

BRINGING THE OUTSIDE IN:  
HOW NEW YORK'S ART MUSEUMS CREATED SELF-TAUGHT ART

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## **Abstract**

Folk art, also referred to as outsider art or self-taught art, has its roots in tradition and creative passion, much like the rest of art history. The difference is that self-taught artists are defined not by their artistic style, like impressionists or surrealists, but by their personal identities. Curators, museum directors, and art historians have created this category through exhibitions and catalogues in an attempt to bring artists outside of the art world into its realm, while also maintaining the artists' "otherness." While the benefits of inclusion in the canon are undeniable, there is little discussion about the damaging, fetishizing nature of categorizing an artist primarily by their marginalization. By tracing the history of self-taught art and its terminology, this thesis argues that ulterior motives often exist behind the choice to exhibit these autodidacts. Examining exhibitions from the 1940s to the present, the tokenization of artists who are often Black, impoverished, southern, and rural has accomplished only superficial advances in the movement towards inclusion.

## **Author's Positionality**

Prior to opening my research and argument, I would like to preface by acknowledging my background and inherent perspectives as an educated white woman from the United States' South. My childhood was split between rural and city environments, providing experiences with art from local craft fairs to museums with international reputations. It was through my family's love of self-taught art that mine grew, and through this work I hope to see the field embrace these creators in a more genuine way. I recognize that my positionality is often much different than those of the artists I discuss, which is why my work is built upon the work of scholars with diverse perspectives and identities who have further expertise.

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## Chapter 1 – Looking Beyond Gallery Walls: Defining Outsider Art

These tastemakers need to consider how the artists they represent will benefit or be restricted by promotion under the outsider label.

–Lisa Slominski, *Terminology: Tastes, Gates, Labels, and Suits*

While much has changed throughout my life, one thing has remained constant: my love of self-taught artist Howard Finster. Prior to my birth, my grandfather purchased “Resting Souls (Work 23,486),” a cut-out of a giraffe on a small stand covered in faces and text in Finster’s telltale horror vacui style. Each year, I found something new to notice about the work – a new face, a strange choice in wording, a hint of wisdom. Through regular observation, this piece quietly taught me what makes an artwork compelling. It was not until many years later that I began to understand Finster’s identity as an uneducated, impoverished creator and how that ascribed him to the folk art category. Appreciating his artwork first, and his biographical story second, gave me what I have come to see as an essential perspective on self-taught art. Rather than fetishizing the artist and their identities that make them so-called outsiders to the art world, I was able to learn how to value the creative output on equal footing with the artist themselves.

The same cannot be said for many art world members and casual art appreciators, as the field has engineered an identity-based category that prescribes a particular stereotype to these artists. When an artist receives the title of self-taught, outsider, folk, or any of the additional monikers, audiences are set up with societally prescribed expectations. These assumptions include a combination of one or all of the following: rural, impoverished, Black, southern, uneducated, and overall isolated from mainstream conventions. A closer look at any given autodidact quickly reveals that they are more complex individuals. However, their image in the hands of the art market or museum world is overemphasized to create a story of hyper-

marginalization. Of course, these identities are true and do lead to vulnerabilities and amplified hardship; that is not being questioned. What must be understood is that institutions hyper-fixate on their ideal self-taught artist by attempting to make them appear to be the most marginalized out of the category, as though that makes their art more important. The story behind the artwork is always relevant, seen most visibly when a painting's value increases tenfold due to a famous past owner. In the case of outsider art, it is vital that institutions weigh their emphasis on the artist's story with a fair balance of visual analysis as they would with any artist who holds an advanced arts degree.

What this thesis seeks to analyze, investigate, and advocate is a managed approach to uplifting self-taught artists without fetishizing their identities. Curators and museums as a whole are responsible for telling stories that are not their own; they become translators to their wider audiences. Improper attention to detail, even if done with the best intentions and not in malice, leads to miscommunication at best and harm at worst. As renowned Smithsonian scholar Stephen E. Weil once explained, the overall goal of museums is to “make a positive difference in the quality of people’s lives.”<sup>1</sup> Institutional leaders must be “fiercely determined” to maintain and fulfill the museum’s purpose, which Weil argues includes not only “entertainment, education, and experience,” but also community.<sup>2</sup> Through proper storytelling, curatorial power can successfully expand the art historical canon and champion inclusion across the field.

As this thesis will display, curatorial power has been and remains undeniable. Case studies of exhibitions on self-taught artists from New York City’s art museums reveal both the importance of inclusive exhibiting practices, as well as the damaging nature of objectifying

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen E. Weil, “Museums: Can and Do They Make a Difference?” in *Making Museums Matter* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 59.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 61, 66-67.

artists. Museums, simply put, have been in the habit of applying their object-centered practice to artists, presenting creators as objects themselves. Untangling this history will not only reveal this to be true, but will provide a chance for reflection and restructuring of curatorial power and perspectives in the future.

The primary lens this thesis employs is the idea of museums as community-centered rather than object-centered. Curator and educator Megan Johnston has crafted the idea of “slow curating,” which best encapsulates the natural evolution of art institutions. Her method “is an intentional process of collaboration, context, and engaging within communities,” working across museum departments and with the institution’s audiences to produce exhibitions that center discourse and knowledge production.<sup>3</sup> While case studies from the 1930s to the present will reveal how New York’s museums created self-taught art in a way that objectified artists, Johnston’s community-focused slow curation practice provides light at the end of the tunnel. These artists are a vital part of American art history, and institutions today are well positioned to implement a new curatorial practice that provides them equal placement and agency as accepted masters such as Pollock and Warhol.

### **Untangling the Terminology**

Folk art is one of the primary terms utilized by institutions to describe the art and artists discussed herein. Looking exclusively with an American perspective, folk art is creative material, such as painting, sculpture, or other, that is crafted by artisans for a small audience. These artists produce work not from a scholarly background, instead utilizing a community-

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<sup>3</sup> Megan Johnston, “Slow Curating: Re-thinking and Extending Socially Engaged Art in the Context of Northern Ireland,” *OnCurating* 24 (December 2014): 24. [https://www.on-curating.org/issue-24-reader/Slow\\_Curating\\_Re-thinking\\_and\\_Extending\\_Socially\\_Engaged\\_Art\\_in\\_the\\_Context\\_of\\_Northern\\_Ireland.html#.Y\\_qFPOzMI3Q](https://www.on-curating.org/issue-24-reader/Slow_Curating_Re-thinking_and_Extending_Socially_Engaged_Art_in_the_Context_of_Northern_Ireland.html#.Y_qFPOzMI3Q).

centered practice. Their art is informed by the cultural knowledge that surrounds them and often lacks the formal training that professional artists receive. This is directly connected to the alternative term self-taught art, which denotes a creator whose practice was developed by skills attained either through an individual endeavor or through a more casual learning environment than traditional academia. Self-taught art is often a preferred term because folk art carries with it a stereotype of being “less-than” the art canonically accepted as “masterful.” However, the term folk is still in regular use today by the field. Autodidact is another way of saying self-taught, used often without the additional term “artist” to succinctly envelop the full phrase of “self-taught artist”.

Linked to these three terms, outsider is often used as an additional classification for these particular artists. This descriptive word has historically been linked to creators who have developmental differences or mental illness diagnoses, as seen by scholar Roger Cardinal’s seminal text *Outsider Art*, which attempted to canonize an art-brut history in 1972.<sup>4</sup> Cardinal’s work was built on the legacy of French artist Jean Dubuffet, who brought to public attention what he called art-brut or “raw art.”<sup>5</sup> Dubuffet’s terminology has fallen out of common use, as its translation is imperfect for an American self-taught art context. However, Cardinal’s outsider term is now regularly used to envelop all folk artists. This caveat does not fully eradicate the preconceived notion that outsider artists are “less-than” in their abilities or value due to neurological differences.

Finally, it is important to note what wording has become truly unacceptable: naïve and primitive art. Regularly used early on in the exhibition and study of self-taught art, as exhibition

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Cardinal, *Outsider Art*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Slominski, *Nonconformers: A New History of Self-Taught Artists*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022) 54.

case studies from the 1930s and 40s will reveal, these descriptors carry with them a connotation of “other-ness”. Not only do these words pigeonhole the artistic output of these creators, but they also suggest that the creators are of lesser status, reaffirming the traditional white, European centric, wealthy artistic hierarchy that publics are critiquing museums to dismantle.

The terminology of self-taught art reveals the paradoxical nature of this category. Attempts to justify an artist as someone who is marginalized enough to qualify for this designation of “other”. In reality, folk art masquerades as a tool for othering; its mere existence affirms that these artists are, in fact, enveloped into the art world’s ever-growing realm. This thesis argues that a creator cannot operate wholly outside of a system that routinely discusses and exhibits them. With this in mind, perhaps the true defining feature of these autodidacts can be that they initially began their creative journey through individual desire, not in an attempt to chase potential monetary and art world success. This is a tricky claim to make, since most artists would argue they found their path from an interior passion. The circular nature of these distinctions is messy. Simply put, outsider art is a confusing misnomer, as are the labels of self-taught and folk.

Through the work of preeminent self-taught art scholar Lisa Slominski, the field has developed an excellent guide to untangling the history and present status of this field. Published in 2022, Slominski’s collection of interviews, histories, and artists entitled *Nonconformers: A New History of Self-Taught Artists* explains how all of the aforementioned terms are an imperfect fit due to the artists’ diverse backgrounds and oeuvres.<sup>6</sup> As she aptly explains, these artists do not “commonly share a raw aesthetic or a process of secretive frenetic production.”<sup>7</sup> For example,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 7

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 9



Southern artists like Sister Gertrude Morgan and Lonnie Holley are or were actively engaged in their local communities, not isolated and hidden away.<sup>8</sup> The current terminology is imperfect as it tries to apply a universal origin to artists whose lives and visions are unique to their own practices. At a recent lecture, Slominski acknowledges she does not intend for “nonconformers” to become an additional term in the running.<sup>9</sup> Due to the nature of the field’s verbiage, this thesis employs the terms self-taught, folk, and autodidact interchangeably, mimicking the usage of scholars and art historians today. Perhaps in time these artists will become so enmeshed into the art historical canon that these imperfect terms will no longer be necessary.

### **Towards Genuine Inclusion**

As this thesis will reveal, it is the institutional power of New York City’s art museums and their leaders that led to these overlapping terms. The Museum of Modern Art’s 1932 exhibition *American Folk Art: Art of the Common Man in America 1750-1900* provides a starting point, recognizing the museum’s attempt to place self-taught artists into the American art historical canon.<sup>10</sup> Following their lead later in the 20th century, landmark exhibitions, both good and bad, were hung across the city at the Brooklyn Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the New Museum, and many others. Their lack of a clear vision and intention, or perhaps malintent poorly hidden in rhetoric, is how self-taught art and artists have been continually ostracized.

Curators by nature are responsible for taking on the role of storyteller. Their position includes the responsibility of carefully and as truthfully as possible communicating the stories of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Slominski, “Neurodiverse: Inclusivity and Accessibility in Contemporary Art” (lecture, Christie’s Education, London, UK and Zoom, January 19, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and Holger Cahill, eds. *American Folk Art: Art of the Common Man in America 1750-1900*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932)

others through a visual and written lens. Without proper care, however, curators, educators, museum directors, and other wielders of institutional power employ stereotypes and utilize folk artists as tokens, alleging a commitment to diversifying their exhibitions and collections through displaying one artist who will hopefully tick all the right boxes (not white, not from a city, not rich, not a man, etc.) so that they can return to their regularly scheduled programming for the next nine years. The museum industry has attempted to expand the art historical canon to include these autodidacts, but instead the result is a way for these institutions to feign diversity and pacify their critics.

In the age of #DecolonizeThisPlace, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and other massive social movements, institutions can no longer underestimate the intelligence of their audiences. Even those who are not regular museum attendees can see through these habitual cover-ups. Institutional responsibility finally must be taken. It should have been taken since the beginning of museums as entities, but now there is no way to avoid accountability. Protests have removed toxic directors and board members from their posts and controversial art and exhibitions from gallery walls. While not every instance has created lasting change, moments like artist Nan Goldin's PAIN movement removing the Sackler name and funding from institutions make it clear that the choices museums make are being closely watched.<sup>11</sup>

For self-taught art, however, there is a creeping feeling that once again museums are using these artists as a way to placate audiences demanding change. Since 2018, there has been a traceable boom of exhibitions highlighting folk art. In hopes of providing clarity and a reasonable scope, this thesis will focus solely on New York City exhibitions and institutions, where the origin of self-taught art in museums lies.

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<sup>11</sup> "Our Mission Statement," PAIN, accessed February 24, 2023, <https://www.sacklerpain.org/our-history>.

The inclusion of self-taught artists into mainstream institutional collections and exhibitions is not a negative. Inclusion, in a true sense, is the ultimate goal of movements to change how institutions were founded and create spaces that are welcoming towards and reflective of local communities. Where the issue lies is in the tokenization and lack of investment into artists' communities from the institutions that claim to promote them. The terminology created by these institutions to define outsider art has relegated these artists to a particular service of tokenization. Going forward, it is essential that museums and curators work to truly incorporate these artists based on merit and aesthetics, rather than solely identities that institutions have traditionally systematically avoided through their collecting and curating practices.

As self-taught art is once again receiving acclaim across New York City's museum landscape, now is the time to critically interrogate the motives behind exhibiting and collecting outsider art. In this thesis, a series of case studies will chronologically trace New York's relationship with these artists. The stage is set in chapter 1 in the 1930s at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) where, under inaugural director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., an initial focus on folk art began. Following poor critical reception, Barr was dismissed, as was his curatorial staff's push to make room for self-taught art in mainstream art history. A quiet period of about thirty years ensued, ending with the founding of the American Folk Art Museum in 1961 and the publication of Cardinal's *Outsider Art* in 1972.<sup>12</sup> After investigating initial intentions at MoMA, chapter 2 will explore why the 1960s through the 1980s were an obvious time for institutions to highlight self-taught art. In conclusion, an examination of the contemporary resurgence of interest in autodidacts will be presented in chapter 3, focusing on the 2010s and 2020s. What this

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<sup>12</sup> "About," *American Folk Art Museum*, accessed November 19, 2022, <https://folkartmuseum.org/about/>.

chronology will reveal is a clear pattern in the ebb and flow of interest from New York institutions and their curators.

## Chapter 2 – Finding the “Heart” of American Art: The Museum of Modern Art under Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

This work gives a living quality to the story of American beginnings in the arts, and is a chapter, intimate and quaint, in the social history of this country.

–Holger Cahill, *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900*

When thinking of the masterpieces of the Museum of Modern Art’s collection, Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* or Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* for example, one thinks of works that draw in crowds of art historians and amateur art appreciators alike. Only recently has there been a return to the institution’s origins of self-taught art, resulting in galleries dedicated to some of the earliest exhibitions in MoMA’s history. Before other museums began to collect and exhibit American folk art, New York’s preeminent modern and contemporary art museum led the charge. Founded in 1929, MoMA is rooted in a foundation of self-taught art shown in equal stature to the art world’s most revered artists.<sup>13</sup>

The institution’s role in promoting self-taught art was helmed by three of its leaders: founding director Alfred H. Barr Jr., founding trustee Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, and director of exhibitions Holger Cahill. Barr had perhaps the most prominent role as his position was the most public. After receiving his PhD at Harvard, Barr was recommended as the Director by a former professor and accepted saying “This is something I could give my life to – unstintedly.”<sup>14</sup> With Barr at the helm, the museum was quick to take risks and push the museum field into what it is today. Abby Rockefeller used her influence as one of MoMA’s leaders and as an established collector of folk art to influence the museum’s exhibition schedule. It was her collecting passion

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<sup>13</sup> “1929: Alfred Barr Chosen as First Director.” Museum of Modern Art, Accessed December 2, 2022. [https://www.moma.org/interactives/moma\\_through\\_time/1920/alfred-h-barr-jr-selected-as-first-director/](https://www.moma.org/interactives/moma_through_time/1920/alfred-h-barr-jr-selected-as-first-director/)

<sup>14</sup> Grace Glueck, “Alfred Hamilton Barr Jr. Is Dead; Developer of Modern Art Museum,” *The New York Times*, August 16, 1981.

that allowed MoMA to investigate folk art as the origin of a truly “American” art history, as her efforts led to the initial piecing together of a self-taught art history.

Rockefeller’s interest in and purchasing of early outsider art provided Cahill with the platform he needed to realize MoMA’s first exhibitions. Originally from the Newark Art Museum, Cahill’s career evidenced that he was passionate about American folk art.<sup>15</sup> His partnership with Barr and Rockefeller allowed him to synthesize their visions into exhibitions. The first exhibition at the museum to showcase self-taught art and subsequently reveal this relationship in action was *American Folk Art: Art of the Common Man in America 1750-1900* in 1932.<sup>16</sup> Here Cahill defines folk art for the audience as being “the expression of the common people, made by them and intended for their use and enjoyment. It is not the expression of professional artists made for a small cultured class, and it has little to do with the fashionable art of its period.”<sup>17</sup> Folk art, then, was defined at its origin as being rooted in passion rather than trend or pedigree.

These leaders’ efforts to align self-taught artists with the other European and American masters in their collections continued with exhibitions like the *Westchester Folk Art Exhibition* in the Summer of 1934 and *New Acquisitions: The Collection of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.* in early 1936.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the best known instance of Cahill, Barr, and Rockefeller’s passions coming together was in the 1938 *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America*.<sup>19</sup> In this show, MoMA’s galleries were dedicated to the works of European self-taught

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<sup>15</sup>Eugene W. Metcalf, “Black Art, Folk Art, and Social Control,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 18, no. 4 (1983): 280.

<sup>16</sup>Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and Holger Cahill, eds. *American Folk Art: Art of the Common Man in America 1750-1900* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 6

<sup>18</sup> “Exhibition History,” *Museum of Modern Art*, accessed October 12, 2022.

<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/history/?=undefined&page=&direction=fwd>.

<sup>19</sup> Holger Cahill, Jean Cassou, Maximilien Gauthier, and Dorothy C. Miller, eds. *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938).

artists like Henri Rousseau and René Rimbart alongside American equals of John Kane and Lawrence Lebduska.<sup>20</sup> By pairing the two regions together, the exhibition began affirming the narrative that the US had just as prominent and traceable an artistic tradition as countries like France and England.

Within the introduction of the exhibition catalogue for *Masters of Popular Painting*, Barr explains clearly and directly that “the purpose of this exhibition is to show, without apology or condescension, the paintings of some of these individuals, not as folk art, but as the work of painters of marked talent and consistently distinct personality.”<sup>21</sup> In establishing these artists as worthy of exhibiting and collecting, Barr was also pushing for a deeper exploration of American self-taught art. He made it clear these are not the only American “popular” artists whose work is worth investigating, and that he hoped his exhibition would lead to an uncovering of more artists.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 1 Installation view of the exhibition “*Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America*” (Photograph by Soichi Sunami for the Museum of Modern Art, New York, c1938).

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 9

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 10

Where these exhibitions faltered is in their failure to encapsulate the full American art origins by excluding the folk traditions of people of color. As this discussion of genuine inclusion and diversifying art history would not be addressed directly until the 1960s, it is important to consider the strides the museum did take prior to that confrontation. In 1935, MoMA presented *African Negro Art*, focusing on the sculptural elements of different indigenous groups' masks and figures.<sup>23</sup> From the title alone, it is clear that the curatorial perspective was entrenched in systemic racism. Sweeny, author of the exhibition's catalogue, wrote in the introduction that this exhibition comes to represent the art world's embrace of African art and aesthetics.<sup>24</sup> From his writing it is clear the field was not yet willing to connect famous modernists like Picasso and Modigliani with their evident African influences. He discusses at length the Benin Bronzes, works that are only now being returned to their rightful owners. According to Sweeny, the "discovery" of these works is what convinced Europeans that African art and culture had merit, dispelling "the legend of the barbarous Negro," which was "the creation of European exploiters who needed some excuse for their depredations."<sup>25</sup> With *African Negro Art*, MoMA established itself as an institution pushing art history to expand. Their exhibitions and publications reveal a dedication to precise, exacting language that did not shy away from past exclusions in the canon. However, it is also evident that their work addressing race worked to maintain boundaries between racial groups, establishing Black art as inherently African and failing to address African American artistic traditions that were well established by the 1930s.

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<sup>23</sup> James Johnson Sweeny, ed. *African Negro Art*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1935).

<sup>24</sup> Sweeny 11

<sup>25</sup> Sweeny 17





Figure 2 Installation view of the exhibition “African Negro Art” (Photographed by Soichi Sunami for the Museum of Modern Art, New York, c1935).

Two years after the exhibition *African Negro Art*, MoMA displayed the first retrospective given to a Black man, *Sculpture by William Edmondson*. While there is no catalogue, the language from the press release is telling of what narrative the institution had in mind by showing Edmondson’s works. A Black self-taught artist from Nashville, TN, Edmondson was a tombstone creator who sculpted limestone to follow the messages God delivered to him.<sup>26</sup> MoMA’s unnamed press author characterized him as a “simple old Negro,” who had “probably never seen a piece of sculpture not his own,” despite him living in a large city.<sup>27</sup> Emphasis is placed on his Christian influence, as well as the visionary nature of his inspiration. The press

<sup>26</sup> “The Museum of Modern Art announces an Exhibition of Sculpture by William Edmondson.” Museum of Modern Art press release, October 18, 1937. [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_press-release\\_333062.pdf?\\_ga=2.169579489.1755412471.1676131597-585852096.1665953370](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_333062.pdf?_ga=2.169579489.1755412471.1676131597-585852096.1665953370).

<sup>27</sup> “The Museum of Modern Art announces an Exhibition of Sculpture by William Edmondson.” Museum of Modern Art press release, October 18, 1937. 3.

release closes with a note that his work was “discovered” by New York photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe, who was shown his work by a Nashville native.<sup>28</sup>

It is the nature of MoMA’s wording, as well as the mention that he was “discovered” by a New Yorker, that warrants calling into question their intentions in exhibiting Edmondson. Curator and art historian Kinshasha Holman Conwill calls out this institutional shortcoming clearly in her research on Black self-taught art, observing:

Is it mere coincidence that so many of the artists are Southern, poor, Black, and without formal training and that those who collect their work are often white, educated, and affluent? [...] Why are some of these same individual collectors and institutions apparently less interested in the work of trained Black artists, such as Maren Hassinger, Melvin Edwards, and Howardena Pindell?<sup>29</sup>

MoMA’s exhibition of Edmondson, now accepted as a major figure in the self-taught art canon, is notable first and foremost because of their commitment to self-taught artists. However, consideration of their writing about the artist reveals a disconnect between the presentation of Black artists and white artists. Edmondson fits into that “ideal” stereotype of a self-taught artist: Black, lower class, uneducated, and from the South. Because of this, Barr and MoMA more broadly were able to avoid any negative criticism from this exhibition.

With the Edmondson exhibition as footing, in 1943, Alfred Barr led MoMA into a full embrace of American folk art with the first retrospective of New York self-taught artist Morris Hirschfield. As recorded in the exhibition catalogue, *The Paintings of Morris Hirshfield* was an

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<sup>28</sup> “The Museum of Modern Art announces an Exhibition of Sculpture by William Edmondson.” Museum of Modern Art press release, October 18, 1937. 4.

<sup>29</sup>Kinshasha Holman Conwill, *Testimony: Vernacular Art of the African-American South: The Ronald and June Shelp Collection*. (New York: H.N. Abrams in association with Exhibitions International and Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 2001). 54

attempt to place folk art on equal footing with other modern American and European artists featured in the museum's collection. Barr, as the museum's director, had been gearing up to make this claim since the museum's beginning. Through his other exhibitions that focused on either exclusively folk art or included outsider artists in their galleries, Barr had been slowly preparing MoMA visitors to see these artists as equal to modern masters like van Gogh and Mondrian. It cannot be ignored that this exhibition was designed for a particular audience. Since its founding, MoMA has catered primarily to wealthy, educated, white visitors, as reflected by their collecting and curatorial habits, as well as the identities of their staff and trustees. However, in the 1930s, Barr knew that swaying this art-loving group was central to finally incorporating folk art into the mainstream canon.



*Figure 3 Installation view of the exhibition "The Paintings of Morris Hirshfield" (Soichi Sunami for the Museum of Modern Art, New York, c1943).*

Looking at the exhibition's catalogue, one begins to wonder why Barr chose Hirshfield to be the first white self-taught artist with a MoMA retrospective. Perhaps it was a collaborative choice with Rockefeller and Cahill. Because of this early attempt to codify folk art as museum-worthy, Barr's exhibition reveals a clear intention from an institutional perspective to create and maintain folk art as an art historical category. It was not the artist's particular path that pushed his work into MoMA, but instead the clear institutional investment from Barr, Cahill, Rockefeller, and the other leaders of this landmark institution.

Critical reviews revealed, however, the exhibition of Hirshfield pushed the art world farther away from embracing self-taught art. Reception was strikingly negative, with one critic saying "While serious, professional artists fight for the recognition that means life to them, the Modern fiddles away its resources building a precious cult around amateurism."<sup>30</sup> Here it is evident that Barr's attempts to widen the canon were lost on the art world. Instead, they now believed MoMA was wasting space on artists who did not "deserve" to be hung there. In an attempt to save face, the board dismissed Barr from his role as director in the same year.<sup>31</sup> With his dismissal came the silencing of his legacy, as the museum shied away from displaying self-taught artists in the years following. Barr's attempts at providing a fuller art history to his audiences, coupled with the efforts of Rockefeller and Cahill, disappeared from view.

How, then, was Barr able to dedicate gallery space to self-taught artist William Edmondson without facing negative responses? It is not hard to see that Hirshfield did not fit the ideal outsider artist format that MoMA's audience was willing to accept. The display of an autodidact who was white and from New York City, the alleged center of the cultural world, was seen as an insult to the other white artists in the museum's collection. Black self-taught artists,

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<sup>30</sup>Peyton Boswell, "Master of the Two Left Feet," *ArtDigest*, July 1943.

<sup>31</sup> Glueck "Alfred Hamilton Barr Jr."

however, did not break the status quo. Despite the institution's attempt to present audiences with the reality that self-taught art was on equal footing with modern masters, their audiences were not prepared to make that leap. Rather, they could only accept that a Black artist would be untrained, poor, and from a region they found to be far behind their urban, highbrow culture.

MoMA has been responsible for setting the standard for US art museums since its beginning, so the choice of its leadership to expand the US art historical canon with the inclusion of self-taught art was monumental. With the return to *Masters of Popular Painting* in the galleries today, it is evident that they are not allowing that legacy to fade into the background as it did with Barr's removal from the directorship in 1943.<sup>32</sup> This practice, however, does not yet reach a threshold of true embrace and inclusion. In actuality, MoMA's past and present curatorial work with self-taught artists is directly against the ideals of socially engaged slow curation.

There remains an evident divide between how MoMA, and the art world more broadly, was willing to see and understand self-taught art through race. Black autodidacts were accepted as a stereotype, set in direct contrast with the classically trained, white modern artist with broad commercial appeal. After Barr's time as director, MoMA failed to remain a champion for self-taught art in the American canon. It would not be until the 1970s, some 30 years later, amid broader social reckoning that the New York museum world would return to the self-taught artist as a tool for alleged diversity and inclusion.

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<sup>32</sup> "Collection 1880s-1940s: 521 Masters of Popular Painting" MoMA, accessed December 1, 2022 <https://www.moma.org/calendar/galleries/5142>.

### Chapter 3 – Institutional Reckoning: Pushing for Change in the Post-War Museum

When an outsider artist achieves a level of success and is exposed to and co-opted by the mainstream, does the artist lose their hermetic privacy which engendered the work's idiosyncrasy—the very essence of otherness?

–Carlo McCormick, *Howard Finster*

After a two-decade period without notable mention of self-taught art, New York's museums were once again looking for a way to position themselves as inclusive, diverse spaces. A shift in this direction began in 1961 with the founding of the Museum of Early American Folk Art.<sup>33</sup> Known today as the American Folk Art Museum (AFAM), this institution became New York's first genre museum for self-taught art. The museum was founded with a focus on 18th and 19th-century folk art, similar to early exhibitions discussed prior at the Museum of Modern Art. As a genre-specific institution, AFAM set itself apart from spaces that span across art history, collecting and exhibiting within one category. With its name change in 1966, becoming the Museum of American Folk Art, the institution began to examine “virtually every aspect of the folk arts in America—north, south, east, and west—including the work of twentieth-century self-taught artists, whether traditional or idiosyncratic in nature.”<sup>34</sup>

Renamed to AFAM in 2001, their director at the time, Gerard C. Wertkin, described the institution as now recognizing that “American folk art [can] only be fully understood in an international context,” including Latin American and European works in its collection and exhibitions.<sup>35</sup> As he further explained, “the word “American” in the Museum's new name functioned as an indication of the institution's location, emphasis, and principal patronage rather

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<sup>33</sup> Slominski, *Nonconformers*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Gerard C. Wertkin, “Foreword.” in *American Anthem: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum*, ed. Tanya Heinrich (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 2001), 12.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

than as a limitation on the kinds of art that it collected, interpreted, or presented.”<sup>36</sup> Preeminent self-taught art scholar Lisa Slominski notes that “these incremental name changes illustrate how a wider genre aims to expand to meet popular and cultivated interests,” as terminology is always defined “by those interested in cultivating a genre, not by those defined within the genre.”<sup>37</sup> Wertkin’s explanation reveals little about the artists displayed and collected by AFAM; rather, it shows their desire to more clearly define who is a “folk” artist.

The sentiment of AFAM’s inaugural director Gerard C. Wertkin was that of genuine diversity and investment in a community of artists. This institution’s intentions differ from the display of self-taught art at museums like MoMA, which has a much broader scope. At AFAM, the focus is solely on self-taught art, establishing these artists as relevant to the broader art world utilizing the platform of a New York City-based institution. In contrast, display of these artists at MoMA and in other spaces often reveals a lack of investment in the community. The investment from these museums in autodidacts comes off as superficial, being exhibited rarely and only to receive praise for diversity, then ignored until deemed necessary again years later.

This period of history also saw the creation of what is now a regularly used, though contested, term for self-taught artists. In 1972, British poet and lecturer of French at the University of Kent authored *Outsider Art*, a text intended to serve as a guide for European Art Brut artists.<sup>38</sup> As he discusses in his introduction, the artists included often have an intellectual disability or severe mental illness, following the genre defining work of Jean Dubuffet.<sup>39</sup> He explains critically that, to fit into his discussion, “lack of previous training is a crucial criterion,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Slominski, *Nonconformers*, 13,

<sup>38</sup> John Maizels, “Roger Cardinal, Art of the Artless,” in *Nonconformers: A New History of Self-Taught Artists*, ed. Lisa Slominski (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 85.

<sup>39</sup> Cardinal 24

and yet this does not imply lack of self-acquired skill,” recognizing the value of an individual practice or skills acquired outside of arts training.<sup>40</sup> While this text was not particularly notable in its reception among European scholars, the term “Outsider” was and remains a largely important descriptor in American self-taught art exhibitions and publications. Slominski pokes at the term’s relevance, asking “with outsider art’s current ambiguity and perimeters controlled by enthusiasts rather than by the artists, how culturally effective and respectful could the term be?”<sup>41</sup> Though Cardinal likely did not anticipate his book title becoming the leading terminology for self-taught art, it is clear once again that the art world would not release their control of the narrative.

Alongside the creation of AFAM, other genre museums began forming in this period, such as the Studio Museum in Harlem. Founded in 1968 amidst the Black Arts Movement, the Studio Museum defined a space for Black artists in New York and more broadly the US art world.<sup>42</sup> The institution’s beginnings were quiet, but their team’s strong voice was recognized across the New York museum field shortly after its start. Speaking from within the Black community rather than on its behalf, the Studio Museum created the 1982 exhibition *Ritual and Myth: a Survey of African American Art*. The exhibition offered a response to *Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1982* which debuted at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and then traveled in the same year to the Brooklyn Museum. Critics of *Black Folk Art* found the show to continue the separation of Black self-taught artists from the broader Black artistic tradition, failing to connect autodidacts with clear community practices and aesthetics.<sup>43</sup> Curated by Dr.

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<sup>40</sup> Cardinal 39

<sup>41</sup> Slominski, *Nonconformers*, 12.

<sup>42</sup> “Timeline” Studio Museum Harlem, accessed February 24, 2023 <https://studiomuseum.org/timeline>.

<sup>43</sup> Cheryl Finley, “What it Was: Black Folk Art in America,” in *Nonconformers: A New History of Self-Taught Art*, ed. Lisa Slominski, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022) 119.



Leslie King Hammond, *Ritual and Myth* put Black self-taught artists in context by connecting them with artists from Africa, the Caribbean, and the US whose practices spanned two centuries.<sup>44</sup> In curating this exhibition, Hammond not only began to define the African diaspora through art, but she also demonstrated how these self-taught artists “built bridges to their African heritage and their contemporary African American successors.”<sup>45</sup>

These east coast exhibitions, as well as similar ones happening across the US, drew quick critical responses. Critic Eugene Metcalf wrote for the *Winterthur Portfolio* in 1983 on *Black Folk Art* in particular, saying that curators Jane Livingston and John Beardsley displayed “the tension between personal freedom and social restraints” that gave “meaning and power to artistic expression” of these artists.<sup>46</sup> From his view, self-taught art must be investigated through its social context, as an exclusively aesthetic lens creates “socially debilitating a priori assumptions about Black people and their art.”<sup>47</sup> The failure of *Black Folk Art* was that it confined self-taught artists to only communicating artistically between each other and not a broader artistic tradition. Metcalf illustrates the power dynamic this upholds, saying “the notion of folk art preserves the status and power of the leisure class by serving as a dumping ground for unusual forms of expression that might challenge the artistic and social status quo.”<sup>48</sup> Terminology and its use, whether that be in exhibitions, scholarly publications, or art world vernacular, is a tool for societal control. Folk art, as evidenced by *Black Folk Art* and the subsequent contrast with *Ritual and Myth*, is a category created to isolate and restrict the natural conversation through aesthetics and skills between vernacular and trained artists.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Metcalf “Black Art” 273.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 281-282

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 287



Figure 4 Installation view of “Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1980” (Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, c1982)

New York’s leading institutions attempted to display self-taught art in ways that showed their publics that they cared for the artists’ community. However, much like *Black Folk Art*, their results were lackluster. At the Whitney Museum of American Art, the 1970s brought two brief entries into the self-taught art world. First, in 1971, the institution hung *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, curated by avid quilt collector Jonathan Holstein and his then-partner Gail van der Hoof.<sup>49</sup> Advisory board member Meg Cox commented on her realization of how “radical” this exhibition must have been at the time, as opposed to present day where quilts and other artisan-made housewares are more often presented as decorative fine arts.<sup>50</sup> New York Times critic Hilton Cramer wrote highly of the project, impressed by the Whitney’s shift to display works in the folk art realm. He wrote that it was “the kind of exhibition that prompts us to rethink the relation of high art to what are customarily regarded as the lesser forms of visual

<sup>49</sup> “The Whitney Museum of Art’s Quilt Exhibition at 50,” *TheQuiltShow.com*, July 6, 2021. <https://thequiltshow.com/blog/history/the-whitney-museum-of-arts-quilt-exhibition-at-50>.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

expression.”<sup>51</sup> While much of the commentary surrounds quilts, a medium not yet discussed in this thesis, the sentiment of folk art and craft as high art connect well.

It is interesting to consider how this exhibition was so groundbreaking for the museum’s exhibition history, but it highlighted unnamed artists and works that were not in its collection. The Whitney received praise in the early 2000s for another quilt exhibition, entitled *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend*, highlighting Black women creators from southern Alabama. Unlike *Abstract Design*, however, this exhibition was organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, showing a level of distance from the subject.<sup>52</sup> Still, the choice to hang this exhibition and support named marginalized female artists is notable even if it was 30 years later.



Figure 5 Installation View of “Abstract Design in American Quilts” (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, c1971)

The institutional resistance to fully embrace self-taught artists at the Whitney was seen again in their 1984 exhibition *The Flowering of American Folk Art*. As reported by the New

<sup>51</sup> Hilton Kramer, “Art: Quilts Find a Place at the Whitney.” *The New York Times*, July 3, 1971. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1971/07/03/79674663.html?pageNumber=22>.

<sup>52</sup> Frances Richard. “The Quilts of Gee’s Bend,” *ArtForum*, November 22, 2002. <https://www.artforum.com/picks/the-quilts-of-gee-s-bend-3834>.

York Times, this show “trace[d] the history of the use of floral patterns in folk art and [was] part of the exhibition “Reflections of Nature: Flowers of American Art”” which was hung in the museum’s main gallery space.<sup>53</sup> Rather than hang these sections together, the institution displayed the folk art portion at their corporate location in the Philip Morris office building.<sup>54</sup> It is notably isolating that the museum would choose to include these artists in their broader investigation of American art, but only in theory. Ten years prior, this same subject was hung alone in the Whitney’s main galleries for the 1974 exhibition *The Flowering of American Folk Art: 1776-1876*.<sup>55</sup> When presenting American art overall, however, the institution failed to integrate folk art fully into the picture. What this piece of exhibition history reveals is that the Whitney feigned a dedication to inclusion during a moment of institutional pressure, only to return to their status quo as soon as pressure eased.

Although the Whitney’s exhibitions have rarely shown a commitment to self-taught artists, an argument can be made that they show support through collecting practices. For example, the museum maintains four works by Miami autodidact Purvis Young, whose practice highlights his experience as a religious Black man in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>56</sup> The same can be said for art institutions like MoMA, the Brooklyn Museum, and others seen as leaders in the art world. However, it is commonly cited that museums only display 5% of their collections on average.<sup>57</sup> In 2016, the Whitney was ahead of most, displaying typically 10% of its collection while others in the city like the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum showed only 3%.<sup>58</sup> From

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<sup>53</sup> “Exhibition at Whitney: ‘Flowers in Folk Art’” *The New York Times*, February 25, 1984.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/25/arts/exhibition-at-whitney-flowers-in-folk-art.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> “Whitney Museum of American Art Exhibition History,” Whitney Museum of American Art, February 15, 2023.

<sup>56</sup> “Collection: Purvis Young,” Whitney Museum of American Art, Accessed February 25, 2023.

[https://whitney.org/collection/works?q%5Bsearch\\_cont%5D=purvis%20young](https://whitney.org/collection/works?q%5Bsearch_cont%5D=purvis%20young).

<sup>57</sup> Angie Kordic, “Treasures We Never See – How Much Art is Hidden Away in Museums Storage?” *Widewalls*, January 31, 2016. <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/art-storage-museum-collections>.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

these statistics alone it is evident that collecting an artist is no guarantee that their work will be seen by audiences. It is through exhibitions that museums demonstrate their commitment to artists. Collection building is vital so that works are preserved and available for loans, but this behavior does not compensate for lack of follow through with exhibiting and discussing artists outside the canon.

The repeated behavior of institutions failing to invest in self-taught artists beyond a one-off exhibition is not exclusive to collecting institutions. The New Museum, New York City's preeminent contemporary art museum, does not have a traditional collection. Rather, it provides exclusively a platform for living artists. Following two decades of building interest among the New York museum world, the 1980s saw the introduction of the famed, living self-taught artist. Howard Finster, an uneducated, impoverished preacher from rural Georgia, captured national attention, becoming a celebrity in his own right. The New Museum seized this opportunity to join the trend of dipping a toe into self-taught art. Through the curatorial work of guest curator Jesse Murray, the museum organized *Currents: The Reverend Howard Finster* in 1982. Writing about the exhibition, Murray highlights the most important aspect of Finster's practice, his religiosity, saying, "Finster uses art to penetrate the apocalyptic dimensions of the world in order to achieve a larger consciousness of a greater reality."<sup>59</sup> The focus for this exhibition was not on Finster's identity as an impoverished, rural, southern white man, but on his voice and artistic vision. His biographical story was of course a part of his work, but Murray's framing gave Finster the same agency and platform as any art school-trained artist.

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<sup>59</sup> Jesse Murray, "Currents: Reverend Howard Finster." *The New Museum*, (1982) 4.



*Figure 6 Installation view of "Currents: The Reverend Howard Finster." (The New Museum, New York, c1982)*

Sparked by a broader cultural demand, museums, alongside all other US institutions during this period, were pressured to begin looking critically at their practices and rethinking their role in society. Self-taught artists rising to "exhibition-worthy" standards once again is then no surprise, as these artists are often, if not exclusively, from marginalized backgrounds, and their display on gallery walls provided the appearance of care for their audiences. As evidenced by the nature of these New York museums' behavior with outsider art, these artists were treated as a passing trend. Unlike classically trained artists who check all the boxes for the traditional view of an artist, self-taught creatives were presented as a chance for institutions to have an example to point to when accused of lacking diversity in their exhibition schedules. Even so, their attempts were lackluster, such as the Whitney only being willing to show folk art as part of

the American artistic tradition in a gallery sponsored by the corporate greed of a cigarette company. Had this exhibition taken place in the museum's main galleries, the presentation would have read much differently. Instead of seeing self-taught art as lesser, speaking only to the audience of a multi-million dollar cancer-causing company, the exhibition could have spoken to the Whitney's understanding of these artists as integral to the story of American art. Their exhibition history instead reveals a lack of interest and care for the past and future of self-taught art.

It is unrealistic to assume that these art museums would have devoted annual exhibitions to self-taught artists. That is not the root of the issue. Rather, it is the clear difference in how these artists are presented - shown once and rarely again. Past curatorial practice denied artists the opportunity to become part of the museum's community. In contrast to the contemporary ideal of a socially engaged curation model, such as slow curating, the behaviors of curators and institutions throughout the 1970s to the 1990s reveals lack of audience engagement. The work of these curators when displaying self-taught artists affirmed the false ideal of "the figure of the curator as an expert," in a field so broad that expertise is difficult to achieve.<sup>60</sup> Through engaging artists in a meaningful way, incorporating their communities and allowing for nuance in the presentation of knowledge, these exhibitions would have provided opportunity for genuine inclusion of outsider art in mainstream American art history. In actuality, New York's institutions feigned interest through singular moments of display, failing to follow through.

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<sup>60</sup> Johnston "Slow Curating" 29.

## Chapter 4 – Actualizing Change: The Contemporary Institution and Realizing Genuine

### Inclusion

Today, being self-taught has become less something to overcome than something to advertise.

– Max Lakin, *The Enduring Appeal of the Self-Taught Artist*

After yet another several-decades-long break from interest in self-taught art, the present state of the museum field almost demands some level of attention back to the topic. Beginning in the mid-2010s, audiences began to push all institutions towards realizing equity and diversity. In the museum field, the primary movement is known as Decolonize This Place. Rooted in a desire to decenter white colonial narratives, much of their work originated in deaccessioning Native American objects from collections, particularly human remains and spiritual items.<sup>61</sup> Amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, and other concurrent social movements, Decolonize This Place’s work has come to broadly represent an urgent need for museums to diversify their staff, collections, and exhibitions.<sup>62</sup> Self-taught art’s inclusion in the art historical canon is one small part of this shift, but its prevalence in 21st century art museums shows that potentially museums are finally reaching a point of full embrace.

Staffing and curatorial specialization is one way museums are prioritizing equity in their exhibitions, collections, and programming. Since the 2000s, museums across the United States have begun creating specialized roles for curators to focus on self-taught art. The High Museum of Art in Atlanta, GA created the role of the Merrie and Dan Boone Curator of Folk and Self-

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<sup>61</sup>Elisa Shoenberger, “What does it mean to decolonize a museum?” *Museum Next*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/>.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*



Taught Art in 2015<sup>63</sup>, the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. created the role of Curator of Folk and Self-Taught Art in 2012<sup>64</sup>, and Crystal Bridges American Art Museum in Bentonville, AK created the position Windgate Curator of Craft in 2020 (although the latter remains unfilled)<sup>65</sup>. In contrast, New York’s museums have not followed suit. There is no defined curatorial role focusing on self-taught art at the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum, or the Whitney Museum of American Art, all of which have exhibited self-taught art to some degree. Despite the lack of specialization, some of these institutions are on a path to investing in self-taught artists through their exhibition calendars.

Fulfilling its historical role as trend forecaster, the Museum of Modern Art chose to return to its origins in 2019 when unveiling a new collection exhibition strategy in its expanded midtown space. Ending in Summer 2023, MoMA returned to its self-taught origins through a contemporary rehanging of *Masters of Popular Painting* in its permanent collection galleries.<sup>66</sup> While it is not a true historical return, this gallery displays many of the artists who Barr and his team hung in the 1938 exhibition, such as John Kane and Joseph Pickett.<sup>67</sup> One gallery in the museum’s 175,000 square feet of exhibition space is not particularly groundbreaking. However, the acknowledgement of their institutional legacy in creating a space for self-taught art in the timeline of American art is a step forward.

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<sup>63</sup> “High Museum of Art Names Katherine Jentleson New Curator of Folk and Self-Taught Art.” High Museum of Art press release, January 28, 2015. <https://high.org/Press-Release/high-museum-of-art-names-katherine-jentleson-new-curator-of-folk-and-self-taught-art/>

<sup>64</sup> “Umberger, Leslie. Curator of Folk and Self-Taught Art.” Smithsonian Profiles, accessed February 24, 2023. <https://profiles.si.edu/display/nUmbergerL9192012>.

<sup>65</sup> “Windgate Curator of Craft.” Indeed, accessed February 24, 2023. <https://www.indeed.com/viewjob?jk=a2399989c546af94&from=serp&vjs=3>.

<sup>66</sup> “Collection 1880s-1940s: 521 Masters of Popular Painting” MoMA, accessed December 1, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/galleries/5142>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

Prior to this critical collections work, MoMA faced notable criticism about their avoidance of self-taught art. While discussing MoMA's 2019 building expansion, New York Times critic Holland Cotter discussed the short-lived midtown location of AFAM. This space was lost in 2009 due to financial issues and later purchased by MoMA to be enveloped in their next capital campaign. Cotter pointed out the irony of the massive museum absorbing the folk art center's past home without collecting any self-taught artists beyond the few like Horace Pippin and Henry Darger who are already embraced by art history.<sup>68</sup> Speaking candidly, Cotter suggested that MoMA did not need to continue dedicating space for "any more Rauschenbergs, or Richters, or Serras, or Twomblys," but those not yet given their institutional due like the majority of artists in AFAM's collection.<sup>69</sup>

Writing for *Hyperallergic*, curator and arts writer Laura Raicovich interpreted MoMA's new strategies through the lens of theorist and scholar Ariella Azoulay. Their writing "speaks about the technologies of imperialism as those that operate via categorization and the constant reinforcement of a linear progression of time."<sup>70</sup> Shifting into a strategy that encourages questioning and playing with a mix of previously established categories then provides a route towards unlearning imperialism.<sup>71</sup> As an institution still respected as a model for curatorial vision, MoMA's power in returning with a critical eye to their past is a clear sign that perhaps museums are working towards a genuine commitment to the rewriting and expansion of the art historical canon.

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<sup>68</sup> Holland Cotter, "Will the Renovated MoMA Let Folk Art Back In?" *The New York Times*, June 6, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/06/arts/design/moma-folkart.html>.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Laura Raicovich, "Gauging the Possibilities of Impermanence at the New MoMA." *Hyperallergic*, January 9, 2020. <https://hyperallergic.com/536428/gauging-the-possibilities-of-impermanence-at-the-new-moma/>.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 7 Installation view of the gallery “Masters of Popular Painting” in the exhibition “Collection 1880s-1940s” (Photograph by Jonathan Muzlkar for the Museum of Modern Art, c2019)

Following several years of delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 2022 saw several concurrent exhibitions of self-taught art, positioning the field to continue its path towards expansion and inclusion. Shown in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, the Brooklyn Museum hosted *Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe*, organized by the High Museum, from September 2, 2022, to January 1, 2023.<sup>72</sup> Nellie Mae Rowe, a Black self-taught artist from Fayette County, Georgia, created hundreds of drawings and an art environment that centered on her lived experience and Christian influences. Prior to this exhibition, the museum had not visited the topic of outsider art since a 2001 rehanging of their American Art collection galleries.<sup>73</sup> Not only is the return to the subject notable, but the focus on a female autodidact is a landmark shift as well. New York Times critic Roberta Smith noted that female

<sup>72</sup> “Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe.” Brooklyn Museum, accessed December 1, 2022. [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/nellie\\_mae\\_rowe](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/nellie_mae_rowe)

<sup>73</sup> “American Identities: A New Look.” Brooklyn Museum, accessed February 28, 2023. <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/651>.

artists are rare in “the upper echelons of the self-taught canon.”<sup>74</sup> Through this exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, the New York art world began to see a harkening back to the post-war era of its museums. Rowe’s work, as noted by Smith, was first seen in a New York museum during the 1982 exhibition *Black Folk Art in America: 1930-1980*.<sup>75</sup> Smith’s criticism suggests that self-taught artists are finally being enveloped into the American art canon, noting that this exhibition reveals “that most artists, not just outsiders, are in some way “self-taught,” and also that many outsiders aren’t nearly as isolated as is sometimes assumed.”<sup>76</sup> It remains to be seen if the Brooklyn Museum will make a larger commitment to canonizing self-taught art, but *Really Free* suggests that a genuine inclusion is on the horizon.



Figure 8 Installation view of “Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe.” (Danny Perez for the Brooklyn Museum, c2022).

<sup>74</sup>Roberta Smith. “Nellie Mae Rowe Levels the Wall Between Insider and Outsider Art.” *The New York Times*, September 2, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/02/arts/design/nellie-mae-rowe-brooklyn-museum.html>

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

Perhaps the most telling sign that New York's institutions are on their way to redeeming the legacies of self-taught artists is the return of attention to Morris Hirshfield. For the first time since the 1943 exhibition at MoMA, Hirshfield's works were rehung for the city's audiences in *Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered* at the American Folk Art Museum. As voiced by the exhibition's primary curator, Robert Meyer, the display and its accompanying catalogue are not only a way to expand Hirshfield's viewership, but also to provide "a resource for future scholars, students, curators, and admirers of Hirshfield," which Meyer hopes will be aplenty.<sup>77</sup> Though not rehung in MoMA's galleries, Hirshfield is a New York native whose works have been hidden away in collections warehouses. With a contemporary audience, AFAM was able to provide him the success Barr wished to realize 80 years ago.

According to critic Anton Vidokle, curatorial power was allowed to grow to its current strength with the decline of art criticism. Despite their presumed good intentions, curators who try to "'produce' art and artists by the simple expedient of including them in a show often result in little more than a curatorial embarrassment."<sup>78</sup> It may be reasonable to assume that the reason for the success of Hirshfield in the contemporary art world is that curators now rule taste, not critics. While their strength of opinions may be weakening, the rehanging in a 2022 context was met with excellent critical reception. *The New Yorker* wrote, "This abundant show rescues the master of pictorial patterning from obscurity," setting up Meyer and team as heroes of folk art.

Susan Davidson, art historian and longtime curator, acted as curatorial advisor on the exhibition, producing an extensive catalogue of works for the show's text.<sup>79</sup> In a recent

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<sup>77</sup> Richard Meyer, "Introduction." in *Masters of the Two Left Feet: Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2022) 16.

<sup>78</sup> Anton Vidokle, "Art without artists," *e-flux journal* 16 (May 2010), accessed January 19, 2023. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/16/61285/art-without-artists/>.

<sup>79</sup> Richard Meyer, *Master of the Two Left Feet: Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2022).

interview, she revealed a longtime interest in Hirshfield's work, which led to her involvement in the project. While AFAM is rightfully receiving high praises for their support of *Rediscovered*, Davidson revealed that the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, Italy was intended to be the host institution.<sup>80</sup> Budget concerns during the pandemic led to their dropping of the project, but luckily AFAM, who was involved as a secondary host location, managed to take over, preventing an otherwise likely dissolution of the exhibition.<sup>81</sup> Every museum was faced with financial hardship during the pandemic, prompting difficult budget considerations. Even so, it is notable that the Guggenheim constellation of museums chose not to pursue the project so well aligned with their founder's collecting patterns in favor of other pursuits. Perhaps the new audience for Hirshfield will promote further exhibiting in the Guggenheim's future, or other institutions across the city.



Figure 9 Installation view of "Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered"  
(Photography by Eva Cruz for EveryStory via The New York Times,  
c2022)

<sup>80</sup> Susan Davidson (independent curator) in discussion with the author, February 24, 2023.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

These recent exhibitions affirm that, in an age where institutional change is required lest museums be abandoned in a new era, curators and the works they exhibit hold the power to determine the agenda. As the most public-facing work museums provide, the hanging of art tells audiences what these systems are prioritizing. The art world is not yet in a genre-less position, but the walls of categorization are becoming less rigid. Gary Alan Fine, cultural sociologist at Northwestern University, noted in the early 2000s that students of the genre argue that outsider art “has died, as all creators are now influenced by a global visual culture.”<sup>82</sup> Though unclear if this sentiment rings true, that will soon be determined again by institutional power, as “powerful actors create the creator through the shaping of biography.”<sup>83</sup>

The display of artists in a museum setting is vital for their inclusion in art history. Current systems continue to affirm the institutional power of these sites and their leadership. Regardless of if it is “right” or “wrong”, the power a museum’s support has on an artist’s career is undeniable. These exhibitions of self-taught artists in recent years have put them on the radar of the New York art world, shown by the multitude of hosting institutions. However, this cycle has repeated itself before. With that history in mind, audiences must hold museums accountable to their commitment to artists, rather than allowing them to fade into the background once again.

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<sup>82</sup> Gary Alan Fine, "Crafting authenticity: The validation of identity in self-taught art," *Theory and Society* 32, no. 2 (2003): 164, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3108577>.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 175.

## Chapter 5 – Looking Forward: Can Self-Taught Artists Actually Exist?

It is a terrible thing to be perpetually stuck in the present, and this is a major occupational hazard for curators.

–David Levi Strauss, *The Bias of the World: Curating After Szeeman & Hopps*

After investigating the beginnings of self-taught art in New York museums, as well as their present status, it is evident that confusion remains surrounding these artists' status in the broader American art canon. The nature of a curator or art historian, as well as humans more broadly, is to categorize. Systems are built upon foundations of categories that allow for easier understanding. These are inherently inexact, as artists fit into multiple areas or perhaps none at all. Rita Risser, philosophy professor at United Arab Emirates University, suggests that these categories “enable audiences to properly calibrate their responses to artworks.”<sup>84</sup> While useful, she notes that “the challenge is to ensure that any given category is nonarbitrary and also ethically attuned.”<sup>85</sup> When speaking with art historian Lisa Slominski on the role of language and categorization in regards to self-taught art, she explained that the benefits of exhibiting these artists are the priority, even if the terminology is imperfect. What matters most, despite language issues, is “excellent scholarly intent.”<sup>86</sup> Through approaching the scholarship and display with the same agency and purpose one would with an established artist, curators are able to advance the legacy of these artists and incorporate them into the canon.

Self-taught artists are bound together not by their aesthetics, as with modernists, abstract expressionists, or other American artists, but by their identities. As a curator, individuals gain “institutional power, a degree of security, and a mandate for a certain range of activity, which

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<sup>84</sup> Risser

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Lisa Slominski (art historian) in discussion with the author, February 16, 2023.



may involve a certain sense of institutional authorship,” but, as artist and founder of arts journal *e-flux* Anton Vidokle explains, it “does not include artistic claim to the artwork on which this activity is predicated.”<sup>87</sup> Therefore, artists are the ones who should have the agency to categorize their practice, or refuse institutional categorization. Self-taught artists have historically been denied that choice.

The natural question is then—what is the way forward? Can curators wield their power responsibly? For Risser, the curation of self-taught art requires a baseline of consent, then “guided by an intent to respect and foster the dignity of the artist.”<sup>88</sup> Artists from marginalized communities lack power in the relationship between curator and creator. The priority in a curator’s exhibition work must be to create and preserve a relationship of mutual respect and prioritization of dignity. Without this mindset, museums risk exploiting artists and failing to meet expectations for how a 21<sup>st</sup> century institution engages with its stakeholders.

Contemporary scholars and curators regularly discuss strategies to curate meaningful exhibitions. While there is no one “correct” method, Johnston’s concept of slow curation offers an excellent path. Her method is “slow” because it requires breaking down the concept of “the curator as an expert” in favor of an equitable flow of knowledge between institutional staff, artists, and community members.<sup>89</sup> “This curatorial process is rhizomatic, organic, and non-linear,” breaking out of the forcibly linear art historical tradition to prioritize inclusion of non-canonical histories.<sup>90</sup> The central focus of slow curation is community engagement. No longer is there a hierarchical relationship between curator and audience as teacher and student, but instead there is space for open dialogue and genuine investment in each other. This strategy is ideal for

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<sup>87</sup> Vidokle “Art” 2.

<sup>88</sup> Rita Elizabeth Risser, “Insiders curating outsider art,” *Museum Anthropology* 40, no. 1 (2017): 87

<sup>89</sup> Johnston 29

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

the future of self-taught art because it does not try to retroactively apply western, imperialistic ideals onto artists whom the system was built to ignore. Rather, it embraces alternative knowledge and methods of scholarship, rethinking what it means to exhibit and canonize art histories.

From the Tucson Museum of Art, Marianna Pegno, Director of Engagement and Inclusion, and Christine Brindza, Senior Curator, offer a clear goal for the future of curatorial power. In their view, to maintain relevance in the 21st century and put into action the demands of the public for a community-centered, decolonial museum, contemporary institutions must begin prioritizing the systemic broadening of representation among their collections and operations, as well as a multivocal leadership strategy.<sup>91</sup> A primary strategy to realize this mode of operation is creating community advisory boards or committees, determining length of service based on the project at hand.<sup>92</sup> Another vital practice includes collaborative and accessible label writing, both for level of comprehension and the languages offered.<sup>93</sup> The priority in all of these methods is rethinking and actively challenging the institutional hierarchies upheld by museums in order to welcome artists and communities they have historically shunned.

There cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach for art museums to demonstrate true commitment to self-taught artists. Each institution's community differs, as do their key stakeholders. What is true across the field is the power of diverse contemporary audiences. Historically, museums have well served their traditional public, those being wealthy and middle class white, cis gender, straight visitors. With the growth of social media and accompanying social movements, marginalized groups that institutions whose interests have been ignored are

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<sup>91</sup> Christine Brindza and Marianna Pegno, "Redefining Curatorial Leadership and Activating Community Expertise to Build Equitable and Inclusive Art Museums," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 64, no. 2 (2021): 346

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 347

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 348

seizing platforms to amplify their voices. The 21<sup>st</sup> century audience is demanding change consistently and using all its resources to ensure it happens. Through curatorial practice that rethinks hierarchies and challenges canonical art history, museums and their communities will be continually future-focused, creating a more genuine, inclusive space for art and artists across all backgrounds.

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## Figures

- Figure 1 Soichi Sunami, photographer. “[Installation view of the exhibition “Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America”]” Photograph. New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, c1938. [https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2090?installation\\_image\\_index=0](https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2090?installation_image_index=0).
- Figure 2 Soichi Sunami, photographer. “[Installation view of the exhibition “African Negro Art”]” Photograph. New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, c1935. <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2937?insta>
- Figure 3 Soichi Sunami, photographer. “[Installation view of the exhibition “The Paintings of Morris Hirshfield”]” Photograph. New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, c1943. [https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2313?installation\\_image\\_index=0.illation\\_image\\_index=14](https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2313?installation_image_index=0.illation_image_index=14).
- Figure 4 “[Installation view of the exhibition “Black Folk Art in America, 1920-1980”]” Photograph. Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum, c1982. <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/983>.
- Figure 5 “[Installation view of the exhibition “Abstract Design in American Quilts”]” Photograph. New York, NY: Whitney Museum of American Art, c1971. <https://www.internationalquiltmuseum.org/exhibition/adaq50>.
- Figure 6 “[Installation view of the exhibition “Currents: The Reverend Howard Finster”]” Photograph. New York, NY: The New Museum, c1982. <https://archive.newmuseum.org/images/1476>.
- Figure 7 Jonathan Muzlkar, photographer. “[Installation view of the gallery “Masters of Popular Painting” in the exhibition “Collection 1880s-1940s”]” Photograph. New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, c2019. [https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5142/installation\\_images/51319?work\\_id=79964](https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5142/installation_images/51319?work_id=79964).
- Figure 8 Danny Perez, photographer. “[Installation view of the exhibition “Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe”]” Photograph. Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum, c2022. <https://brooklynmuseum.tumblr.com/post/695927124520026112/how-about-a-specialty-cocktail-to-go-with-your>.
- Figure 9 Eva Cruz, photographer. “[Installation view of the exhibition “Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered”]” Photograph. New York, NY: EveryStory via The New York Times, c2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/29/arts/design/morris-hirshfield-american-folk-art-museum.html>.

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