

Folk Cultures in the Long 20th Century (Brno, 18–19 Jun 26)

Masaryk University, Brno, Jun 18–19, 2026

Deadline: Dec 19, 2025

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Agents of Change: Folk cultures in the long 20th century

Folk art and cultures have often been seen as passive, unchanging, and frozen in a preindustrial era, linked with ideas such as nostalgia, decoration, and kitsch. From this point of view, grounded in late 19th and early 20th-century nationalist and modernist discourses, folk art seems to be a relic of the past that cannot respond to the challenges of modern societies, let alone contribute to social change.

There is another perspective – one that, admittedly, has received much less attention: numerous publications, exhibitions, institutions, and movements around the globe have recognised folk art as a continuous and contemporary practice with the potential to emancipate and activate individuals and groups. Ranging from projects dedicated to wellbeing and mental health to activist interventions from all sides of the political spectrum, folk art is connected to class, gender, and ethnic divisions, regional and national identities, as well as decolonial and economic emancipation. Far removed from the limiting associations with preindustrial traditionalism and decorativeness, it instead can be understood as an agent of change in both past and contemporary practices.

The workshop turns attention to folk craftspeople and artisans that have actively engaged with social upheavals, market shifts, government policies, and technological advances around the globe from the late 19th century to the present. Building on the idea of agency in folk art, the workshop welcomes papers that offer new perspectives on the meanings of folk art throughout the long 20th century in various geographical and political contexts. With the goal of developing new theoretical frameworks for the study of folk art across disciplines, the workshop seeks to open a long-overdue debate about the role of folk art in contributing to political, social, and economic change during the long 20th century. It asks:

How do folk cultures interact with politics and ideologies through specific actors, from the extreme right to alternative subcultures, from conformity to resistance?

How does folk art serve as a tool for emancipation and oppression?

How and why does folk art enter the market? What roles do commercialisation, tourism, and souvenir culture play in its formation?

How was folk art presented, exhibited and collected? How was folk creativity institutionalised?

What are the ecological dimensions of folk art and material culture?

The workshop is part of "Beyond the Village. Folk Cultures as Agents of Modernity, 1918-1945," a

project funded by the Czech Science Foundation (GAČR).

We invite scholars from various fields engaged with the topics of folk creativity, folk art and material culture to submit proposals (up to 300 words) for 20-minute papers, accompanied by a brief CV.

Please send the proposals to folkandchange@gmail.com by 19 December 2025.

Notification of acceptance of proposals will be issued by the end of January 2026.

For enquiries, please feel free to contact the members of the project team:

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Reference:

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