

**A New Look at an Old Barn: A  
Field Study of Twenty Appalachian Painters**

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This present study arose from my desire to better understand Appalachian art and culture. This is no easy task. The boundaries between Appalachian and mainstream society have shifted so often, they now are only a blur. In the past one hundred years, Appalachian society has been rapidly modified, and this change is evidenced in many aspects of Appalachian culture. Quilts grace mobile homes and satellite dishes loom by log cabins.

Appalachian painting is one of Appalachia's newest and perhaps least understood artforms. While a plethora of Appalachian crafts' documentation exists, the fine arts have not been sufficiently examined, as determined by an extensive literature search. The purpose of this study is to identify selected Appalachian painters and describe their work. A major objective is to examine the nature and significance of painting in terms of the makers' world views, values, and aesthetic considerations. This study asks if Appalachian painters share ideas, beliefs, and aesthetic values, and whether these values are incorporated into their paintings. In addition, this study seeks an understanding of the interactions among the painters, their paintings, and their society.

A better understanding of Appalachian painting may begin with a trip through the mountains to meet the artists. To do so, you must leave the busy highways, since many Appalachian painters are secluded in emerald hollows or in coal camp ghost towns. Sightseeing here is difficult because of curved mountain roads and a steady flow of oncoming coal trucks. Frequently roads wash out after a rain storm, resulting in a lengthy detour. A ten mile trip can take thirty minutes of cautious driving. It is not easy to venture, but the reward for seeking these painters is an invitation to relax on their porches to watch night fall. Fog creeps slowly up from the layers of blue ridges, and the rhythm of the porch swing matches the song of the crickets. Conversation becomes colorful and philosophical.

**Research Strategy**

For this study, I travelled the highways and back roads of southeastern Kentucky, and met with twenty painters. I visited their homes and studios; although most paint either in spare bedrooms or at the kitchen table. I saw paintings in progress, as well as finished works framed and hung on walls or carefully stored away. The painters' homes are galleries filled with their work, and occasionally with paintings made by community members. Many also collect wooden sculptures, baskets, and woven rugs made by

mountain craftspeople. Overall, I viewed more than twelve hundred paintings, five hundred drawings, and two hundred slides of paintings taken by the painters. These slides were of paintings that had been sold or given away.

The painters shared their stories and hot, strong coffee. I also met their families and heard what they had to say about the paintings. These fragments formed the data I am using to tell a likely story about Appalachian painting.

### **The Location and Participants**

Prior to this study, I conducted two pilot studies, one in southeastern Ohio and another in central Kentucky. These pilot studies helped shape my research questions and clarify terms that I would use, and enabled me to hone my interviewing skills. The first study was conducted in the town where I had taught high school. With the help of former colleagues, I selected four painters and one photographer. I interviewed each selected artist once. The second pilot study involved five women who were painters. In both studies, location and participant selection were idiosyncratic and unsubstantiated by a method which could not be replicated.

For this dissertation, I began in three adjacent counties in southeastern Kentucky. I selected Knott, Leslie, and Letcher Counties, in part, because of the existence of a significant body of historic and scholarly literature that deals with this area. Literature about eastern Kentucky has dominated Appalachian literature for three reasons. First, many prolific writers such as Fox, Frost, and Allen were from Kentucky. Also, eastern Kentucky, with its feuds and moonshine, was considered by many to be quintessential Appalachia. Lastly, many major organizations which encourage Appalachian studies are headquartered in Kentucky. This anthropological, folkloric, literary, and sociological bibliography serves as a foundation for my study. In addition, this area was selected because the sparse population and continued dependence on the coal industry creates a somewhat homogeneous population. Kentucky's first coal mines were opened in this area, and many small mines are still in operation.

I wrote to county librarians in Knott, Leslie, and Letcher counties and asked for names and addresses of Appalachian painters in their counties. In addition, I wrote to county extension agents and asked for the same. I knew that in rural communities, county extension agents travel the county extensively and are in charge of festivals and fairs. Many painters exhibit at these festivals, and mailing lists are maintained and kept up to date.

The lists contributed by librarians and extension agents provided a place to begin data collection. I later interviewed librarians and extension agents to ascertain information about their roles in the community, their relationship to the painters, and about their decisions to include or omit local painters. All librarians and extension agents reported they had included all

painters they knew, and omitted only those few who did not wish to be contacted.

The second phase of participant nomination came from painters who were interviewed, and from community members I met while staying in southeastern Kentucky. I asked them for additional names and painters, taking careful note of what they said about their paintings.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

Intermittently, I spent about two years collecting background information, building rapport, and interviewing painters of southeastern Kentucky. Family and financial obligations prevented me from staying in southeastern Kentucky for an uninterrupted year. Instead, I stayed as much as possible during summers, long weekends, and holidays. Many Friday nights I would load my camera and tape recorder in my car, find a country music station on the radio, and head south with other cars sporting Kentucky license plates.

Rapport was built over a period of three months with the help of one Letcher County painter and his family. I met Jeff Chapman-Crane in the spring of 1989 after a lecture he gave at the Columbus, Ohio, Cultural Arts Center. He became a primary informant and a constant support during this study. He first introduced me and the purpose of my research to other painters and community members, and then acted as a liaison for me. When I was interviewing in Letcher County, I stayed in a cabin I rented. I stayed in homes of other painters when gathering data in Knott and Leslie counties.

I interviewed all of the painters nominated by librarians, extension agents, painters, and community members when contact was possible. In some cases, neither phone numbers nor addresses were provided. I found postmasters to be helpful in locating some painters whose addresses were incomplete. All of the painters I contacted granted permission for interviews. I interviewed twenty painters: twelve women and eight men. Their ages ranged from twenty to eighty-six, but most were in their thirties and forties. Most listed their occupation as "artist" although some were art teachers in the county schools. They had a wide range of education, ranging from tenth grade to Master's degrees. Eighteen painters were native to central Appalachia, one was originally from northeastern Ohio, and one was from New York. All painters reside in eastern Kentucky.

When possible, I met with the painters before I interviewed them. During this time we chatted, looked at their gardens, or played with their children. I later returned to interview them. I conducted most interviews in the painter's home or studio. When I interviewed male painters, other members of their family were often present, but did not participate in the interview. Wives or daughters would talk to me only when the painter left the room to collect

more paintings or other materials. Usually women tended to children and fetched paintings or coffee.

Female painters who were mothers, on the other hand, occupied children and answered questions simultaneously. I had learned from the two pilot studies that interviews with women were more successful if their husbands were not present. In the pilot interviews, women became silent when their husbands came home, and these men, although not painters, dominated the conversation about painting. With this in mind, I made an effort to interview women in the late morning or early afternoon.

Interview length ranged from thirty minutes to three hours, depending on factors such as a family or other obligations or time of day. Early afternoon interviews with women, for example, were brought to a close about four o'clock so they would have time to make dinner for their families. Open-ended questions were asked, and an unstructured format allowed painters to determine the direction of the interview. I wanted a relaxed atmosphere of conversation, rather than a question and answer session.

In all cases, painters had at least one original painting available during the interview. Some painters had made a large body of work, while others were just beginning to paint. Their paintings were frequently referred to and were an integral part of the interviews.

Most interviews were recorded by a small, battery operated cassette recorder. Five painters were hesitant to have their interview audio recorded. I honored their requests not to tape interviews and instead took notes. The painters and I agreed that after I transcribed all interviews, I would return them to the painter for approval. They were permitted to add, omit, or change any part of the transcript. Four returned their transcripts with no changes. Two painters requested permission to write their answers after viewing the transcript. Others corrected grammar or restated ambiguous statements. The painters consistently omitted any negative comments they had made about other community painters or community members in general. Often the painters added new and valuable information about things they remembered after the interview.

After reviewing transcripts, I often discovered valuable, but unexplored, bits of information introduced during the interview. Children and phone calls had often interrupted our train of thought. I made note of these missing pieces and conducted follow-up interviews when necessary. I interviewed some painters only once, and others I interviewed two or three times. I frequently corresponded with the painters by letters or phone calls.

Often after the interviews, we talked informally over coffee or lunch. I did not take notes during this time, rather relied on my memory and wrote this information immediately after leaving the painter's home. When I stayed in the painters' homes, it was customary to talk late into the evening. These

marathon sessions usually uncovered personal information. Although some painters gave me permission to use parts of that information because it was pertinent to my study, they asked to not be identified. In these cases, I will refer to "a painter."

I also photographed paintings that had been referred to during the interview and other paintings the painter wanted to have photographed. I made two copies of the slides and gave one copy to each painter. Slides were taken both for record keeping and to use along with the written information as primary data. In addition, I collected referential materials, such as photographs, copies of reviews, and materials written by or about the painters and their paintings. For example, some painters had written artists' statements or had other painters write statements about them. These statements were often used as press releases which announced their exhibits.

### **Methods of Data Analysis**

An emic approach was employed for data collection and analysis. An emic approach seeks to accept the native's point of view and his or her way of perceiving the world. This approach has been summarized by Pelto and Pelto (1978) in the following terms:

1. The researcher's intent is to seek categories of meaning, in nearly as possible in ways "the natives define things."
2. The people's definitions of meaning, their idea systems, are seen as the most important "causes" or explanations of behavior.
3. The methodological strategy is fundamentally inductive, for research cannot proceed until the "natives' categories of meaning" have been discovered. (p. 62)

This study began with no hypothesis, rather categories were permitted to emerge from data collection. Data were analyzed through the identification of cultural themes, or "any principle recurrent in a number of domains, tacit or explicit, and serving as a relationship among sub-systems of cultural meaning" (Spradley, 1979, p. 141). The sheer amount of data required management. I first conducted twelve interviews. I organized notes and interviews according to one of the eleven research questions. I then coded responses to each question according to themes such as religion, tradition, and gender roles.

After a first draft was written, I then went back to the field and conducted three additional interviews in order to test the information. I revised the draft and made adjustments in light of new data. I shared these drafts with key members of the study and with colleagues. I continued to write and revise using their suggestions and comments. In September, 1990,

I completed five additional interviews. While these interviews were interesting, no new themes emerged.

### Methodological Limitation

My study is both aided and limited by my position as an Appalachian. As such, I hold inherent biases, and those biases have been at play while I defined the research problem, collected data, and analyzed the information gathered. I have attempted to reveal these biases to my readers. In addition, throughout the researching process, I kept a journal, discussed my work with Appalachians and colleagues, and tried to be aware of my cultural baggage. From the onset, my ambition to describe and interpret the art work of Appalachian painters has been tempered by the caveat that whatever I write about "them" may also be true of me.

To obtain greater objectivity, I have chosen to quote the painters liberally in order to allow them to speak for themselves. I did not reshape their answers into paragraphs or sentences. Instead, in an attempt to retain the dynamics of oral communication, I quote verbatim and indicate pauses in the thoughts by line breaks in the quoted passages. In some cases, this resulted in prose. An excerpt from an interview with a painter illustrates this.

Didn't you watch "48 Hours"?  
The "48 Hours" that Dan Rathers did about Floyd County?  
Boy, I'm telling you.  
They fixed us good.  
They stereotyped us again.  
While we're spending all our life  
trying to get out of that.  
All they portrayed were people still with outhouses.

One was a wife beater.  
One was a drunk.  
And these pitiful, poor looking people.  
And they talked "right chair"  
and "hits over thar."

In a really pukey looking place called "Muddy Gut  
Hollow"  
They asked how it got its name and she said, "Well that cause it rains  
here so much and the road gets so muddy  
the hogs get their belly all muddy."  
There's all kinds around here . . .

Sand Lick  
Clover Lick  
High Splint  
Cutchin

Defeated Creek  
My mother came from Defeated Creek.  
Thank God Eolia means something different.  
Eolia means  
Valley of the Wind.

### **Structure of Dissertation**

This study is in six chapters. Chapter One provides an historical context of central Appalachia as foundation for the information gathered in the study. Chapter Two presents the methods employed. Chapters Three, Four, Five answer the study's questions by presenting the findings from the fieldwork. Chapter Three identifies twenty Appalachian painters and describes their training. Chapter Four is concerned with the nature and significance of painting in terms of the makers' world views, values, and aesthetic considerations. In Chapter Five, interactions among the painters, their paintings, and Appalachian society are detailed. The final chapter, Chapter Six, offers conclusions, sets forth implications for art education, and recommends areas for further study.

### **References**

- Spradley, J. (1979). **The ethnographic interview**. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Pelto, J., & Pelto, G. (1978). **Anthropological research**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.