Three generations later, perhaps it will be recognized as a Massachusetts tradition. It depends on how many Hmong settle here and how many of those settlers hold on to this particular tradition. Something becomes traditionalized by being used and associated with a particular place or cultural group; it endures over time.⁶

Many find it surprising that the state folklorist would focus attention on traditions that originate elsewhere. Yet all traditions come from somewhere else, and change has always been a vital part of any tradition. Change in locale influences the availability of raw materials. Change in technology influences methods of production. Change in your neighbors influences who will understand your choice of color and symbolism. Change in the availability of less expensive alternatives (for example, plastic pitchers and imported mass-produced baskets) influences the use of the handmade objects (redware pottery and woven baskets). What was once made and used primarily for practical purposes (a Nantucket lightship basket to collect potatoes) is now produced for collectors and tourist markets – and because the creation of it continues to please its maker.

In a world with increasing standardization, where the makers of things (objects, music, and food) are increasingly distanced from the users of things, the appeal of direct connection is powerful. An imported bed comforter from a discount department store is useful, but it does not quicken the pulse like a hand-pieced quilt depicting Lowell textile mills, made with

⁶The Hmong are a minority ethnic group. About two million live in Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. Another ten million live in southern China. Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Hmong refugees have settled in the U.S. The 2000 census counted 186,310 persons of Hmong ancestry. This number has been criticized as undercounting the population, which has been estimated to be anywhere between 250,000 and 300,000. In Massachusetts, the largest communities are found in Springfield and Fitchburg. The word Hmong, which means “man,” is the name used by the Hmong people themselves.



Whaling Bark Scrimshaw: detail of prow. Scrimshaw is the name given to an art form created by sailors. It consists of elaborate carvings on the surface of bone or tooth, with the engravings highlighted using a pigment. Scrimshaw is most commonly made out of the bones and teeth of Sperm Whales and walrus tusks. Collection of the author.

scraps of fabric by a woman who gathered remnants from those very same mills. A fiberglass yacht is sleek, seaworthy, and efficient but it does not satisfy the soul the way a timber-framed, trunnel-fastened, wooden schooner does. We delight in the hand-wrought object, built using techniques that date back to biblical times. Why else would a crowd of nearly 3,000 turn out for the side-launch of a vessel built on the banks of the Essex River where, for eleven generations, members of the same family have built and launched wooden ships?

In his introduction to *The Encyclopedia of New England*, poet Donald Hall makes the point that in any New England town, family names recall migrations. French Canadians came to chop wood and work in textile mills, Cape Verdeans to hunt whales and later work cranberry bogs, Irish to escape the famine, Poles to farm the Connecticut River Valley, Italians and Finns to quarry granite, Portuguese to fish. Indeed, the nineteenth century saw successive waves of immigration that made New England the most multi-ethnic region in the United States at the time. The Commonwealth has long been an important port of call for immigrants. In addition to providing jobs, the state has a long history of providing refuge for those seeking religious and political freedom. Our communities reflect the diversity that resulted from nearly four hundred years of immigration history. Yet, most continue to view New England as homogeneously white with Yankee sensibilities. The extent of diversity remained largely invisible until the 1980s and 1990s, when immigration to Massachusetts changed to become primarily non-white and non-European.⁷

One of the realities of folklore fieldwork at a public agency is the constraint of small budgets and limited time. Unlike field research in academe, our fieldwork is done in the service of tangible programs and services . . . With a mandate to cover the entire state, we can often do little more than identify tradition bearers and try to support them in significant ways. We document a lightship basket maker on Nantucket, aware that half a dozen other basket makers on the island merit investigation. Yet, finding the time and resources for comparative research is impractical. We are, by necessity, generalists. We sample the field and, by serving a few, raise visibility for many.

⁷ Marilyn Halter, "Ethnic and Racial Identity," in *Encyclopedia of New England* (Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, 2005). Halter poses the idea that in New England "ethnic" is perceived as related to European immigrants. Other populations, for example Chinese, Native Americans, and Africans, are perceived in racial terms. "The peculiar idea persists in both the region and the nation as a whole that if your race is white, you are defined by ethnicity – whether Irish, French, Canadian, or Italian – but if you are black or mixed, you are defined by skin color alone" (326).

***Editor’s Note:** In the following section HJM has chosen one artist and folk art form to highlight from the dozens of artists profiled in Keepers of Tradition. Artist and educator Carlos Santiago Arroyo has helped revive traditional Puerto Rican wood carving. In 2004 Latinos represented 7.7% of the state’s population, with Puerto Ricans the largest group (47%) followed by Dominicans (16%), Guatemalans (6.5%), Salvadorans (6%), Colombians (5.8%), and Mexicans (3.8%).*



Artist Carlos Santiago Arroyo at home with four of his santos. Photo by Kate Kruckemeyer.

SACRED EXPRESSIONS

In his professional life, Carlos Santiago Arroyo is an educator and a social worker, tending to the hearts and minds of the community, and in his art – the carving of *santos* – he speaks to its soul. *Santos*, literally “saints” in Spanish, represent a centuries-old tradition of religious devotion practiced by Latino artisans who are called *santeros* and *santeras*. Historically, such small wooden carvings of religious figures associated

with the Catholic Church were made to be used in the home for prayer, or to ask for a cure.

Until several decades ago very few artisans still practiced this art in Puerto Rico, but there has been a renaissance of this art form, and hundreds of artists are actively carving on the island. As a consequence, *santos*, once valued exclusively for their religious significance, have become desired objects of art in home collections, galleries, and museums. “Although it’s true that *santos* today have more weight as cultural objects than as religious ones on the island, many believers seek the support of these celestial beings to intercede for them today the same way our ancestors did.”

While related representations of the saints are found in most of the former Spanish colonies, Arroyo’s work has an affinity with the classical style of Puerto Rican *santo* carving popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The proportions of the figures have symbolic meaning, and the nearly expressionless facial features are reminiscent of Romanesque carvings made a thousand years ago. Three-dimensional figures (*bultos*) were sized to fit home altars instead of churches, reflecting the physical isolation of many living on the island at that time. The identity of a saint is expressed through the attribute that accompanies and defines the figure, for instance the book and quill pen of Saint Teresa, the dove of Saint Francis, or the Christ Child and Bible of Saint Anthony. Arroyo notes that the Flight to Egypt, a notable event very early in the life of Christ, is highlighted in the island’s iconography.

Arroyo was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico, in 1947, and raised in Puerto Nuevo. After briefly attending seminary, he began a small collection of old *santos* through the inspiration of his friend and avid *santo* collector Father Felipe Lopez. While studying at the University of Puerto Rico, Carlos often saved his lunch money to spend on these beautiful treasures, reminding himself, “I’ll be hungry, but I’ll have my *santos*.” In 1971 he immigrated to Boston to teach in a predominantly Latino public school, bringing his passion for *santos* with him. Most of Carlos’ energy was directed toward his education, career, and family. He earned a graduate degree in education from Harvard University and later, after moving to the Pioneer Valley, a graduate degree in social work from Smith College.

In 1998 Arroyo had an epiphany. On one of his regular trips to Puerto Rico, he visited an exhibition of *santos* in Old San Juan. As he gazed at a partially completed icon of the Three Kings, he realized that he himself could carve such figures. He began that very afternoon and has continued creating *santos* to this day. As is traditional in Puerto Rico, he carves the



La Mano Poderosa (The Most Powerful Hand), Puerto Rican woodcarving by Carlos Santiago Arroyo, 2003, tropical cedar, gesso, acrylic, 15.5" x 9 x 4. Collection of the artist.

santos from tropical *cedero hembra*, wood from the female cedar tree, and paints them primarily with acrylics. He travels to Puerto Rico every year to meet with other carvers who have been so generous in sharing their expertise with him.

Beyond the religious symbolism of each saint, Arroyo's *santos* are imbued with cultural meaning reflecting Puerto Ricans' long struggle for self-determination. Some of the carvings depict saints and miracles with deep cultural value for Puerto Ricans that are not officially recognized – and sometimes explicitly shunned – by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Two of the most deeply rooted devotions on the island – those of the Virgin Mary and the Three Kings – converge in this carving. Arroyo is quick to point out that the proportions of the figures in this icon are purely arbitrary, as is true for many other carvings in Puerto Rico. “The Three Kings are presented in a frontal manner, at the feet of the Virgin, of a much smaller stature than she, affirming her preponderance in the scene. This Virgin holds in one arm baby Jesus, while on the other she carries the star that guided the Magi to the town of Bethlehem. This is one of the most popular carvings in homes throughout the island, although it would not be found in chapels as the official church does not recognize this icon: it is a creation of the popular religious culture of the country.”

Despite the fact that Arroyo has little time to pursue his craft, his art has been recognized in exhibitions from the University of Massachusetts to the Museo de Las Americas in San Juan. Regionally, he has also become known as an outstanding presenter on *santos* and Puerto Rican culture. “I love ... bringing the *santos* to the classroom, to Latino students, because here [in the United States] they don't talk about Puerto Rican culture. It's just amazing to me,” he says. With his beautiful *santos*, Arroyo reminds us of the power that a sacred art form can have in the preservation of cultural values and history.

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Excerpted from *Keepers of Tradition: Art and Folk Heritage in Massachusetts* (2008) with permission of the author, Maggie Holtzberg, and the Massachusetts Cultural Council, pages 3-17.

