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## Inside an Outsider's Mind

By [Chloe Malle](#)

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Artist Henry Darger led an Ellison-esque existence, an invisible man until his death in 1973.

Posthumously elected mascot for the Outsider Art movement, Darger lived in a one-room apartment in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago. For much of his life, he worked as a custodian in a Catholic hospital without even enough disposable income to keep a pet.



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"Henry Darger had an art collection." That is the first sentence of curator Brooke Davis Anderson's introduction to the evocative exhibit devoted to the artist. She follows up in the second paragraph with

the similar, but more challenging, "Henry Darger had an art collection?" The collector in question was an indigent recluse with no artistic training and barely enough money to keep himself afloat, let alone collect art. Yet he did. The collection is on view at the American Folk Art Museum through Sept. 19.

Climbing the steps to the fourth floor of the exquisitely designed midtown institution, the museum-goer sees Darger's collages lining the museum walls like suits of armor. They stand at attention, leading with ceremony to a photograph that gives insight into his special existence. It's a wall-size, black-and-white photograph of Darger's apartment, taken by Nathan Lerner, the Chicago landlord who discovered his trove of art around the time of Darger's death. The photo reveals the

septuagenarian janitor's private existence—a collaged and cluttered studio that was his place of work, residence and art collection seamlessly woven into one. In his home, more than 100 self-made works in the cramped room were displayed in any way possible: tacked to walls, dangling from strings, taped directly onto surfaces. Unlike the exhibits that have showcased Darger's large-scale, scroll-like watercolors, the Folk Art Museum's focuses on these collages and compositions he created and lived with every day, the images with

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which he chose to surround himself. Culled from the more than 40 collages in the museum's collection, this secret facet of Darger's oeuvre is shown for the first time.


They mix together newspaper clippings of soon-to-be-adopted Korean babies; religious icons; un-Crayoned pages from discarded coloring books of idyllic childhoods and contented Labradors; and magazine portraits of June Cleaver-type women imagined as his mother. Darger had on his wall everything he could not have in his life, unknowingly predating Rauschenberg's combines and Warhol's altered repetitions and reappropriations of already existent media.

The works on view show the signs of age, but considering the quality of materials—Christmas seal stamps, cast-away cardboard, medical tape, art supplies from the five-and-dime store—it's a miracle they

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