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Title: Folk tales

Author(s): Laura Gascoigne .

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Britain's attitude to folk art has often been one of indifference-- regarded as provincial, many fine examples have remained hidden in the country's regional museums. As a survey exhibition opens at Tate Britain, is it time to look more closely at Britain's vernacular traditions? The 1951 Festival of Britain was a post-war pick-me-up, prescribed by a Labour government for a weary nation. Alongside Britain's recent achievements in science and industry, it celebrated traditional British culture in a popular exhibition on the South Bank housed in the patriotically named Lion and Unicorn Pavilion. Inside an entrance guarded by giant effigies of the United Kingdom's heraldic beasts, handcrafted from straw (Fig. 1), displays reminded the public of great British institutions, from the Law and the Constitution to the English pub. At the Whitechapel Gallery, meanwhile, the exhibition 'Black Eyes and Lemonade' explored the quirkier fringes of British popular arts, hand- and machine-made. Selected by Barbara Jones, an artist and collector of contemporary curios and ephemera whose book, *The Unsophisticated Arts*, was published the same year, the exhibition--revisited last year in an archive display at the Whitechapel --included a tiled fire surround shaped like an Airedale

terrier and a talking lemon advertising Idris lemonade. Jones warned museum visitors to adjust their expectations of the objects on show: 'The museum eye must be abandoned before they can be enjoyed,' she said. Jones's was not the only publication on vernacular arts to come out in 1951. The publication of *English Popular Art* by Enid Marx and Margaret Lambert also coincided with the Festival of Britain. Marx--a distant cousin of Karl--was an artist and illustrator, best remembered today for her abstract designs for seating fabrics for the London Underground. With her friend the historian Margaret Lambert, she was an avid collector of English popular crafts, drawing creative inspiration from objects she collected. After campaigning unsuccessfully during her lifetime for a national museum for English folk art, she settled for the next best thing on her death in 1998 by leaving the Marx-Lambert Collection to the Peter Moores Foundation at Compton Verney. Five years earlier, Peter Moores had acquired the British Folk Art Collection of the art dealer Andras Kalman and his wife Dorothy for his planned museum in Warwickshire. With the two collections united under one roof, on its opening in 2004 Compton Verney became the first museum in the country to boast a dedicated display of British folk art. People from countries with strong vernacular art traditions find the indifference of the British to their folk art history baffling; the Hungarian-born Kalman was obliged to turn to America for a model for his pioneering collection. Various explanations have been offered for our comparative neglect of this side of our heritage, aside from snobbery. In his book *British Folk Art* (1977), James Ayres suggested that in our densely settled small island, the trickle-down effect of sophisticated 'high art' influences from urban centres into rural areas robbed our vernacular arts of their vigour and innocence, making them...

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