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## ART

### The Insider's Guide to Outsider Art

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Brendan L. Smith May 4, 2018



Horace Pippin, "Interior," (1944) oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Meyer P. Potamkin, in honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery (all images courtesy the National Gallery)

WASHINGTON, DC — Does it really make any difference if outsider artists are called “outliers” instead?

It's a new term proposed in Outliers and American Vanguard Art, the National Gallery of Art's new exhibition of work by outsider artists and the mainstream artists who promoted them while also parroting outsider art styles. Featuring 250 works by more than 80 artists, the exhibition will travel to the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art later this year.

Organized by National Gallery senior curator Lynne Cooke, the exhibition features some compelling artwork, but it falls into the same traps and stereotypes that have plagued many museum exhibitions featuring outliers (if that's what we're supposed to call them now). You also could pick from a long list of

alternative titles, including folk artists, visionary artists, primitive artists, naïve artists, or just plain, old self-taught artists. I'm sticking with outsider artists for this article.

This museum exhibition, like many others, bemoans the segregation of outsider artists into a lower class, but the National Gallery perpetuates this trend of confining outsider artists inside their own artistic ghetto even when there is little connecting this diverse group of artists hailing from a wide range of backgrounds and artistic traditions. The exhibition also sticks mostly to the “greatest hits” of outsider artists who have already been stamped with the art world’s seal of approval.



Bill Traylor, "Men Drinking, Boys Tormenting, Dogs Barking" (c. 1939-1942) opaque watercolor on card with dark gray prepared surface, overall: 36.2 x 55.25 cm (14 1/4 x 21 3/4 in.) Collection of Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz, promised gift to the Philadelphia Museum of Art

The exhibition focuses on three periods when mainstream artists helped promote outsider artists or appropriated their styles. But the chosen time spans, which encompass most of the 20th century, seem arbitrarily drawn to include stretches from 1924–1943, 1968–1992, and 1998–2013. There’s no explanation why outsider artists fell off the art world’s radar from 1993 to 1997, or in other intervening years.

The mixing of work by outsider artists and mainstream artists in the exhibition creates a confusing layout for visitors who aren’t familiar with the artists or their pedigrees. In another stereotypical trend, the outsider artists’ life stories and travails are prominently featured in the wall text, often at the expense of their artwork. To score points in the art world as a “true” outsider artist, it helps if you suffer from mental illness, poverty, or self-imposed isolation.

The exhibition opens with five of Judith Scott’s 1990s untitled abstract fiber sculptures wrapped in yarn, rope, and string. The wall text promptly alerts visitors she is an outlier because she was deaf, had Down Syndrome, and grew up in an institution where she remained for 35 years.

The next gallery features mainstream artists who appropriated outsider art styles, including Marsden Hartley’s 1918–19 painting “Santos, New Mexico” when he explored Hispanic and Pueblo Indian themes after a visit to New Mexico. Folk artish paintings by New York modernist painters Charles Sheeler and Yasuo



Judith Scott, "Untitled" (2004) fiber and mixed media, overall: 53.34 x 40.64 x 40.64 cm (21 x 16 x 16 in.)  
(courtesy of The Museum of Everything, London)

Kuniyoshi also are on display, including Kuniyoshi's 1923 oil painting "Boy Stealing Fruit" featuring a pudgy boy planning his getaway with a purloined banana. Their work is contrasted with paintings by outsider artists, including John Kane's spare and haunting 1929 "Self-Portrait" showing a bare-chested man with a dead-eyed stare and a body marred by the ravages of time. Henri Rousseau's 1910 "Tropical Forest with Monkeys" from his engaging series of jungle paintings is featured with two less interesting paintings. Rousseau is portrayed as an outsider artist even though his work was exhibited regularly in the Salon des Indépendants in Paris during his lifetime, and Pablo Picasso held a banquet in his honor in 1908.



Marsden Hartley, "Adelard the Drowned, Master of the 'Phantom'" (c. 1938-1939) oil on board, unframed: 71.12 x 55.88 cm (28 x 22 in.) framed: 67.31 x 78.11 x 6.35 cm (26 1/2 x 30 3/4 x 2 1/2 in.)

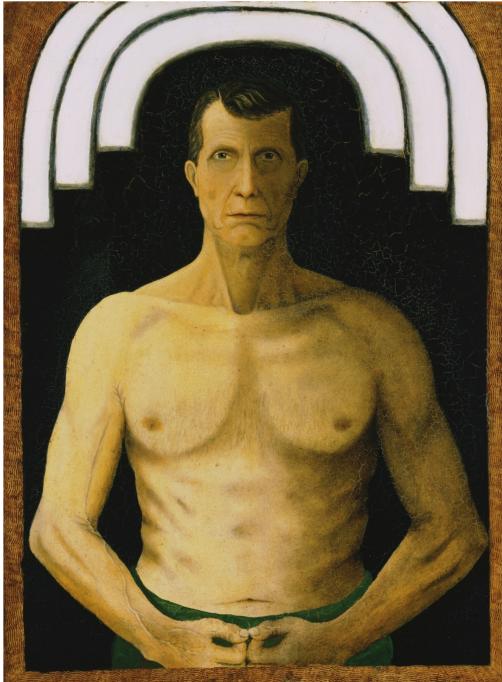
The most fundamental problem with the exhibition is the unstated assumption that work by outsider artists is only good or worthy of notice if it's promoted or parroted by artists who are already ensconced in the art world. That stereotype triggers more questions. Are outsider artists still outsiders (or outliers) when they become darlings of the art world? Do they lose their street cred when they produce work geared toward the art market rather than being driven by holy visions or the vagaries of mental illness?

I may be overly sensitive to this taxonomic debate because I am an outsider artist. Maybe. It depends on who you ask. I am a self-taught artist who began making mixed-media work in Santa Fe, NM, after my TV broke and I sought a more creative outlet. I scavenged rusty bed springs and auto parts from dusty cracked-clay arroyos in northern New Mexico and cobbled them together into large sculptures. Does that make me an outsider artist or just a self-taught artist? I have suffered on and off from major depression, but my mental illness only reduced my artistic output. I never saw a vision of God's face on my fingertip that told me to paint sacred art like Howard Finster, who has several rough-hewn pieces in the National Gallery exhibition.

I also didn't grow up poor and uneducated on a remote farm — an outsider artist bio that the art world adores. And no one will discover a secret cache of prodigious artwork in my home after my death like Henry Darger's fantastical *In the Realms of the Unreal* drawings of the superhero Vivian Girls (whose work also is featured in the National Gallery exhibition). To most art world insiders, I'm just a self-taught artist or an "emerging artist," even though I've been emerging for more than 15 years now, from what I'm not sure. "Emerging artist" is another patronizing term that excludes or diminishes the work of artists who haven't been accepted by the insular art world's elite group of wealthy collectors, gallery owners, museum curators, and critics.

The American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore does a better job than most museums at displaying work by outsider artists. AVAM obviously focuses on outsider or visionary artists, but they aren't obsessed with their life stories. Group exhibitions focus on novel or light-hearted themes, including mystery, parenting, or food as in YUMMM! The History, Fantasy, and Future of Food. (I defy you to find an exhibition in a "serious" art museum titled YUMMM!)

AVAM isn't a stickler about the definition of outsider artists or whatever we're calling them now. My artwork was featured in 2014 in a solo exhibition titled *Ghosts in the Machine* in the museum's independently operated former restaurant,



John Kane, "Self-Portrait" (1929) oil on canvas over composition board, overall: 91.7 x 68.9 cm (36 1/8 x 27 1/8 in.) the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund, 1939 (digital image (C) the Museum of Modern Art/ licensed by SCALA/ Art Resource, NY)

Mr. Rain's Fun House. In the YUMMM! exhibition last year, artist Wendy Brackman displayed a captivating 10-feet-tall spinning mandala featuring a cornucopia of food crafted from colorful paper plates. She taught herself how to make elaborate paper-plate sculptures and now runs a successful handcrafted party-hat business as Wacky Wendy. Is she an outsider artist, a self-taught artist, or a savvy businesswoman? It depends on who you ask.

Outliers and American Vanguard Art, continues at the National Gallery of Art (East building, concourse galleries, between 3rd and 9th Streets, along Constitution Avenue NW, Washington, DC) through May 13.

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