

VILLAGE VIEW

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Country things, according to some people who hold themselves to be experts on the subject, are enjoying a nationwide renaissance. Country clothes are selling well in fashion departments of retail stores. Everyone knows country music has been increasing in popularity for a decade or more. Country cooking is frequently seen advertised; sometimes it's called home cooking. And sometimes people who go to restaurants featuring home cooking find themselves seated at the same table with utter strangers, serving themselves from the big platters and bowls being shared by others at the table. Country crafts find favor among people at all levels of sophistication and income; do-it-yourselfers, whether rich or poor, pay only for materials, and then invest their time. Rural or urban, our neighbors and friends are demonstrating a marked tendency to appreciate simplicity, to disregard sophistication and to lean in the direction of the homely.

Consider textiles: Hand-loomed fabrics are used freely by interior decorators. We find them upholstering chairs and sofas, draping our windows, covering our beds, and on pillows. Antique Oriental carpets and Scandinavian shag rugs are both examples of man's handiwork. Or woman's. Place-mats, napkins, tablecloths woven of linen or rushes, stitched from quilting or appliqued with felt, edged with rickrack or delicate lace, dress our dining and luncheon tables whether we expect just the family or to serve a company meal.

Nor are uses in handwoven materials limited to interior decoration. Both men and women are choosing clothing made from hand-loomed wools and wearing them in skirts, jackets, ties, shawls, and vests . . . sometimes in casual styles . . . other times in very dressy modes.

Patchwork and quilting grow more popular with each passing week. And not only among those who purchase products using quilting. Especially among people who work with textiles for pleasure and economy, but also among those who are quilting and patching for profit, the craft is finding an expanded market and spreading from the bedroom throughout the house and into women's clothing, though not yet to men's.

Other handiworks—knitting, crocheting, hooking, needle-pointing—are generating renewed activity among Americans. Both men and women are plying needles with increasing enthusiasm and growing proficiency. A semi-retired farmer from Iowa is creating a latchhook rug of a quality that rivals the best to be found in the finest stores. A former high school principal from Michigan, father of five grown sons and daughters, crochets a lacy white baby's blanket for each new grandchild. Already completed are five king-sized afghans, wedding presents to each of his own children.

A practical reason for returning to a greater appreciation for country things may be deemed the on-going need for energy conservation. Dressed in warm clothing, quilted jackets and vests for instance, we can be comfortable in rooms where lower temperatures are maintained. At the same time, style-conscious people demand that clothing be attractive as well as comfortable. Quality fabrics, hand-loomed from natural fibres, well-cut and well-tailored, fulfill both requirements.

Looking behind the practical, and moving into the realm of possibilities, there could conceivably be other reasons for the resurgence in country things, reasons we find hard to establish as fact, but which do, nonetheless, have advocates. And the side of the advocates deserves consideration, because the trend is not only widespread geographically, it is widespread in all facets of country things. The universality of

the movement may, indeed, be a statement people are making, one sociologists might do well to heed.

As people find themselves more and more surrounded by industrialization, by high-tech equipment, by computerization, they seem to respond by reaching back to grasp at the familiar, the simple, the homely. Many people today are feeling threatened by technical changes which appear to sweep through every phase of human endeavor, and which seem to make obsolete the productive capacity of hundreds of thousands of Americans. For many people, technology has already soared to unreachable heights, to a point where only investment of time and money in both equipment and training make the level attainable.

The auto mechanic no longer depends upon his innate ability to feel and hear an engine is running at optimum efficiency; part and parcel of the engine of an automobile is a computer with which the mechanic's equipment must interface. The accountant no longer prepares tax returns for his clients; he supplies data to a computer. The computer prepares the return. At banks automatic tellers accept deposits and dispense withdrawn funds; the friendly person at the savings' window has been replaced by a machine. Over and over again, almost in any direction we turn, we find people are being replaced by machines.

It is unnerving.

And as a result, perhaps, mankind is responding by clinging to things still comprehensible. A person can understand a loom, how knitting needles or a crochet hook hang a loop on a loop to create fabric whether bulky sweater or frothy lace on a hanky. A man can run a lathe and turn a spindle, and see the work move under his hand and tool. A woman can cut her patches, sew them in a pre-planned patter, and watch her quilt take form and size and shape.

Church fairs, Rummage sales, Flea markets. Wherever crafts and handiwork are to be found, people flock. Some are bargain hunters. Others seek quality birthday and Christmas gifts for loved ones. And some purchase beautiful handcrafted items because they are beautiful, and because they are handcrafted, and for no other reason.

Hand-tooled leather compares well with the plastic product that imitates it; hand-thrown pottery may possess beauty not to be found in mass-produced dishware. Blown crystal is lovelier than pressed glass. An original painting by an unknown artist may be of greater value than a Rembrandt print.

Quality lies in imperfection as well as in perfection. The hands that guided the needles can be seen and felt in the hand-knit sweater. The fingers that held the wood block and whittled the figurine illustrate the degree of skill developed by the woodcarver; his imprint remains on the finished work. No two pieces of hand-painted china may be exactly alike, a detail that makes the set priceless; certainly, irreplaceable. A sculptured bust, or a perfectly molded one; which would be the better quality?

While it is undoubtedly true that certain home- or hand-made things appear amateurish or inferior to some machine-made items, quality varies in the products of different craftsmen. The opportunity to choose work of the master craftsman is given to all who take the time and trouble to compare, and to all who make the distinction, and to all who are willing to pay fairly for superior workmanship.

In this fast-moving world many of us feel we are, increasingly, losing contact with other people. Country spirit, an interest in the welfare of our fellowmen . . . like country things, products personalized by the touch of human hands, is enjoying rebirth because it fills a need, a human need, and offers a certain balance, weighed against technological strides.