
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS COLLECTIONS POLICY STATEMENTS

Folklore and Folklife

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I. Scope

This statement refers to all materials that pertain to the subject of folklore and folklife, which is defined as the dynamic expressive culture and everyday practices shared within various groups, including but not limited to familial, ethnic, occupational, religious, and regional. Expressive culture includes a wide range of creative and symbolic forms such as custom, belief, technical skill, language, literature, art, architecture, music, play, dance, drama, ritual, pageantry, and craft traditions or other material culture. These expressions are primarily learned through oral or visual transmission, by imitation, or in performance, and are generally maintained without benefit of formal instruction or institutional direction. In most cases, expressions of self and collective identity come from place-based or cultural communities.

Development and administration of this Collections Policy Statement falls to staff of the American Folklife Center (AFC), founded in 1976 by an act of Congress (Public Law 94-201) to “preserve and present American Folklife.”

Folklore and folklife is documented in many formats, published and unpublished. (For more on formats, see section IV. Best editions and preferred formats.) The majority of AFC’s folklore and folklife collections contain ethnographic documentation of expressive culture, which includes both audiovisual documentation of traditions in practice and context as well as interviews with artists or culture bearers. More than half of AFC collections include interviews and oral histories. The ethnographic interview offers an occasion for personal narratives and storytelling, which are a research strength in AFC collections.

The core monograph and serial publications covered by this statement are found in Classes BL, BS, BV, D, E, F, GN, GR, GV, M, ML, NA, NK, PE, PN, PQ, PR, PS, PT, TT and TX. In addition to these materials, there are certain holdings within the Manuscript Division; the Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division; the Music Division; and the Prints and Photographs Division.

The Library maintains separate but overlapping Collections Policy Statements and Supplementary Guidelines for the [Veterans History Project](#); [Anthropology, Archaeology, and Ethnology](#); [Web Archiving](#); and [Lesser-Known Languages](#).

In general, the Library does not collect three-dimensional artifacts (e.g., baskets, quilts, costumes) that are products of folk-cultural practice. Materials that are not considered to be of national or international significance are not considered to be of high priority.

II. Research strengths

General

The Library's collections concerning folklore and folklife are undoubtedly the largest, richest and most comprehensive in the United States. Of these, the collections in the Archive of the American Folklife Center (AFC) are especially unique and valuable. The AFC archives, established in 1928, maintains the Library's largest and most significant collection of folklore and folklife materials from the United States and around the world. It is the country's national archive of traditional life and one of the oldest and largest of such repositories in the world. In 2018, the AFC archives held more than 6 million items created by ethnographers, communities of origin, governmental, and non-governmental organizations.

Areas of Distinction

Music and Dance of the United States

Music and dance are intangible cultural expressions that lend themselves to documentation and research (given their public or community-based nature). The Library's collections in this arena are extensive and represent virtually all diasporic communities in America in every state and territory. Particularly strong are pre-1950 African American genres, pre-1950 Anglo American genres, and 1930s-1960s Folk Music Revival materials.

Exemplars: Alan Lomax collection; Jean Ritchie and George Pickow collection; Caffe Lena collection; Center for Traditional Music and Dance

Music, Dance and Narrative of Native American communities

Of special note are the unparalleled collections documenting Native American communities, 1890s-present.

Exemplars: Frances Densmore collections; Helen H. Roberts collections; Willard Rhodes collections; Alice Fletcher collections

Music and Dance of the world

Traditions practiced by communities around the world have been extensively documented, and the Library's strength lies primarily in the fieldwork of English-speaking ethnographers. Significant Spanish-language and Portuguese-language materials from major ethnographers have long formed part of the collection and emergent genres continue to be documented.

Exemplars: Laura Boulton collections; Vida Chenoweth collection; Harold Conklin collection; Pete and Toshi Seeger Film Collection; John Donald Robb collection; Luiz Heitor Corrêa de Azevedo collections; Melville Herskovits recordings from Bahia, Brazil

Narrative and Verbal Arts

Narrative and Verbal Arts encompass a wide range of genres including stories, myths, legends, jokes, fan literature, memes, proverbs, folk poetry, and cowboy poetry, as well as premier collections of American English regional dialects, plus collections of Gullah (Sea Islands Creole), Caribbean, and French-based Creole dialects.

Exemplars: International Storytelling Collection, Web Cultures Web Archive, Literatura de Cordel collection, American Dialect Society Collection; Center for Applied Linguistics collection; Joseph C. Mele collection of dialect recordings from the University of South Alabama; Audrey R. Duckert collection.

Folklife and Material Culture

Folklife and material culture encompass a broad array of community traditions and tangible forms of expression, including but not limited to craft, folk art and vernacular architecture as well as customs and practices such as foodways, folk medicine and beliefs, secular celebrations or life cycle rites of passage. Documentation of local variation of community traditions provides valuable research content.

Exemplars: American Folklife Center field survey collections; StoryCorps collection; W.P.A. California Music Project; Juan B. Rael collection of Spanish American traditions

Vernacular Religious Expression

Religious folklife includes but is not limited to vernacular hymn singing recorded in homes, small churches, community centers, and at festivals; as well as documentation of wedding music and customs, funeral music; vernacular sermons (especially, but not exclusively, African American sermons); interviews with preachers and congregants, documentation of religious processions and material culture.

Exemplars: Jeff Todd Titon collections, Don Yoder collections, Kenneth M. Bilby collections, Juan B. Rael collection, Native American collections, John Henry Faulk collections, Eleanor Dickinson collection, Alan Lomax Haiti collection, Italian Americans in the West and other AFC Field collections.

Occupational Folklife

Documentation of occupational folklife creates research materials about expressive culture of occupational groups, individual workers and the workplace. Ethnographers are especially concerned with documenting the acquisition and transmission of work-related knowledge and skill, the social and cultural contexts of work and occupation and also the customs and narratives that confirm membership or status within a work group.

Exemplars: Occupational Folklife Project collections; George Korson Collection, Working in Paterson collection

Public Memory and Collective Experience

Communities and cultural groups often turn to folklore and traditional expressive forms to publicly name shared collective experience or comment on events of shared historical significance. Such activity often is a critical vehicle for creating community identity. In recent years, more communities and cultural groups are using oral history and documentation techniques, personal narrative, secular forms of commemoration, celebration and social protest, as well as material culture to express and frame shared historical experience. The Library holds unique documentation in this area.

Exemplars: Veterans History Project; Civil Rights History Project; September 11, 2001 documentary project collection; Inauguration 2009 Sermons and Orations Project collection; Surviving Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in Houston collection

Public Folklore

Cultural expression is sometimes re-contextualized for public educational presentation. In this manner, the American Folklife Center sponsors concerts, lectures, and symposia for local and online consumption, and this documentation is added to the research archive. Similarly, the Center holds major collections of folklore programs and events created by national and regional public folklore organizations.

Exemplars: National Council on Traditional Arts collection; Folklore Society of Greater Washington, American Folklife Center public programs collections

III. Acquisition sources

Whenever possible the Library attempts to acquire materials through non-purchase means, such as copyright, exchange or gift. The Library of Congress collections are heavily dependent upon materials received through the copyright deposit provisions of U.S. copyright law ([17 USC section 407](#) & [17 USC section 408](#)). For copyright demand, the U.S. regulations allow for the Library to receive analog and some digital materials. When items are offered in both formats the Library's default is normally the Best Edition print version, unless the publisher has arranged a special relief agreement with the Copyright Office. For materials not available to the Library through copyright deposit, or other non-purchase means, the Library acquires materials through purchase. Purchase is used predominately for foreign publications that are not widely available within the United States. The Library utilizes an array of traditional methods of library acquisition (firm orders, subscriptions, and approval plans) with vendors located in different areas of the world. In addition, the Library uses its six Overseas Operations Offices to broaden its foreign acquisitions opportunities.

IV. Best editions and preferred formats

For guidance regarding recommended formats for material acquired via purchase, exchange, gift and transfer, see: <http://www.loc.gov/preservation/resources/rfs>.

For information regarding electronic resources and web archiving, see the following Supplementary Guidelines: <http://www.loc.gov/acq/devpol/electronicresources.pdf> and <http://www.loc.gov/acq/devpol/webarchive.pdf>.

For guidance regarding best editions for material acquired via the Copyright Office, see: <http://copyright.gov/circs/circ07b.pdf>.

V. Collecting policy and levels

The overall context for this policy is the Library's position as the *de facto* national library of the United States. The Library of Congress places primary emphasis on American folklore and folklife and aspires to collect published works comprehensively in this area. The Library also collects material about the dynamic and emergent traditions of other countries and regions to illuminate dynamic connections and contrasts with diasporic communities in the United States and around the globe.

Format types include published monographs and serials, unpublished records, including graphic images, moving images, sound recordings, web sites, and artifacts. The local nature of folklore study means that research with primary source materials is particularly useful. As such, an emphasis is placed on developing the American Folklife Center archival collections.

The Library collects the following Folklore and Folklife materials:

Works on folklore and folklife published in the United States

Unpublished multi-format ethnographic documentation created by noted scholars and documentarians, including the work of folklorists, ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, and other ethnographers.

Papers, unpublished multi-format documentation of folk artists (including traditional singers, dancers, musicians, storytellers, and craftspeople) and folk-revival performers and songwriters, community-based events and practices and other vernacular practices (foodways, ritual, festival, etc.) of national and international significance.

Works published abroad about the folklore and folklife of countries other than the United States, and works published by foreign scholars and other important figures in the field (including prominent tradition bearers) of national or international significance

Works on American folklore and folklife published abroad

Works published abroad on folklore and folklife in general avocational newsletters, bulletins, and similar periodicals on folklore and folklife

Works with a geographic focus within the United States that have been created mainly for local distribution

Collections of the institutional papers of folklife organizations and granting institutions of national significance

Collections of ephemera concerning American folklore and folklife, including such items as posters advertising performances of folk music, folk festival programs, and on aspects of folklore and folklife in the United States

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