

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Summer 2000

**Review of *Backyard Visionaries: Grassroots Art in the Midwest*  
Edited by Barbara Brackman and Cathy Dwigans**

Karen Janovy

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Janovy, Karen, "Review of *Backyard Visionaries: Grassroots Art in the Midwest* Edited by Barbara Brackman and Cathy Dwigans" (2000). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2145.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2145>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Backyard Visionaries: Grassroots Art in the Midwest.* Edited by Barbara Brackman and Cathy Dwigans. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999. Map, illustrations, notes, contributors, name index. xiv + 146 pp. \$39.95.

Always eager to plunge into books with enticing epigraphs (such as Archibald MacLeish's "A world ends when its metaphor has died"), I was not disappointed with Brackman and Dwigans's *Backyard Visionaries*. Beautifully illustrated, it not only documents, with excellent notes, a kind of "visionary" art, much of which exists on site rather than in museums, but also highlights model preservation efforts by the Kansas Grassroots Art Association (KGAA) of historically significant outsider art. Elizabeth Broun's illuminating introduction states that this art, first coined "outsider" art in 1972, has found an "exceptional environment throughout the Midwest" since the late '60s and early '70s and "seems region specific."

Introduced to "outsider" art at a North Platte, Nebraska, gallery, I experienced firsthand Emery Blagdon's "healing machines" and am delighted with their inclusion in this survey. A 1994 exhibition at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery convinced me that these art works continue to convey the wonder of that initial encounter.

Editors Brackman and Dwigans have assembled stunning photographs—many in color—focusing on "grassroots art in the Midwest," specifically Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri, and Oklahoma. Essays are by thirteen KGAA members—Carl Magnuson, Gregg Blagsdel, Barbara Brackman, John

Hackmeister, Lisa Stone, Jim Zanzi, Earl Iversen, Jim McCrary, Jon Blumb, Dan Dryden, Don Christensen, Cathy Dwigans, and Ray Wilber—all well-qualified to provide insight into this body of work variously referred to as self-taught, naive, outsider, folk, spiritual, or visionary—as the book's title implies.

Books that are useful, that show visually where the "stuff" was created, as this one does, and incorporate telling quotes from knowledgeable sources to connect with the work, are valuable resources for the casual reader as well as museum personnel. *Backyard Visionaries* is clearly one of those. Each author explores significant regional connections, but often within the context of such larger issues as Social Darwinism, the Populist movement, *art brut*, and contemporary art. The various historical perspectives from which they attempt to "classify" the unique creations of Ed Root, Dave Woods, Charles Koester, Elsie Quigley, Father Mathias, Paul and Matilda Wegner, Samuel P. Dinsmore, Father P. M. Dobberstein, Claude Melton, Emery Blagdon, Ed Galloway, as well as regional quilters, egg decorators, and saddle makers, amplify our appreciation and understanding of these remarkable "visionaries."

Ultimately, each author offers a strong case for the same innate, intuitively compulsive human characteristics behind creation and the making of aesthetic decisions regardless of whether an artist is designated as "fine" or "outsider."

KAREN JANOVY  
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery  
and Sculpture Garden  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln