

*Craftsmen of the Cumberlands: Tradition and Creativity*, by Michael Owen Jones. Publications of the American Folklore Society, New Series. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990. xiii, 289 pp. Illustrations, bibliographical notes, index. \$30.00 cloth, \$15.00 paper.

REVIEWED BY WAYNE FRANKLIN, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

In this substantial revision of *The Handmade Object and Its Maker* (1975), folklorist Michael Owen Jones returns to the chairmakers of rural Kentucky, and particularly to the career of Chester Cornett (1913–1981). Cornett was raised in a family of sometime craftsmen who for the most part produced objects intended for daily use. He, too, made many quite utilitarian chairs; but he also was the maker of several chairs marked by a redundancy of parts that in many cases rendered them relatively “useless.” Jones takes as his subject here the sources of both the more ordinary chairs and the idiosyncratic ones produced by Cornett. Jones aims to explain the balance between creativity and tradition via an intensive examination of one decidedly unusual craftsman’s life and art.

Cornett operated under many pressures, each of which contributed something to his unfolding creativity. He was not a happily social man. He often felt awkward in crowds—and to him a “crowd” might mean merely one other person. Cornett suffered as well from a conflict-ridden marriage to a woman who despised his craft so much that she ultimately would not have his chairs in their house, but purchased cheap, weak commercial furniture instead. His health was frail, and his ability to earn enough to support himself and his large family was severely restricted. He was a genius with wood, but the ordinary chairs he made produced very little income. One reason he turned to increasingly complex, convoluted forms (including his two-in-one rockers, which featured four rockers, seven or eight posts, and a superabundance of very visible pegs) was his sense that he could charge more for objects that had obviously taken more effort and material to make.

But Jones argues that the psychological motives behind Cornett’s continuing fascination with complex chairs were at least as important as the commercial ones. For one thing, as Cornett was “discovered” by several journalists (and by Jones himself) in the mid-1960s, he seems to have responded to this new attention by seeking to produce objects worthy of his emerging notoriety. For similar reasons he seems to have adopted a grizzled beard, wild hair, and bib overalls as marks of his eccentricity and his embodiment of traditions of the past. Yet even here the changes in Cornett were probably overdetermined. His adoption of an “old-time” appearance thus had much to do with his

nervous relation to his contemporary surroundings. And his more inventive chairs, with their redundant elements, formed exceptionally embracing constructs which similarly might protect him from an intrusively modern world. The bizarre chairs "hugged" those using them, he remarked.

This is a fascinating story. But whether Cornett can tell us as much about tradition and its relation to creativity as Jones would like is doubtful. As a man of such pronounced qualities, Cornett would seem to have infused his creations with far more psychological burden than was true in the case of his local contemporaries. Furthermore, all of these men were operating in an economy so heavily dominated by mass-produced, machine-made objects that the traditional framework that might have obtained in Kentucky a hundred years before simply did not exist for them. They represent a vestigial practice rather than a healthy normative one, and to draw conclusions about the world we have lost from the fragments of it that survive is a notably tricky procedure. Cornett's very redundancy as a craftsman might be taken to suggest the weakening of the traditional grammar he so obviously stretched to the breaking point. Had Kentucky in his lifetime provided a better market for handmade objects, rather than mass-produced ones, perhaps Chester Cornett's creativity would have found a more balanced outlet.

*A Taste of the Country: A Collection of Calvin Beale's Writings*, edited by Peter A. Morrison. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990. viii, 249 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, graphs, bibliography, index. \$28.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JAMES R. SHORTRIDGE, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

Calvin Beale is senior demographer at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. To judge by his job title, one might expect that his writings would be tedious and jargon-filled reports that, while informative in their way, would reveal little of the human spirit. Nothing could be further from the truth. Mr. Beale has been an authoritative yet avuncular interpreter of rural America since 1950. During this period of unprecedented change, he has written sympathetic interpretations of traditional cultures, of the diversity within rural society, and of the growing importance of the manufacturing, recreation, and retirement industries to the rural economy.

Beale's insights often have appeared as conference addresses and government bulletins. Editor Peter Morrison has done a great service by gathering seven of the best of these somewhat fugitive works for

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