



## Documentary Arts: Innovative, Interdisciplinary Methodologies Since 1985

by Alan Govenar

For more than four decades, Documentary Arts has introduced and employed innovative interdisciplinary methodologies to broaden public knowledge and appreciation of the arts of different cultures in all media, from photographs, films, and videos to studio and field recordings, interactive installations, and musical theatre productions. Much of the work of Documentary Arts draws its impetus from the ways that ordinary culture influences different modes of human expression, whether in oral storytelling, novels, films, video, radio, or on-stage performance.

Documentary Arts has published catalogues, books, and education guides and launched numerous websites, including [Documentary Arts](#) and the online magazine [Truth in Photography](#), developed in association with Aperture, Magnum, and the International Center of Photography.

The projects undertaken by Documentary Arts are multifaceted and have often focused on the art and ideas of people who have been marginalized and misunderstood because they do not fit neatly into established academic disciplines. For each project, Documentary Arts has engaged a wide range of advisors, involving artists, educators, historians, folklorists, and other cultural specialists from Asian, Native American, African American, Latino, and Anglo American communities.

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About the Photo: Sheila Kay Adams, as seen in *Extraordinary Ordinary People*, a First Run Features Release.  
Photograph by Alan Govenar, courtesy of Documentary Arts.

Building trust among people who are skeptical and poorly represented, if represented at all, is difficult. Collaboration and sustained interaction with artists, organizations, and other partners have been crucial.

Among the many projects Documentary Arts conceived, developed, and produced, more than 35 years of work focused on recipients of the National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship, 1982-2016.

### **Books**

*Making Culture by Hand*, A series of five young reader books on Konstantinos Pilarinos, Irvin Trujillo, Bettye Kimbrell, Sonia Domsch, and Mozell Benson, Documentary Arts, 2025

*The Retablos of Jeronimo Lozano*. Schiffer Publishing, 2022

*Everyday Music*, Texas A&M University Press, 2012

*Extraordinary Ordinary People: Five American Masters of Traditional Arts*, Candlewick Press, 2006

[\*Masters of Traditional Arts Education\*](#)

[\*Guide\*](#) by Paddy Bowman, Betty Carter, and Alan Govenar, ABC-CLIO, 2002

*Masters of Traditional Arts: A Biographical Dictionary, Two Volumes*, ABC-CLIO, 2001

### **Radio**

“Masters of Traditional Arts,” 2000-2001, 52-part radio series on the diversity of music, spoken word, and art/craft traditions in the U.S., for national broadcast by WGBH Radio, Boston.

“Masters of Traditional Music,” 1992, 52-part radio series on the diverse musical traditions in the U.S., focusing on National Heritage Fellows, broadcast on 150 stations, 1993 Golden Reel Award, Best National Music/ Entertainment Series, National Federation of Community Broadcasters.

Taking a holistic approach, Documentary Arts has delved into the deep fabric of culture and interrogated the inflection points where the ordinary becomes exceptional. Everyday practices and beliefs are revealing, shedding light on historical issues and illuminating their impact in the contemporary world. The “ordinary” is foundational in the multitude of ways culture is expressed and passed on from one person to another person, one generation to the next, whether in rituals and ceremonies, or in arts, crafts, music, dance, and spoken-word traditions.

“Culture is ordinary,” the Welsh Socialist writer, academic, novelist, and critic Raymond Williams maintained in a 1958 essay.

...[T]hat is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind....The questions I ask about our culture are questions about our general and common purposes yet also questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind. (2014)

## Films

*Extraordinary Ordinary People*, 2017, 84-minutes, documentary on recipients of the National Heritage Fellowship, a breathtaking array of musicians, dancers, quilters, woodcarvers, and more demonstrate the importance of the folk and traditional arts in shaping the fabric of America. From Bill Monroe and B.B. King to Passamaquoddy basket weavers and Peking Opera singers, from Appalachia to inner city neighborhoods in New York, the mountains of New Mexico, the suburbs of Dallas, and the isolated Indian reservations of Northern California—each of the artists share exceptional talent, ingenuity, and perseverance.

*You Don't Need Feet to Dance*, 2013, 81 minutes, documentary on African immigrant Sidiki Conde, having lost the use of his legs to polio at 14, balances his career as a performing artist with the almost insurmountable obstacles of life in New York City.

*Master Qi and the Monkey King*, 2012, 81 minutes, documentary chronicles the life and work of Qi Shu Fang, one of the preeminent masters of Chinese Opera living in the U.S., and highlights the intricacies of Peking Opera, an art form hardly known in the West.

*Masters of Traditional Music*, 1991, 58 minutes, documentary of the 1991 Dallas Folk Festival opening, featuring Bua Xou Mua, Joe Cormier, John D. Holeman, Valerio Longoria, and Kevin Locke.

*Black on White/White and Black*, 1990, 26 minutes, 16mm documentary (with Bruce Lane) on the life and career of Alex Moore, a native of Dallas and the first Black Texan to receive a National Heritage Fellowship.

*Texas Style*, 1986, 28 minutes, 16mm, documentary (with Bruce Lane) on rural life and traditional fiddling.

Building on Williams' thinking, David Trend, in his book *Everyday Culture: Finding and Making Meaning in a Changing World*, discusses how the meanings that inform and organize daily life often go undervalued and unexamined, because they are generally perceived as unimportant (2007). But for both Trent and Williams, it is ultimately the ordinariness of culture that makes it extraordinarily significant.

## Ethical Concerns

Who has the right to tell the story of culture? Is it only people who are part of that culture? Born in that culture? Raised in that culture? Can a researcher or storyteller from outside a particular culture accurately document the people living and working inside that culture? Does one need special training to successfully accomplish this mission? What happens with this documentation? Who has the right to use this documentation and for what purposes?

There is no clear, simple answer, because the truth of culture is invariably subjective. There are more questions than answers, especially in the contemporary world. Inundated with misinformation or inaccurate information propagated by the internet, social media, and artificial intelligence, deciding who and what to believe can feel insurmountable.

Our understanding of art, culture, folklore, and history is increasingly being undermined by the politics of erasure. Among the most glaring examples are Holocaust deniers and 2020 election deniers in the U.S., but perhaps more insidious are the policies of school boards to ban books and to upend, for example, African American history, especially as it relates to the facts of "slavery" and the factors that precipitated the Civil War. In 2022, the Texas State Board of Education proposed that slavery should be disingenuously described as "involuntary

## Interactive Media

[Masters of Traditional Arts](#) website, 2006, with 500 short videos, 4,000 photographs, 29 hours of field recordings, biographic entries on all National Heritage Fellows, 1982-2016, and an Education Guide

Masters of Traditional Arts Interactive DVD video kiosks, 2014-2016, Old Post Office Building, Washington, DC

Masters of Traditional Arts DVD-ROM, 2011, 3rd edition

Masters of Traditional Arts DVD-ROM, 2007, 2nd edition

Masters of Traditional Arts DVD-ROM, 2002, produced by Documentary Arts, published by ABC-CLIO, Inc.

## Exhibitions

*Extraordinary Ordinary People: American Masters of Traditional Arts*, national touring exhibition curated by Alan Govenar and Marsha MacDowell. Folk art and photographs from Documentary Arts collections, Michigan State University Museum, East Lansing, September 3, 2013-December 20, 2013; Castellani Art Museum, Niagara, New York, January 20-June 20, 2014; Western Folklife Center, Elko, Nevada, September 19-December 20, 2014; Wenatchee Valley Museum and Jack Straw Cultural Center, Seattle, Washington, April 23, 2015 -August 11, 2015.

*Dual Lives: Chinese Opera in New York City*, 2011, photographs by Alan Govenar, Wright Museum of Art, Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin; University of Wisconsin Stevens Point. Exhibition Catalogue (Beloit College and Documentary Arts, 2011).

dislocation” in Social Studies textbooks. In 2023, new standards adopted by the Florida State Board of Education (2023) included controversial language about how “slaves developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit.”

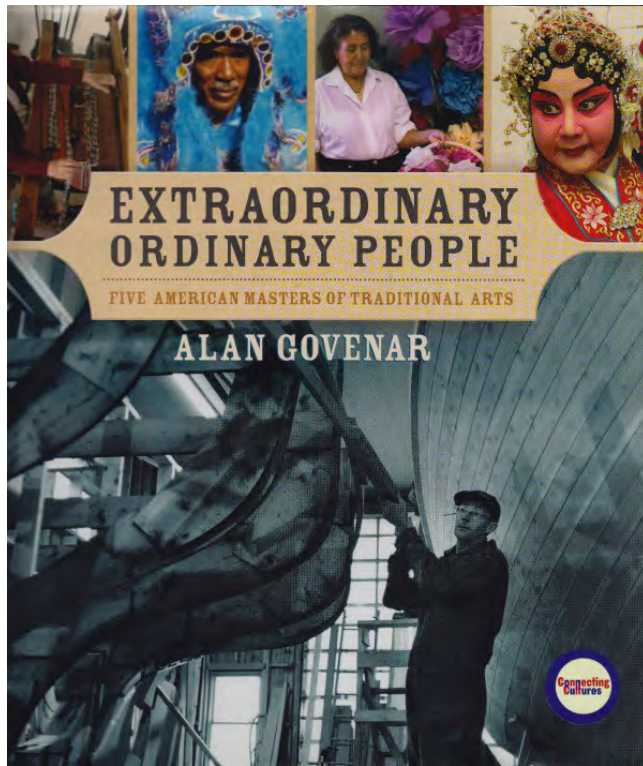
How can the injustices in the ways history is told and taught be foregrounded and rectified?

In the Documentary Arts film *Myth of a Colorblind France*, the African American historian Tyler Stovall observed:

The whole question of who has the right to the history of African Americans and to their role in not just American culture, but global culture is a really complex one. And I think for many African Americans it is fueled by the issue that they feel often times our culture has been, in effect, appropriated by others. Others that were not necessarily acting in the best interest of that community, that were not necessarily willing to take up the fight against racism. So, I think that’s a challenge, but I think at the same time, any culture benefits from being analyzed and investigated by many different types of people who bring their own sort of experiences to an understanding of that culture. So, I think African Americans have also benefitted from the fact that our culture has been considered by so many different types of people. (2022)

Issues related to cultural appropriation, extraction, and exploitation are difficult to discuss and to reconcile. The repatriation of cultural artifacts to their countries of origin has been an important step forward. Since 2001, a growing number of private,





municipal, and college museums have established research positions or whole departments to assess the provenance of their collections, including Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, the Denver Art Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the North Carolina Museum of Art, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA, the Worcester Art Museum, and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Asian Art, as well as the museums at Cornell, Princeton, and Yale universities.<sup>1</sup> In 2013, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, initiated the return of sculpture and other art objects to the Government of Nepal, the Government of India, and the Kingdom of Cambodia, in addition to restituting or reaching settlements "regarding 10 works it determined had been unlawfully appropriated during the Nazi era without subsequent restitution."<sup>2</sup>

Since 1985, Documentary Arts has worked to address the issues of appropriation and exploitation by bringing forth the points of view and needs of the people being documented and by working from within, collaborating with artists, community leaders, and local people who are often not consulted or involved in mainstream cultural studies. As Bob Ray Sanders, one of Documentary Arts' founding board members, points out,

Cultural appropriation implies taking something from someone in an exploitative, disrespectful, or stereotypical way, which is exactly the opposite of what Documentary Arts has done for the past four decades through its exhibitions, books, films, and Black photography archives. Indeed, this organization has highlighted individuals and cultures and brought many into prominence they had never known. Rather than "appropriation," the organization has shown "appreciation." Rather than exploitation, Documentary Arts has made it a point to provide "compensation" to those artists and participants who rarely received any remuneration. Instead of "stereotyping," this group made sure to have advisors who wouldn't dare allow such a thing.<sup>3</sup>

The ongoing collaboration Documentary Arts shared with the 2003 National Heritage Fellow, the renowned dancer Norma Miller, exemplifies not only this "appreciation" but also offers those who experience it a new set of texts for learning about Black culture that cannot be found in their textbooks.

### ***Stompin' at the Savoy***

Like many Documentary Arts projects, the world premiere of my new musical *Stompin' at the Savoy* (Delaware Theatre Company, April 16-May 4, 2025) evolved slowly, beginning during

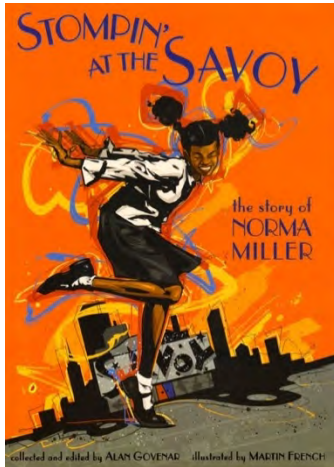


*Stompin' at the Savoy*, Delaware Theatre Company. Photo by Matt Urban, courtesy of Alan Govenar.

conversations with Norma Miller in 2000. Like Raymond Williams suggests, we used questions and conversations to build common meaning, but also to discover extraordinary worlds through this deeply personal work. We were equal partners in the creation of the children's book, *Stompin' at the Savoy: The Story of Norma Miller* (2006), and together we conceived the musical about her teenaged years. She was also involved in developing two Documentary Arts musical theatrical productions, *Blind Lemon: Prince of Country Blues* (2001) and *Blind Lemon Blues* (2004).

Norma's partnership shaped the work that will now carry forward her story for new audiences and learners. The first workshop of *Stompin' at the Savoy* was held in 2020, about nine months after Norma passed away at age 99 on May 5, 2019. By then, I had written multiple script drafts, striving to articulate her vision. In 2022, the York Theatre Company helped to organize a Zoom reading, followed by a two-week workshop. A year later, Documentary Arts produced a 29-hour reading, and in the fall of 2023, I began collaborating with the writer and dramaturg Phaedra Michelle Scott, whose creativity and insights were essential in shaping the dramatization of Norma's story.

Not a conventional musical, *Stompin' at the Savoy* evokes the effervescence of Harlem at a time when racism was rampant. *Stompin' at the Savoy* meshes what Norma called "the beat of the street" with the sounds of the Lindy Hop, with new arrangements of Big Band classics, from King Oliver, Chick Webb, Benny Goodman, and Ella Fitzgerald to period songs by lesser-known Black composers George Walker, Bert Williams, John Leubrie Hill, and Shelton Brooks. Throughout, *Stompin' at the Savoy* is infused with the incessant energy of jump rope rhymes and hand clapping games, many of which were collected by Ralph Ellison in the 1930s just a few blocks away from the tenement where Norma grew up, an easy walk from the Savoy Ballroom, the ubiquitous Home of Happy Feet, one of the first dance halls in the U.S. where Blacks, Whites, Jews, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, West Indians, and anyone else who wanted to swing out were welcome.



To broaden the outreach of the stage production of *Stompin' at the Savoy*, Documentary Arts developed a [website](#) with a guide written by Paddy Bowman to engage students and teachers alike in this story of dreams and fulfillment.

Moving forward, Documentary Arts is committed to expanding its collaborations and to nurturing the pursuit of the fundamental principles of cultural and gender equity. In today's world, the urgency of advocating the core values of diversity and inclusion has never been greater. To achieve these goals, Documentary Arts has begun exploring succession plans and identifying and gifting its vast collections to institutions and organizations that share its mission.

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### URLs

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- Truth in Photography <https://www.truthinphotography.org>
- NEA National Heritage Fellows <https://www.arts.gov/honors/heritage>
- Myth of a Colorblind France* <https://www.mythofacolorblindfrance.com>
- Masters of Traditional Arts <http://www.mastersoftraditionalarts.org>
- Stompin' at the Savoy* <https://www.stompinatthesavoy.com>

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See <https://observer.com/2024/07/museum-repatriation-news-in-2024>.
- <sup>2</sup> For more information on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's repatriation efforts, see <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collecting-practices/repatriated-objects>.
- <sup>3</sup> Bob Ray Sanders, email correspondence, December 12, 2024.