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## Parallel Starts Outsider Art Inside Collections

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# parallel starts

## OUTSIDER ART INSIDE COLLECTIONS

SHELDON MUSEUM OF ART • AUGUST 6 THROUGH OCTOBER 17, 2010



ALBERT YORK. COLUMBIA. 1978. OIL ON PANEL. 12 X 8 INCHES. COLLECTION UNI.-GIFT OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY AND INSTITUTE OF ARTS AND LETTERS

*"The characteristic property of an inventive art is that it bears no resemblance to art as it is generally recognized and in consequence...it does not seem like art at all."*

*Jean Dubuffet*

If we subscribe to the above assertion by French artist Jean Dubuffet that inventive art, or what would later be called outsider art, differs from mainstream art, we are then faced with the question: What constitutes "outsider art?" *Parallel Starts: Outsider Art Inside Collections* looks at the challenge of defining outsider art and how its inclusion in museum collections blurs traditional art historical distinctions. The exhibition is drawn mainly from the Sheldon Museum of Art's permanent collection, accompanied by a selection of paintings by Jeffrey Randall, an artist who lives in Lincoln, Nebraska.

As the term implies, “outsider” artists tend to work in isolation with little interest in other artists’ styles or methods. Such independence from the social and cultural norms that have shaped art history provides scholars with few clues from which to proceed.

Norman Geske, Sheldon Director Emeritus and exhibition curator, defines outsider art as follows:

Essentially, outsider art is the art that derives from the creative instinct, which is inherent in human beings who are entirely independent of any of the conventions of traditional art history. In these works, subject matter, method, and technique are subsumed in the intrinsic impulse to create. They are genuinely original, the first and only ones of their kind.

This originality did not go unnoticed in Europe and especially in France. In the early 20th century, the avant-garde revered unschooled artwork as fresh and independent. Henri Rousseau was self-taught, for example, yet his work is generally understood as integral to the overall development of modern art. According to Geske, if we accept Rousseau as an important artist, we are acknowledging him as an exponent of a kind of creativity that is entirely inspired by his independence from the conventions of his time. For his part, Dubuffet was primarily interested in individuals who struggled with mental illness, and due to their condition, remained isolated from mainstream society. He coined the term *art brut* (raw art) to describe these artists. According to Dubuffet,



JEAN DUBUFFET, HEAD OF A MAN (TÊTE D'HOMME DE FACE), 1954, OIL ON CANVAS 9 1/2 X 8 INCHES; COLLECTION NAA-GIFT OF MR. AND MRS. FREDERICK S. SEACREST

*brut* artists tended to look inward in visionary and obsessive ways creating art that looked “exclusively to the impulses of the artist.”<sup>1</sup>

The definition of *art brut* was difficult to apply in the young country of the United States, where art schools did not even appear until the late 19th century. The distinction between academic and non-academic art had even less meaning to Americans than to Europeans.<sup>2</sup> British writer Roger Cardinal translated the term *art brut* in English as “outsider art” in 1972, and it eventually grew to encompass a wider range of artists than those diagnosed with mental illness. Generally, outsider artists are self-taught individuals who work without conventional training. Today, the

term “outsider art” also can encompass folk, visionary and naïve art forms, each distinctive in its own right.

The definition of outsider art is further complicated when we consider the art’s acceptance by museums. In an exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in 1992, *Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art*, the museum included only outsider art that had been known to modern artists. Curators examined how outsider artists influenced modernists through their creativity and passion, rather than through form, style or subject matter. Although not the first museum to include a large number of outsider artworks, the LACMA



SAMUEL COLWELL BAKER, *THE ALEXANDER MCKENZIE GOING UP THE MISSISSIPPI*, UNDATED, OIL ON MASONITE, 36 X 48 INCHES  
COLLECTION NAA-NELLE COCHRANE WOODS MEMORIAL

exhibition was significant because it presented insider and outsider art together to underscore the latter's validity. LACMA curators pointed to modernist artists, firmly situated within the art historical canon, who were influenced by artists working outside the museum and gallery system. Finally, by incorporating outsider art into the museum’s exhibition programs, it forced us to reexamine the boundaries of this art form and its perceived separateness from the museum world.<sup>3</sup>



JOHN KANE, *FOURTH OF JULY PARADE*, 1930, OIL ON CANVAS, 17 X 14 INCHES  
COLLECTION NAA-NELLE COCHRANE WOODS MEMORIAL

Although Dubuffet suggested that outsider art had little in common with its mainstream counterpart, the increasing acceptance of outsider art by art historians and its inclusion in museum collections seems to have brought the two worlds closer together. Recently, however, *New York Times* art critic Ken Johnson suggested that the term “outsider art” be retired. He asked whether it should matter if an artist is self-taught or has a mental health impairment: “The best outsider art is good for the same reasons that art by professional

insiders is good: because it is formally eye catching, inventively made, unpredictably imaginative and passionately driven."<sup>4</sup>

Outsider artists may create art independent from the mainstream, but especially with the inclusion of outsider art in art fairs, auctions, galleries, and museums is the term "outsider" becoming less relevant?

Despite the challenge of defining outsider art, when viewing the work in *Parallel Starts*, according to Geske, "It is possible to get a sense of their deeply personal view of reality... to recognize originality. It is the work of artists who choose, quite deliberately, to begin at the beginning."

Sharon L. Kennedy  
Curator of Cultural and Civic Engagement

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Carole Tansella, "The Long and Winding Journey of Outsider Art: A Historical Perspective," *Epidemiol Psychiatric Society* 16, 2 (2007), 134.
- 2 Jane Kallir, *Self-Taught and Outsider Art: The Anthony Petullo Collection* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 9.
- 3 Carol S. Eliel, *Moral Influence and Expressive Intent in Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 17. Published in conjunction with the exhibition "Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art" shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
- 4 Ken Johnson, "Visionaries in a Bubble, Safe From Convention," *New York Times*, January 25, 2008, B31.



HOWARD FINSTER, *MR. COKE*, 1996, ENAMEL ON WOOD,  
36<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> X 14<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> X 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> INCHES  
COLLECTION UNL-GIFT OF JANE AND CARL H. ROHMAN