

Researching  
Folk Arts  
How to go about it

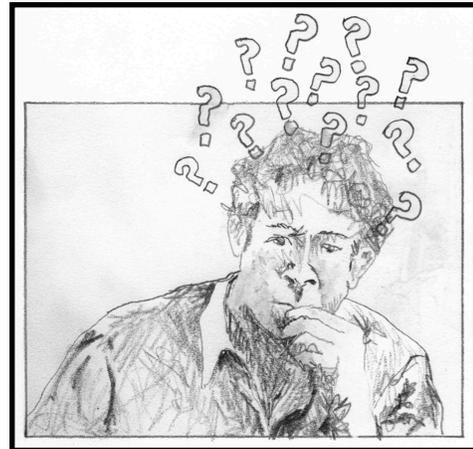
By  
Sally and David Nye

# Researching Folk Arts

## *...how to go about it*

by Sally and David Nye  
Illustrations by Kathy Stanton

Researching the folk arts is fun, rewarding, inspirational and educational. With that said, it can also be very difficult and frustrating at times. How well we know!



We are often asked: ***How does one research an Old World folk art that is almost lost?*** ...especially when there are perplexing variables such as:

- a. time lines encompassing several hundred years
- b. foreign language barriers
- c. countries devastated by war
- d. countries divided and new borders established
- e. diverse cultures within a country

Even though these obstacles present challenges, research can be very productive and gratifying. We hope this article will inspire you to do in-depth research on your favorite subject.

To do this type of research requires you to have:

- a. an insatiable curiosity
- b. passion for your subject
- c. perseverance
- d. patience

In our case, our passion is the fan bird, also known as the *Holy Spirit* bird. Even with many dead-ends, we pressed on with our research. Little did we know that the outcome would result in two books about fan-carving.

## Other Folk Arts...

Other folk arts that have gained interest in recent years are:

**Lovespoons:** spoons with traditions and meaningful symbolism.

**Treenware:** handcrafted wooden kitchen tools and other small household items.

**Chip carving:** symbolism on all sorts of treenware, furniture and even buildings.

**Cookie molds:** legends and customs of the patterns.

**Gargoyles:** meaningful use of them and their strategic placement.

**Wood spirits:** A nature diety associated with spirituality.

**Green Man:** A face within dense foliage with vast symbolism throughout many cultures.

**Trolls:** Scandinavian influence. Commonly known as mischievous but can be friendly.

**Ships' Figureheads:** Iconic symbol on the ships' prow that offers protection and guidance during maritime navigation.

Today, more woodcarving authors are including interesting and intriguing facts in their articles and books. They not only show how-to-do the carving, but they also include the history and the meaningful symbolism it represents.

If your *passion* of a particular subject is nearing *obsession*, consider a *deeper dig* to see what you can find. Thanks to the computer, it can be done in the comforts of your own home.



## Searching the Internet

Take advantage of the WorldWideWeb. Start by typing your topic name into the search engines. An easy website to use is:

<http://www.freeality.com/>

It has several search engines ...try them all, plus ones familiar to you. Each one uses different search techniques.

By choosing different search engines, it is common to find an elusive website which contains that one little bit of useful information. That one step can lead to more.

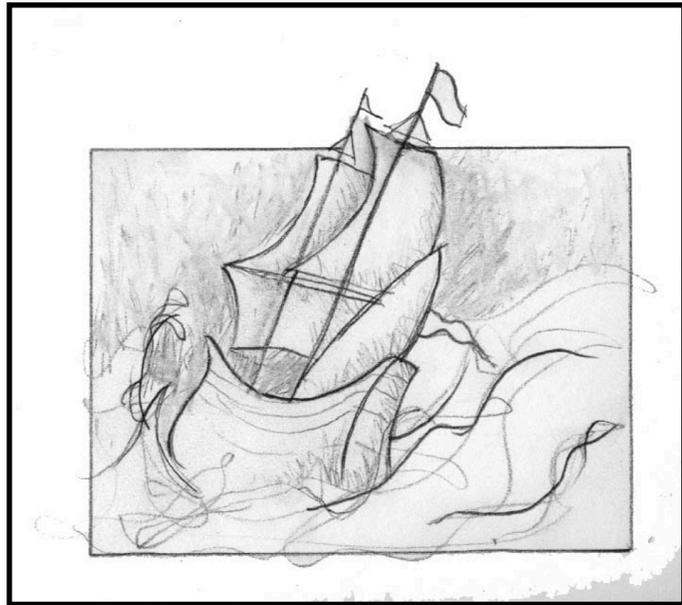
While searching, type in any and all words that come to mind about your topic. In our case, we used fan bird, cedar bird, splint bird, Holy Spirit bird, ceiling bird, Holz Vogel, zvaty duch. Yes ...even languages other than your native tongue.

**Tip:** Google translate link...

<https://translate.google.com/>

Google translate link and dictionaries that translate your language to another are useful. Wherever your research takes you, it is most helpful to learn and use basic words and phrases in the various languages. Pocket travel books are also helpful with language and customs.

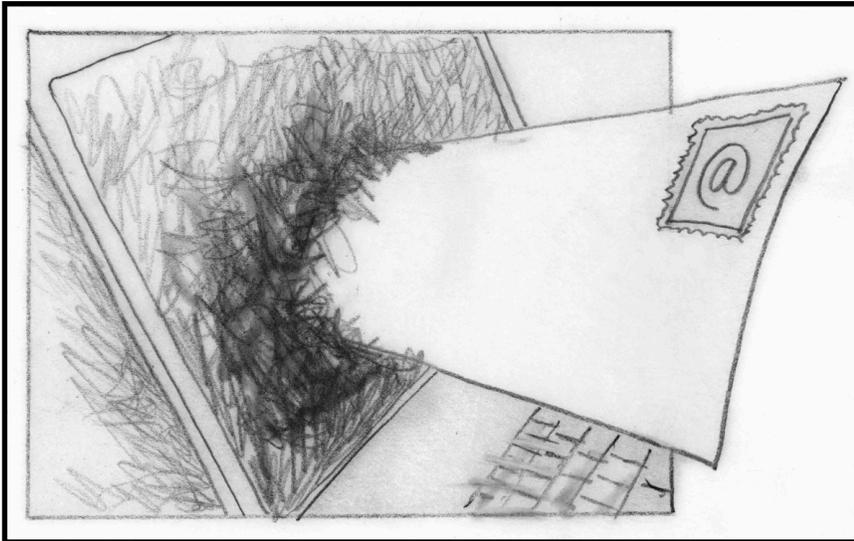
## **Museums and Cultural Centers**



European museum Ethnographers say that the younger generation is interested in learning about the traditions of their heritage. They are asking questions. To find answers, many are traveling to countries where their ancestors immigrated. The ancestors settled in ethnic communities where they felt most comfortable. Life remained undisturbed compared to life in their homeland that was often in turmoil or interrupted by war. Because of this, many cultural aspects, including folklore and folk art may be more intact than in the mother country.

So while at the computer, look for cultural centers or museums in these ethnic communities. They may provide pertinent information about your topic. In our case, we not only obtained valuable information about the fan bird at the National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, but we also gained contacts in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia.

Expand your Internet search to include museums or cultural centers in the homeland. For example, if you are searching in Germany, type in names like: Germany museums, Germany folk art museums, Germany cultural centers, etc. Of course these web sites will be in their native language. Look for words that look similar to folk art, cultural, etc. (volkskunst, kulturell, etc). Scroll through these sites. Because of photos, you will soon know which sites are of value. Some of them offer multiple languages. If so, click on the language of your choice.



## **Sending Email**

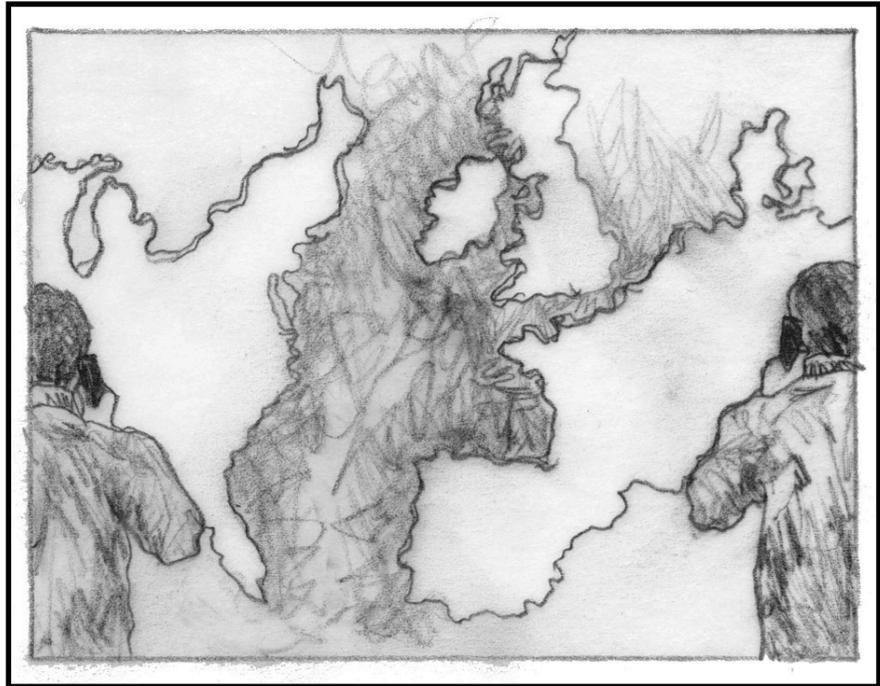
When you find a web site of interest, try to make contact. There is usually a *contact* link to send an email. When making initial contact, be brief. Say your greeting in their language if possible ...it is polite. State your business in simple sentences and attach a digital photo of your subject. A picture is worth a thousand words, especially across language barriers.

**Tip:** Keep an active file of your correspondence that you can refer to later:

- a. contacts ...plus their titles
- b. email addresses
- c. phone numbers
- d. business hours
- e. any and all important notes

Unfortunately, it is common not to receive a reply to your initial email. Don't be disillusioned! Remember, they are usually understaffed and overworked. After two weeks with no reply, send another email. Graciously let them know it is your second try. After a few days and still no reply, contact them by telephone.

## Contacting by Telephone



When contacting museums and cultural centers by telephone, call during *their* business hours and try to say *hello* in their language. Then ask if they speak your language. If they do not, try to communicate as best you can. Remember, speak slowly and use simple sentences. Try to ask if there is a colleague who speaks your language. If not, ask if you can send an email. The word *email* is a universal word. It is easier to read/understand a foreign language than to speak/hear it.

When you tell them you sent previous *emails*, more often than not, they will ask you to send a new email ...but to a different email address. This time it may go to a museum Curator or Ethnographer. The door is *now* open! You have their attention and your inquiries can begin.

The museum Ethnographer or Curator may very well find archival documents or antiquarian books on your subject. They might even know of artisans that were featured in their museum during an exhibition.



## Libraries and Books

Take advantage of libraries since books will probably be your primary source of information. University libraries may be the most fruitful because their reference librarians offer excellent resources or sites to peruse.

Also search Internet sites that feature used and out-of-print books:

<http://www.biblio.com/>

<http://www.abebooks.com/>

<http://www.bookfinder.com/>

<http://www.zvab.com/index.do>

When looking through these sites, search under as many names related to your subject category as you can. In our case, we were thrilled to find even a small paragraph in an occasional book. Each new find gives renewed energy to the "hunt."

### **Tips:**

- a. Visit antiquarian bookstores. Tell the shopkeeper what you are looking for and most likely he will join in your search.
- b. When a book is found, do not ignore its bibliography. Within its list, there may be a book or article related to your topic.

## ***Discoveries!***

Your excitement builds as you discover archival documents, articles, books, photos, and even old folk art items. But there is also anxiety because many of these documents are written in a foreign language. To translate this material, find a university that offers that language in its curriculum. It is there that you may find a translator ...even articles written in *old script*.

It is most beneficial to have detailed country maps of the places where your research takes you. Document the location of your discoveries on the maps with small note tags. The maps are useful when placed on your office wall. A pattern may develop showing a specific ethnic, religious or cultural influence.

## **Symbolism**

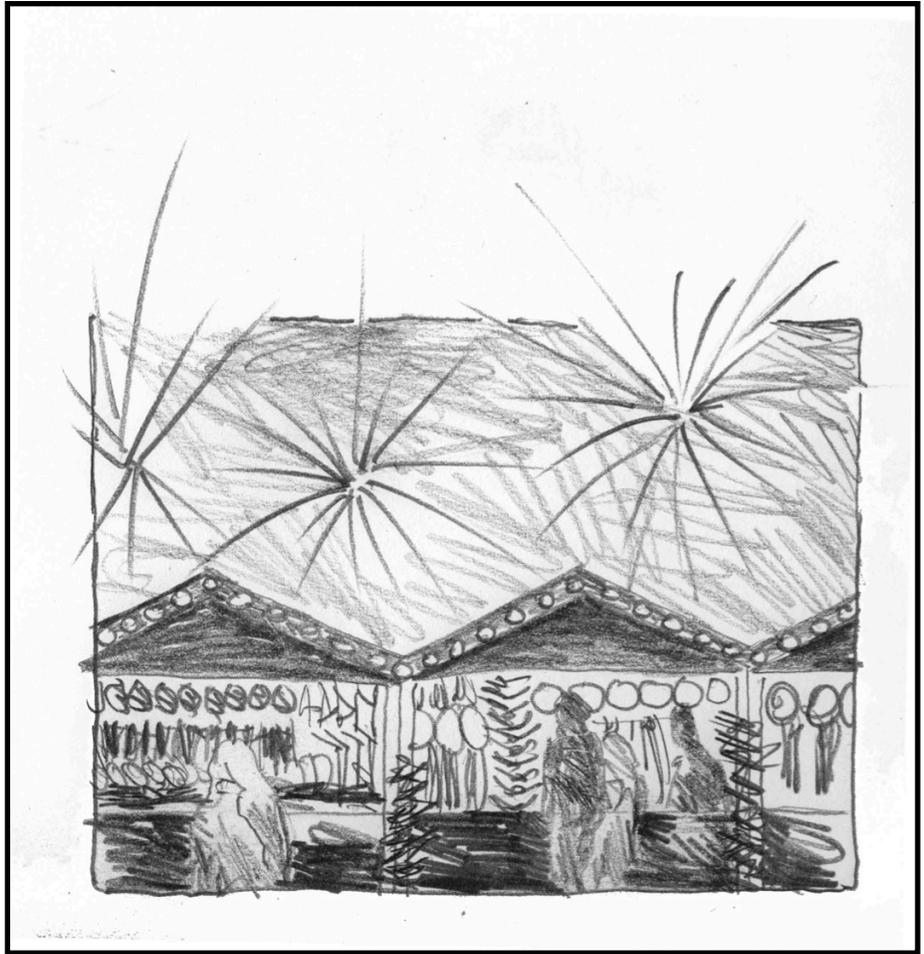
As you know, it was the common person who made folk art items. As most could not read or write, symbols were important in their daily lives. This unwritten language had a deep meaning and often reflected a spiritual nature. Therefore, meaningful symbols were often incorporated into the design of their handcrafted items.

With this in mind, you may have to search a little deeper for the meaning of this *symbolism*. Open your research to include:

- a. heraldry
- b. alchemy
- c. masonry
- d. religions
- e. cemeteries
- f. even postage stamps that commemorate one's culture

The study of iconography with regard to the folk arts is not only fascinating but may also reveal surprising results. Why? ...because symbols have been embedded throughout diverse cultures since the beginning of time.

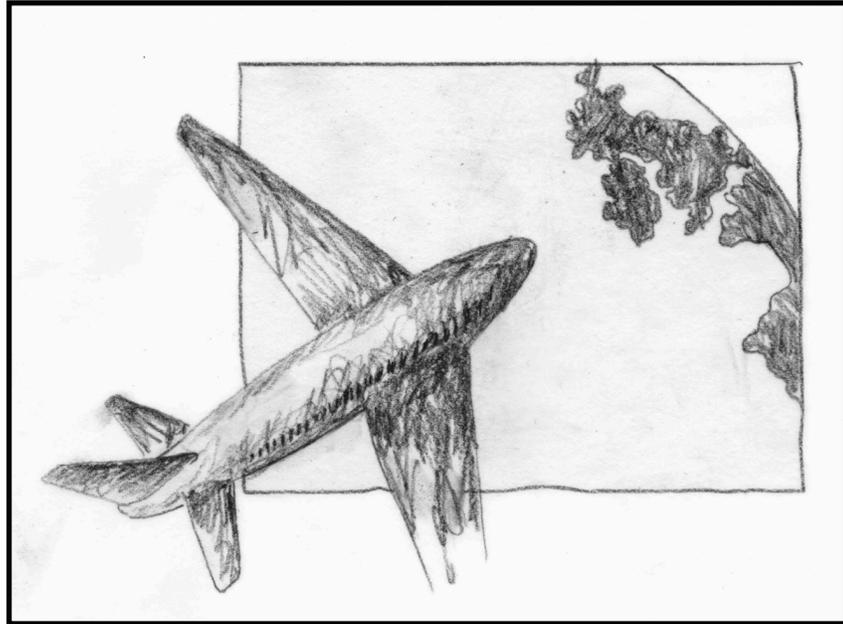
## **Celebrations and Festivals**



Celebrations and festivals that take place today are based on cultural and historical events of the past. These include religious holidays and holy events, the summer and winter solstices, harvest times, medieval fests and other celebrations unique to specific localities. It is at these events that old folklore and customs are recalled and where folk art items are displayed and sold.

The Easter markets and Christmas markets are popular with the locals and tourists. Since artisans of the area bring their wares to these festivals, contact the Chamber of Commerce to inquire about these exhibitors. One may have the folk art of your interest, so try to make contact. Do not overlook artisans that are now deceased. Their family members could have valuable information. Ask if it is possible to obtain copies of family photos and documents.

## **Travel**



If at all possible, travel to festivals, talk to the artisans, meet with museum personnel or anyone with whom you have had contact. Your file of correspondence and your maps are now invaluable to you!

When visiting museums, they may find artifacts in their archives pertinent to your study. These items are not always displayed in museum exhibits. In our case, they not only found fan birds, but also often arranged meetings for us with the local fan carvers along with a translator.

## **In Conclusion...**

To immerse oneself into a project such as the in-depth study of a folk art will no doubt be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life. As discoveries are revealed, they will lead you to places you never imagined. The path is yours to follow. In our case, the fan bird took us back in time to the early 1600's as well as across Europe and Scandinavia ...and our research continues.

When one understands the history, customs and traditions associated with the folk arts, it brings meaning and passion to doing them today.

There is a long list of folk arts for you to study and write about. We encourage you to publish your discoveries to preserve it for future generations.

Most of all, enjoy the journey!