American High-Style and Vernacular Cultures

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Abstract
Brief excerpt from content used in lieu of an abstract:

Do we now have the materials for an integrated cultural history of the American colonies? Or to pose a more difficult question, can we realistically expect to compose an ordered history from the thousands of existing studies of chairs, folk songs, farm tools, poems, flags, election rituals, games, diet, costume, festivals, gravestones, pottery, and so on? Restricting the definition of culture to the older idea of the arts and manners of the cultivated classes does not make the task appreciably easier. The scholarly work on high style seems hopelessly diverse and unconnected. The academy divides the study of high culture among departments of art history, literature, music, history, and others, each with its own canons of evidence and significance, and they are only part of the story.

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The current attraction to vernacular styles is fuelled by a search for the spontaneous voices of a romanticised past (the roaring 1920s, the flamboyant 1950s) or for the noble savagery of a visual underclass (hand-made signage, ethnic food packaging). But nostalgia is a falsification of history, not a return to it; it treats the past not as the roots of the present, but as a distant entity. Appropriations of contemporary vernaculars project a barrier between a sophisticated "us" and a naïve "them". Many critics of modern culture have argued that mass media and mass production altered the entire conduct of both public and private life, and thus they cannot be treated as merely an innocent source of subject matter, imagery or style. High-level meanings shaped traditional cultural landscapes. This has been studied mainly in the high-style portions of traditional landscapes (although it also needs to be studied in their vernacular portions). Examples include large portions of order versus chaos, but of different orders. In principle, no manmade landscape can be chaotic (i.e., random), any more than culture can be; there can only be different orders, since landscape and culture are systematically (and systematically) related. References to "chaos" imply an order which, to a given observer, is incomprehensible, di