

## THE WORLD IN A PAPER BAG

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While most of us have fairly well articulated ideas on what constitutes folk versus "fine" art, the source of our notions is not always clearly identifiable. This paper proceeds on the premise that perceptions on the nature of folk art and the ability to distinguish national origins may well be shaped by what is visually available in museums or shops. Import stores are now to be found all over the United States, rather than only in cosmopolitan centers. One such store, perhaps the first of its kind, is Cost Plus, a San Francisco Bay area institution for over 25 years. Museums aside, there are few places in the United States where so much from so many countries can be seen by such a multitude of people. Therefore, because of its size and scope, Cost Plus and its operations form a worthwhile starting point in the exploration of a number of issues, economic and aesthetic, current in the anthropology of art.<sup>1</sup>

### History.

Cost Plus had its beginning in Amthor Imports, a San Francisco import company founded by the current president's father in the 1920s. From a shop on Sutter Street, Amthor Imports dealt mainly in rattan furniture, grass cloth, and related products from the Far East. Confronted with a surplus of rattan furniture in the mid 1950s, two of the store's employees, William Amthor, the owner's son, and Lincoln Bartlett, devised what was then an innovative solution for its quick sale. Renting a warehouse, they stocked it with the problem furniture, augmenting it with a batch of shirts from Hong Kong. Their merchandise was disposed of by

selling it at low prices on a self-serve basis. This sale was so successful that the pattern was repeated, using other importers' surplus stock until local potential was exhausted. Cost Plus is believed to have had its beginnings in a concept: self service, low prices, and an informal atmosphere designed to evoke the sense of being a dockside warehouse. The atmosphere of serendipity and adventure captured the public imagination. According to one informant, a "concept store" like Cost Plus could have headed in either of two directions following its initial success. The fad could play itself out, or providing the customer's imagination could be consistently captured and held, it could (and did) become a virtual industry.

By a particularly fortuitous chain of circumstances, William Amthor and Lincoln Bartlett succeeded in capturing the customer's imagination. The time was ripe and their timing was accurate, a combination of factors working in the store's favor to this day. Casting about for additional sources of merchandise, Lincoln Bartlett drew a couple working for Pan American Airlines into the network who were also conducting an informal import business in Hong Kong. A friendly bank provided capital backing and Cost Plus, as we know it today, opened in its present form in the fall of 1958, gradually absorbing the parent concern.

Nowadays, the import-export business is one of the big commercial bonanzas. In the 1950's and earlier, there were so few direct importers that most of them knew each other and each other's business.<sup>2</sup> Although there was a certain degree of competition, it was not as intense as it is today. By a stroke of irony, Cost Plus gave birth to its own chief competitor, Pier I Imports, not long after it opened.

In 1962, Cost Plus had grown so successful that in order to allow for further expansion, it had to incorporate, a plan thwarted by the Kennedy recession of that year. The Tandy Corporation stepped in and lent Cost Plus enough money for incorporation in exchange for a franchise and assistance in setting up import stores in Southern California and Texas. In time, the money was paid back, largely due to Cost Plus's desire to remain autonomous and un beholden. Tandy, now owning a whole chain of import stores, became bored with the whole idea. Not caring much for the inventory, he sold out to his Vice President, a Mr. Henderson, who proceeded to make a great deal of money through the 300 or so stores which now comprise the Pier I chain. On November 29, 1973, one informant wryly commented that the stock of Pier I, publicly owned, had sunk very low, whereas Cost Plus, whose stock is privately held, has continued to expand by leaps and bounds.

With success piling upon success, Cost Plus was able to expand beyond its original location, a comparatively small area of the store now holding only clothing and basketry. Fortunately, contiguous property was available and Cost Plus grew in amoebic fashion to the point where it now sprawls over almost an entire city block. Cost Plus's expansion spread to other parts of the Bay Area and beyond, so that there are now seven branch stores: Hillsdale, Mayfield Mall in Mountain View, Walnut Creek, San Jose, Sacramento, Fresno, and the latest, newly opened in Almaden. Plans are to open new stores at the rate of two a year until Northern California is saturated. All stores are to carry the same or nearly the same inventory, a selection of imports from over fifty countries all over the world.

### Structure and organization.

Fortuitously situated on Taylor Street, close to cable-car and bus lines and within walking distance of San Francisco's star tourist attraction, Fisherman's Wharf, Cost Plus and its parent organization, Amthor Imports, share the same premises.

The main store where it all began carries the old standbys of Cost Plus: pottery, glass, brass, wood, basketry, clothing, paper, lacquer, toys, jewelry, art supplies, household items, food, and wine. Fairly new, and well timed in terms of present tastes, the tea and coffee pavilion is close by. A furniture annex also offers rugs, carpets, and mats for sale. It is the Arts and Elegants store, once called Arts and Antiques until customers began asking for antiques that were not there, that is of greatest interest to us. Found here are unique or limited edition items, perhaps the best way of characterizing the merchandise, because the categories and criteria for inclusion are fuzzy and overlap to a certain extent with the main store. With the exception of basketry, what we think of as folk art generally finds its way here, and consequently, it is this branch of Cost Plus that is the focus of collectors and enthusiasts, sometimes even of museums. Interestingly, some old customers refuse to step into the main store, finding it either too crowded or too commonplace by comparison.

Above the main store are the offices of Amthor Imports, frantically busy on both my visits there. Through this office, Amthor conducts both its retail and wholesale business. In addition to the offices for the present staff, a large, art-filled room is kept aside expressly for William Amthor, who now lives in San Salvador, removed from the immediate

field of operations but still very active in the business.

These offices, the mission control of Cost Plus, boast a computer since the volume of business is far beyond the ledger and calculator stage. A teletype machine facilitates swift communication with foreign offices and agents, and probably other branches of Cost Plus. In addition to the electronic hardware, the Amthor offices house a sample room with samples of every item on the sales floor, large pieces being represented in photographic form. The samples are an aid in keeping track of the inventory and also act as a check on quality. Another important division of the Amthor offices is the advertising department, discussed in greater detail later.

While a certain interrelationship between Amthor Imports and Cost Plus is both necessary and inevitable, each store has its own manager, responsible for hiring, firing, and training. Employee training is ad hoc and on the job, a source of regret to Mr. Katten, my principal informant. He feels there should be more time for training, but what with the demands of seven stores in addition to the endless multitude of routine tasks, there is no available time. In spite of this lack, two of the employees interviewed reflected a good grasp of the essentials of Cost Plus, its image and identity, and expressed a considerable degree of loyalty and pride. In addition to having no quibble about pay or treatment, both these employees claimed to enjoy their work keenly, explaining their knowledge of the mechanics of Cost Plus to watching, listening, and being curious. Both acquired this knowledge in under six months.

#### Image and identity.

Cost Plus began with a concept, previously described as the pro-

jection of an image of serendipity and high adventure at low cost in an informal warehouse setting, where people could find a wide, often whimsical array of goods from all over the world, arranged higgledy-piggledy. All of these wares, if not actually handcrafted, would be a cut above the average and predictable. Other aspects of organizational identity are a sense of humor and an absence of stuffiness. The organizational image, strong and assertive, has not been diluted over time, but rather intensified, so that Cost Plus is not just another import store but a local institution.

One reason for the enduring nature of Cost Plus's image is controlled expansion. Pier I for instance, has expanded to the point of being restricted by its size. Being flexible and of a manageable size, Cost Plus can take fliers on the off-beat and crazy, such as old theatrical costumes, New Guinea "art", and horse hobbles that look as though only a policeman would love them. The organization stays so flexible that nothing is out of bounds if it fits in with the aesthetic, economic, and image-projecting criteria of the store.

Akron, another ostensible competitor located in the same area of San Francisco, is not considered seriously at all, since its limited range of imports serves to act as bait and loss-leaders for the main inventory, often including such items as problem clothing in the form of 1000 size 14 shirts.

At Cost Plus, the emphasis is on handmade or semi-handmade goods, and natural materials, although a glance around the store will show numerous instances of mass-produced articles. Regardless of the manner of production, Cost Plus chooses its merchandise to go along with the current

"anti-plastic" trend.

Judging from interviews, the organization feels secure enough about its identity to grow and change with assurance. One asset, according to Mr. Katten, is the tendency for local customers to show a strong, continuous personal sense of identification with Cost Plus. Both image and identity are projected to the public by what appears on racks and in bins, and by how it is sold.

#### Advertising and publicity.

Advertising is handled through a department of the Amthor offices. All graphics, signs, and newspaper advertising are designed by Frances Provenzano who has been with the organization for 13 years. Her work seems to express the Cost Plus image, chiefly its sense of humor. She has a staff of three, all of whom share a consensus of taste. In addition to being advertising manager, Mrs. Provenzano also designs the paper goods carried by Cost Plus, often using decorative details from the store's merchandise for inspiration.

Publicity has been handled by the Art Blum Agency on Commercial Street for the last six to eight years when size made it necessary for Cost Plus to delegate this function to an outside concern. The agency is responsible for Cost Plus's image in the media, in addition to handling openings, interviews, and similar situations. In general, it serves as a buffer between Amthor Imports and the public at large. The Art Blum Agency was chosen as an appropriate mouthpiece for Cost Plus, because it too projects an informal, colorful, and imaginative organizational image.

#### Merchandising techniques.

The basic premise underlying merchandising techniques at Cost Plus

has not changed much over the years. However, due to the increased volume and scope of the business, things are a lot more sophisticated than they used to be in 1958. In keeping with the idea of informality, the stores themselves are bare and cavernous, emphasizing the goods rather than their setting. Lighting is directed on the merchandise, which is displayed in artfully random profusion on simple, neutrally painted racks, shelves, bins, baskets, or piled high on itself. I say "artfully" because genuine disorganization would result in complete chaos in a store of this size. The idea behind the displays is that the physical organization of the space should be flexible enough to allow for overnight changes in inventory. No such overnight changes are planned for window displays which are done by an outside agency three times a year.

In the store, displays are haphazard, sometimes strangely anomalous. One might see an Indian head-cape draped over a terra cotta Japanese head or African carvings on Korean chests. In the Arts and Elegants store, signs are frequently legends made up by Cost Plus or the manager of that particular store. Neither the signs nor attributions of age are to be taken too seriously. The policy is caveat emptor. Cost Plus imports things on face value alone, regardless of subsequent interpretation. Nevertheless, some legends are remarkably accurate, as in the case of small wooden pilgrim souvenir shrines from Puri, Orissa. Others, while accurate, may be indiscriminately applied to all similar objects whether or not there is any connection between them. For example the Token of Love legend applies only to embroideries from Gujerat, but is routinely stapled to all embroideries from India by the local agent.

The computer is an indispensable aid in pricing items.<sup>3</sup> After the

addition of customs, clearance, and other overhead charges to the base price of an article, the landed cost is arrived at. The price above landed cost is determined by a number of different formulae, although the general principle is one of minimum markup. Often the markup is determined by a need to undersell any other organization carrying the same object. Some items, such as limited edition goods, are priced according to what the market will bear. Cost Plus always operates within what it calls the range of feasibility, that is, what a customer might be willing to pay for a particular article, regardless of the price range. Ten dollars is thought to be the upper limit for impulse purchase items, and since impulse buying is what Cost Plus courts, a large part of the merchandise falls into this category. Nevertheless, Cost Plus does not confine itself to any one financial bracket, aiming at a broad spectrum of the buying public. On the whole Cost Plus has to be aware of what other sellers are charging for similar merchandise because it is felt that if offered the same item at nearly the same price the average customer is likely to patronize competitors who also offer credit and services.

Besides rendering no services beyond careful wrapping, Cost Plus differs from department stores in that it is not bound by seasonal changes of merchandise, with the exception of Christmas. Goods do not have to be marked down and put on sale at regular intervals throughout the year. In fact, no one is too concerned if an item does not sell immediately. One informant remarked that sooner or later, what with rising prices, everything will begin to look like a bargain. While there are no sales in the department store sense, certain items are often featured. In these cases, Cost Plus is careful to keep at least a few days supply of the advertised

item in its South San Francisco warehouse.

Although it does have the advantage of flexibility in terms of ordering, sale, and display, the direct import business has one serious drawback. Deliveries are less secure due to the twofold vagaries of artisans and dockworkers. The time lag between ordering and delivery necessitates planning about a year in advance so that during the pre-Christmas rush the following Christmas's merchandising possibilities are investigated.

Customer feedback is demonstrated in simple terms by whether or not an item sells. Regarding political pressure in the case of goods from controversial countries, Mr. Katten (the Executive Vice President) stated that Cost Plus had been relatively free of that sort of thing, unlike competitors in Los Angeles. However, in one instance Cost Plus yielded to pressure from consumers. Goods from South Africa are no longer imported. While believing that in time everything will look like a bargain, two informants showed concern for prices rising too rapidly beyond the feasibility range, thereby making it a problem for Cost Plus to continue re-ordering certain items. A Chinese workbasket which will sell readily at \$8.00 is in no way going to look like a bargain at \$18.00 because there is too much of a gap between its price and its intrinsic worth. It is for these reasons--unpredictability of orders, lack of uniformity in successive consignments, rising prices, recalcitrant government agencies, and so forth--that Cost Plus is constantly on the lookout for new countries and new potential.

Buyers, agents, and artisans.

Intuition and a tacit consensus on suitability govern what we see

at Cost Plus more than adherence to a set of ironclad criteria. The nebulous, intangible factors affecting choice ultimately play a powerful role in influencing our perceptions of the material culture of the over 50 countries represented at Cost Plus. Consequently, the buying structure of Amthor Imports is the most important aspect of this study from the standpoint of Art and Culture.

In its incipient stages, buying for Cost Plus involved a canny selection of other importers' surplus stock. Lincoln Bartlett, described by Mr. Katten as being a man of extraordinary perception, a tone and trend setter, was responsible for most of the buying until 1968 or so. A true arbiter, he travelled around Asia and Mexico looking for arts and crafts the likes of which had not been represented on the American market before. Contacts with artisan groups, reliable exporters, and agents were established and maintained until his retirement. William Amthor, the other founder, is still regarded as "Mr. Cost Plus", acting as occasional buyer, initiator, and roving ambassador for the organization.

Formerly, Cost Plus made attempts to deal directly with artisans or their immediate representatives. Attempts were made in the Phillipines and India to subsidize entire artisan communities. Such attempts were unsuccessful, according to Mr. Katten, because of administrative problems. It proved far better to deal through nationals who have a better understanding of the cultural variables, with Cost Plus supplying standards and specifications through an American designer.

With the increased demands of a rapidly growing business, Cost Plus began to deal through foreign agents, also establishing branches of Amthor Imports in Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Mexico City. There are agents, some of

long standing, in Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Kenya, India, Pakistan, and Europe. Eastern European countries are dealt with through their government agencies. About 50 percent of the total volume of business is done with Japan. India is a close runner-up.

While Cost Plus prefers to deal through its branches or agents, no options are foreclosed. Amthor Imports is listed with the Chamber of Commerce and various consulates; ensuing enquiries are acknowledged, although they are usually directed to foreign agents of Cost Plus. Buying may be done by others at Cost Plus besides those officially designated for the job. People who come in off the street are not turned away if they have something of interest to sell. In addition, small lots of merchandise may be bought at local gift shows.

Regardless of other possible options, Cost Plus and its agents function on a basis of mutual loyalty and reciprocity. Agents are relied upon to understand the nature of the American market, propose new items, control quality, and provide interesting information on their products. While agents may not deal exclusively with Cost Plus, they are relied upon to safeguard Cost Plus's original commissioned designs. A mutual understanding that there is no copyright underlies this agreement; at best Cost Plus can expect a six month head start on a given item. In cases where a country exports a broad range of goods, agents may subcontract. In India, the agents are a family of seven brothers, each in charge of one aspect of the business.

Except in the case of Mexico, representatives or agents are nationals. They are chosen on the basis of previously satisfactory dealings rather than for their innate aesthetic sensibilities. The final

test of their ability is how well their selections sell. In order to keep up with current trends in the United States, agents make periodic visits here with the twofold purpose of being inspired and of seeing what competitor countries are up to.

Foreign agents work in conjunction with local buyers at the San Francisco office of Amthor Imports. Local buyers are assigned geographically except in the case of clothing, jewelry, furniture, and ceramics. Their responsibilities are to keep abreast of all current trends by reading literature, visiting gift shows, and by being aware of what the competition is carrying. They travel abroad once a year to explore new possibilities and to keep in touch with the foreign agents. Except in rare instances, they do not buy goods directly but photograph good prospects for later consideration. Agents and others constantly submit samples or photographs to them for approval, but before any is given, full specifications are required. One staff member handles the follow-up on a fulltime basis.

Buyers do not design, but they do copy, a routine matter in the import business. They also suggest modifications in an otherwise acceptable item. For example, the clothing buyer routinely suggests changes in construction; the ceramics buyer may inform an English pottery that Californians might fancy a particular kind of dinnerware in green.

My first interview, with the public relations agency, left me with the impression that Cost Plus suggested but did not initiate. A subsequent interview, with Mr. Katten, proved quite the contrary in two specific instances. Mrs. Provensano and her staff design all paper products which are then manufactured in Japan. She also submits designs for pot-

tery, some coordinated with the paper goods, and has also initiated adaptations of traditional forms such as Huichol yarn painting.<sup>4</sup>

Roy Ginstrom is Cost Plus's roving designer.<sup>5</sup> For the last five years, he has introduced not only new colors and forms to traditional artisans, but also new techniques in printing and weaving. A specific instance of modification is the introduction of the silk-screen process to the ancient block-printing industry of Farrukabad in North India. Feeling that the traditional process, block printing, offered limited possibilities he introduced silk-screening, which affords the opportunity for larger, more freely handled designs in keeping with current Western tastes. While the artisans were balky at first, their resistance was finally overcome. In keeping with the covenant between agents and importers, the bedspreads executed according to Cost Plus's specifications do not flood the local markets.

Numdah rugs, corvilinear crewel embroidery on felt, have also been modified to exercise a broader appeal in the United States. A whole new pattern vocabulary has been added, consisting of motifs drawn from Indian architecture, or in some instances, Western sources. Flat-woven Indian rugs and mats are now produced in colors catering to prevalent American tastes.

In addition to his work with artisans in India and the Phillipines, an important source of table mats, Mr. Ginstrom is also responsible for the design of candles and allied products for execution in Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup>

In summarizing the buying structure, Cost Plus has a chain of procedures that is followed generally, but not inflexibly. The network of representative agents allows for a smooth and economical movement of

goods, while the loopholes allow for spontaneity.

Prognostications for the future.

As stated earlier, a concept store may burn out or turn into a colossus, depending on how long public interest can be held. The projected expansion of Cost Plus shows that there is no immediate indication of a loss of this vital interest. Infinite expansion is circumscribed by a definitely limited source of supply, which is why Cost Plus is constantly exploring new avenues. Mr. Katten had some definite views on the future of Cost Plus in relation to the demand for hand-crafted goods and their supply.

First, he said, the folk or traditional arts as we know them now may disappear before very long. In Japan, descendants of artisans find it more profitable to go into electronics. New Guinea may have already given its last gasp in terms of traditional arts due to the rapidly changing economy. It is almost a truism to say that where prospects are more enticing, descendants of artisans will be likely to choose more profitable occupations.

Cost Plus will respond to decline or disappearance by switching focus. South East Asia and Brazil are new areas of interest. Due to the constantly rising prices of Japanese ceramics, the United States is now being considered as a source of supply. Mainland China, which a couple of years ago seemed so promising, is less so now; Cost Plus's representative visited the Canton Fair and found that goods had to be ordered in unreasonably large quantities, with prices on some items having doubled or tripled since trade with Mainland China opened. Eastern Europe, which once courted the dollar is now finding the Common Market more

profitable. India and Mexico, however, are present and future standbys largely because of governmental recognition of the export value of traditional arts and a predictable labor force to support craft industries of long standing.

Asked if increased foreign demand has resulted in a deterioration in standards of workmanship, Mr. Katten replied that there was no hard and fast relationship between the two, although deterioration remained a distinct possibility. He cited the increasingly abysmal quality of Gujerat embroideries on sale at Cost Plus, adding that the Indian agent had predicted a drying up of the source. Traditionally, these embroideries have been done by women at home in their spare time. Judging from recent examples, there seems to be less and less time to spare since many pieces are hastily executed, some barely complete.

Increased demand may therefore be a dubious advantage for the craftsman. If his output is limited, he may lose customers. On the other hand, if he increases it to meet demand, he may be compelled to cut corners. If demand then slackens, he is back where he started or worse off than before. Cost Plus tries to adjust its demands to supply to avoid such problems, even though certain items could be sold in far greater quantity. Supply is expanded by the introduction of new techniques and forms, although Mr. Katten added, the difficulty there lies in getting craftsmen to change their ways.

Therefore, by controlled expansion, resilience, and a constant search for new options, Cost Plus accommodates itself to inevitable social and economic change, always keeping in mind the concept which brought it into being.

### Effects and issues.

One may praise or abhor the influence of such institutions as Cost Plus, but they cannot be ignored. There are three possible groups affected by this influence:

1. The American public
2. The artisans
3. The country of origin

#### 1. The American public.

The enduring popularity of Cost Plus and the proliferation of its competition make it clear that import stores have a magnetic attraction for certain segments of the American public. Part of the attraction can be explained by increases in travel, broadening of perspectives, and greater acceptance and enjoyment of diverse ethnic backgrounds, one's own and others'. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the crafts, a growing rejection of uniform, mass-produced objects in favor of those that show the mark of the hand. Handcrafts in the United States are limited to certain areas and certain people, and almost inevitably cost more than their machine-made counterparts.

The reverse holds true in many parts of the world. For instance, a mass-produced molded plastic suitcase has great prestige value for many Indians, much more so than a handmade leather bag. V. S. Naipaul comments on a newly rich Delhi matron who justifies her unrelenting search for imported gadgets and fittings by exclaiming that she is "Craze, just craze for foreign."<sup>7</sup> Are we all craze for foreign? Possibly, because it is certainly more than travel or the handcrafted aspect of the wares at Cost Plus that draws us. Could it be the lure of a multiplicity of identities

to be bought for a song, assumed, enjoyed vicariously and cast off at will? Or could the drawing power of Cost Plus be an extension of the Salvation Army or flea market phenomenon, namely the expectation of serendipity and high adventure at low cost?

After an investigation of the buying structure of Cost Plus, there is little doubt in my mind that our images and perceptions of folk art have been heavily influenced by the decisions and perceptions of others. We have certain well-defined expectations of the folk art of certain countries, attributing a constellation of qualities to each. The question that remains, however, is "Where does it begin?" Cost Plus's buying procedures show that our impressions arrive through the filters of others' aesthetic perceptions and economic expediency. But who influences the buyers? Are they guided by what they assume the American public wants? A more detailed study of the criteria for selection should perhaps give us some answers beyond the obvious one of mutual influence. As Linton points out, even a passive public can be an active factor in change by exercising its option to accept or refuse innovation.<sup>8</sup> Assuming that acceptance or rejection is based on how well things fit or on fortuitous timing.

Our expectations are also influenced by what we feel to be authentic. It is easy enough to compare a Mexican bird cage with an apparently identical wine rack and distinguish "authentic" folk art from "spurious" tourist or export art. However, it is just as easy to be deceived by objects which meet our criteria for folk art. The stuffed embroidery covered animals from Gujerat are a good illustration.

Made from traditional Gujerat mirrored embroideries, abundantly

available at Cost Plus, in the forms of horses, elephants, and camels, these animals fit our concepts of Indian folk art. They are colorful, light-hearted, and made from locally available materials. They are not folk art in that both production and consumption are geared to the export market. No doubt these animals were inspired by traditional village toys made from bona fide scraps, but visitors to the workshop can observe the destruction of otherwise intact embroidered panels in their manufacture, which increasingly bears the marks of mass-production.<sup>9</sup> In the late 1960s the industry was given additional impetus by two American designers, Charles Eames and Alexander Girard. Until the quality of the stuffed animals declined, along with that of the Gujerat embroideries, many people, including the writer, found them ingratiatingly charming, but they lost their appeal for many when their actual origin was discovered.

Age and rarity are associated with "authenticity". Origin myths, ascribed provenience, function, and dating all lend weight to an object. Any or all of these qualities assume considerable importance when a large cash outlay is involved since many buyers need to justify the expenditure in terms of the enhanced intrinsic worth of the object and its subsequent investment value. Less expensive things are taken at face value, but may be more appealing if some information on their background is provided. Cost Plus tries to supply this additional appeal, although it does not aim to substantiate any claims for age, rarity, or function. Based upon what we see at Cost Plus or any import store, our impressions of the folk art of any one country may very well be figments of a buyer's imagination, regardless of how genuine the object may appear. But does it matter? Perhaps it does, because the objects and artifacts we surround ourselves

with carry considerable symbolic weight, reflecting many of our fundamental ideals and values, both those that endure and those that change.

## 2. The artisans.

Perhaps the most perplexing issue raised by this study is the effect of foreign demands on traditional artisans. Using Cost Plus as a case in point, a newspaper article on Roy Ginstrom, the Cost Plus designer, discusses the vicissitudes of teaching old craftsmen new skills.<sup>10</sup> Artisans are persuaded to contemporize and modernize, "House and Gardenize," their traditional designs in order for their products to find favor in American eyes, while using "primitive" techniques and materials. From the article, one gets the impression that resistance on the part of the artisan is seen as irrational recalcitrance, resolved by the choice between decimation or survival through adaptation.

The choice thus offered may prove to be one of the insoluble dilemmas in the study of the anthropology of art. It can be regarded from the philosophical, aesthetic, and ethical points of view. Edmund Carpenter, for example, might feel a sense of outrage at the harnessing of traditional artisans to American interior decoration. Roy Ginstrom, on the other hand, points out that purists in museums, who feel that the artisans' ethic is being contaminated, are not supporting the crafts, which exist only where there is a market for them.

The study of change brought about by economic exigency has been helped by the tools of culture and personality research. Ron Maduro, writing on the Brahmin painters of Nathdwara, found that many artists who were formerly motivated by religious fervor and financed by courtly patronage now feel profound dissatisfaction at being obliged to crank out

tourist and pilgrim souvenirs in order to live.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps there is less inner conflict in the case of artisans who produce objects of a purely utilitarian, less symbolic nature, where aesthetic conviction is swayed by consumer demand.

While the position of cultural imperialism is clear-cut and uncompromising, it is difficult for an outsider to make value judgments based on personal notions of aesthetic and cultural integrity. History shows that craft industries do die out when demand falls off, as the Kashmir shawl industry did in the late 19th century. Artisans may die of starvation if they are too old or habituated to seek work of a totally different nature. Idealists may say that it is better to die of starvation than shame, that betrayal of one's integrity is a living death. Pragmatists might counter that traditional aesthetic integrity is a luxury that might have to be forgone in favor of survival. Moreover, it might be less jarring for an individual to continue what he has done since childhood, extending his skills along similar lines, rather than be forced into industry or domestic service. It might further be argued that if the hand crafts are to survive, there must be enough incentive provided so that the younger generation is not lured away by mammon. The issue is complex, and there are no simple answers.

### 3. The country of origin.

The export boom cannot help but have some influence on the countries involved. While the economic impact is undeniable, it is not within the sphere of this discussion. A more interesting issue is the extent to which acceptance and desirability on the foreign market enhances the appeal of certain goods in their country of origin. In the case of India,

casual observation over the years suggests that things have to cross the ocean twice before they gain acceptance by urban trend setters, excluding a core of serious enthusiasts, scholars, and collectors. This phenomenon appears to extend itself into other aspects of life. Scholars, writers, and artists all gain in favor after receiving the approval of the West, and it is a commonplace that foreign experts are valued beyond Indians with equal knowledge. This Western preference is a behavioral paradox, because most Indians display a chauvinistic attitude that cannot tolerate objective criticism.

There are shops in Bombay, and probably in other large Indian cities where local residents can pay large sums of money for good design that has been under their noses all along, concealed in the guise of rustic "rubbish". These simple, traditional household artifacts are sanctioned by the approval of the shops' arbiters who may be foreigners. In some shops, goods are displayed in limited quantities accompanied by a sales pitch touting the desirability of things that are the rage in New York or on the Riviera that have been snatched from the clutches of impatient foreign buyers. The same boutique owners often commission adaptations of traditional forms, some of which surpass anything seen at Cost Plus in terms of their ugliness or anomaly, making as much of cultural imperialism. These mutant offspring are generally copies of goods a foreign buyer commissioned, or may even be copied from foreign magazines.

#### Conclusion.

Field work in India or any other country where a similar phenomenon may be observed would be the best way of investigating the syndrome of undervaluing indigenous arts until they are taken up by the West.

Meanwhile, Cost Plus, because of its range and scope, offers the opportunity to test some of the hypotheses and constructs emerging from recent studies in Art and Culture. Not only would periodic observation of Cost Plus reflect change in a particular form, but might also show itself to be an agent in change and diffusion, since the absence of any copyright gives one country ample license to borrow from another.

There seems to be a tendency to think of these aesthetic borrowings and transmutations as one of many undesirable phenomena of the 20th century. Nothing could ever be as good as it once was, and it is all the fault of the crass materialism of the West, and such organizations as Cost Plus and Pier I. This attitude is not new. Sir George Watt, writing in 1903, laments the corrupting influence of European design on nearly all of the art industries of India. However, he does acknowledge that the artisan was not totally passive in this process of aesthetic bastardization.<sup>12</sup> A Benares brocade weaver of his acquaintance returned from an exhibition in London with a book of wallpaper samples which he deemed to be of inestimable value, compared to the "worthless old mica sketches, long out of fashion" he had been using. It was this treasured pattern book which provided the weaver with his most successful designs. Some were so successful that versions of them persist to this day.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The research grew out of a seminar in Art and Culture at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1973. The topic under discussion was folk art and the extent to which it is defined by our expectations. Members of the seminar found that, in spite of our diverse backgrounds, a surprising degree of consensus was apparent in our expectations of folk art. All could agree that: 1) folk arts are the objects of everyday living, being either utilitarian, decorative, or both; 2) folk art is not mass-produced on a heavy-industrial scale, showing therefore a tolerance for tool marks, mistakes, and unpredictability; 3) while folk arts are individual or personalized, they are seldom unique objects; 4) the approach to color is earthy, gay, bright, and exuberant; 5) folk art is often characterized by a sense of humor or whimsicality in spite of the gravity of subject matter; 6) materials are often drawn from the environment; and 7) symbolism is largely intended as a means of communication with the immediate group, or within the culture.

The following data are the synthesis of observation in the store itself combined with six interviews of varying length, the most productive one with the organization's Executive Vice-President. Interviews and observation were both hampered by the pre-Christmas rush, preparations for which begin much earlier than one might assume.

The writer gratefully acknowledges the time and cooperation of the following persons, listed according to the order in which they were interviewed: Stuart Mercereau, Art Blum Agency; Judy Johnson, Receptionist, Amthor Imports; Adrian Alvarez, Furniture Annex, Cost Plus; Andrew Katten,

Executive Vice President, Amthor Imports; Frances Provenzano, Advertising Manager, Amthor Imports; Ms. Mackey, Clothing Buyer, Amthor Imports.

<sup>2</sup>By direct imports is meant the absence of a United States middleman.

<sup>3</sup>It will be noticed that to simplify record keeping, every article sold by Cost Plus bears a tag with a computer number and its country of origin.

<sup>4</sup>McCabe, 1971, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup>Anderson, 1972, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup>While on the subject of modification, it would be appropriate to tell the tale of the Korean brassware, an anomalous assortment of forms totally unlike anything one might expect of Korean design. On seeing this array, the observer might conclude that this is a prime instance of the craftsman's original aesthetic having been sold for a mess of pottage. Mr. Katten revealed a different situation. After the Korean War, an entrepreneur decided to turn swords into ploughshares by using brass shell cases as the basis for a new export industry. Designs were copied from the West, such as a prototypical Dansk candleholder. Cost Plus submitted the designs of English goblets and alphabet plaques to the manufacturer. When the supply of shell cases is exhausted, the industry will die out since imported brass would drive the price above the feasibility level.

<sup>7</sup>Naipaul, 1964, p. 90.

<sup>8</sup>Linton, 1971, p. 153.

<sup>9</sup>Information on the circumstances of production given to the writer

by Gyöngy Laky who visited the workshop in 1971-1972; also by Alexander Girard, private communication, 1974.

<sup>10</sup>See also Anderson, 1972, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup>Maduro, ms.

<sup>12</sup>Watt, 1903, pp. 335-336.

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