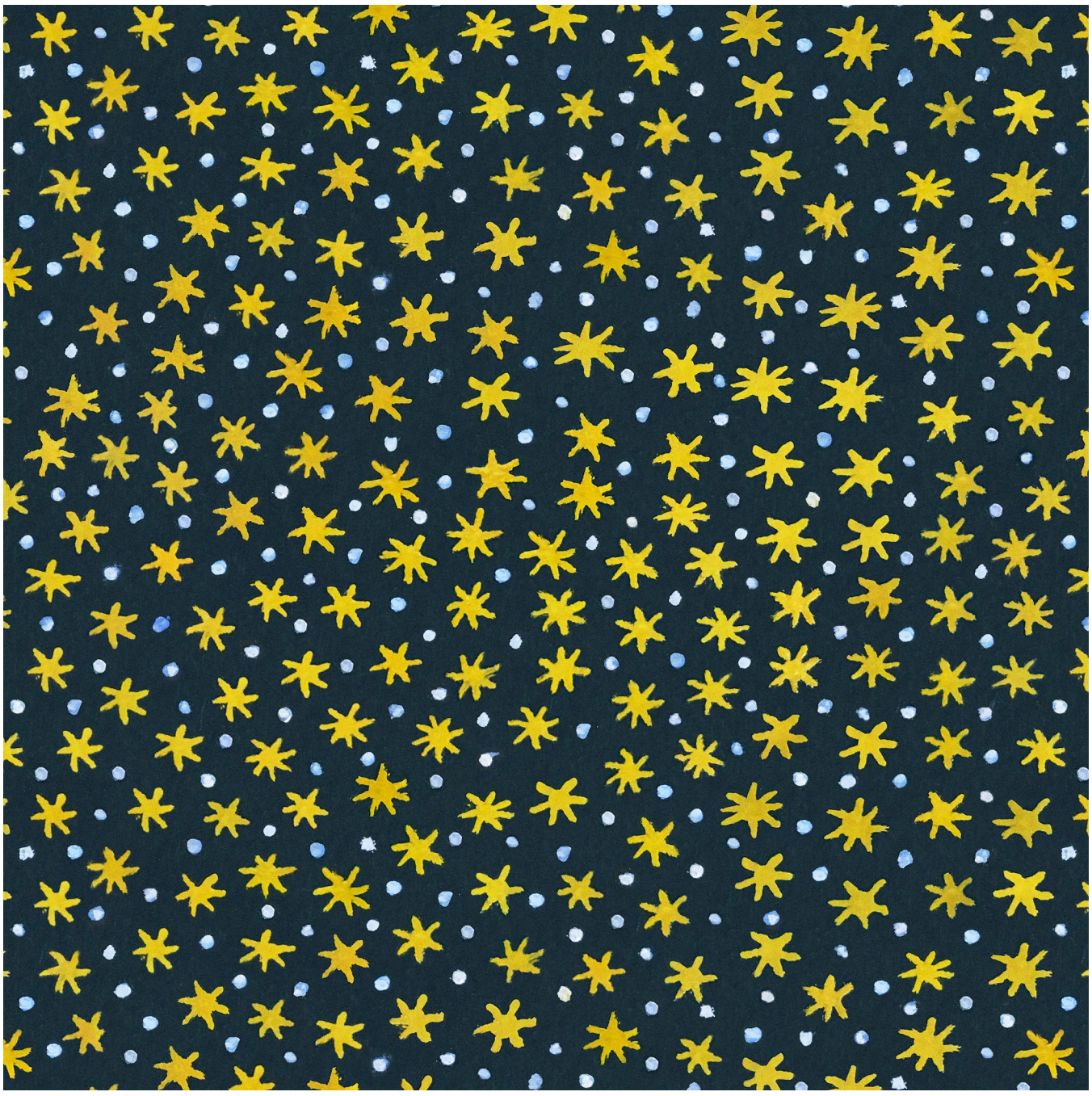
Unexpected Partners: Self-Taught Artists and Modernism in Interwar America

AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM



The exhibition *Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered* was on view at the American Folk Art Museum (AFAM) from September 23, 2022–January 29, 2023, and at Cantor Arts Center from September 6, 2023–January 21, 2024.

This exhibition was curated by Richard Meyer, Robert, and Ruth Halperin, Professor of Art History at Stanford University. Susan Davidson served as curatorial advisor to the exhibition. Valérie Rousseau, the American Folk Art Museum's Senior Curator of Self-Taught Art and Art Brut, was the show's coordinating curator.

The symposium, *Unexpected Partners: Self-Taught Art and Modernism in Interwar America*, was made possible through support from the Terra Foundation for American Art. Additional support was provided by the Department of Art & Art History at Stanford in the co-presenting and facilitating the symposium, particularly Julianne Garcia, Events & Communications Manager at Stanford University.

Introduction

JASON T. BUSCH

Becky and Bob Alexander Director & CEO,
American Folk Art Museum

For the past sixty years, our museum has provided a forum through which underrepresented artists like Morris Hirshfield could be better understood. Hirshfield was an immigrant tailor and slipper manufacturer in Brooklyn who took up painting at the age of 65. With little formal education and no connection to elite culture, he was not expected to make history. Yet, his pictures were championed by Sidney Janis, embraced by the Surrealists, collected by Peggy Guggenheim, and featured in a highly publicized one-person show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943. Critics frequently dismissed him as a Brooklyn tailor unworthy of professional attention and posthumously written out of art history's mainstream narratives.

The American Folk Art Museum (AFAM) was honored to work with scholar, author, and curator Richard Meyer, whose indefatigable research efforts have reasserted the art-historical relevance of Hirshfield. The exhibition *Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered*, on view at the Museum from September 23, 2022, through January 29, 2023, was the most comprehensive presentation of Hirshfield's work. *Master of the Two Left Feet*, a book that accompanied the exhibition, reflects the scholar's deep engagement with Morris Hirshfield's paintings and constitutes a significant contribution to the field of self-taught art.

We were also indebted to Susan Davidson, an esteemed scholar who served as curatorial advisor to the exhibition and authored a catalog of works for *Master of the Two Left Feet*, and to Valérie Rousseau, AFAM's Senior Curator of Self-Taught Art and Art Brut, who served as the exhibition's coordinating curator. Without them, this important retrospective would not have been possible.

On Friday, January 27th, 2023, the symposium "*Unexpected Partners: Self-Taught Art and Modernism in Interwar America*" used the research behind this important exhibition as a springboard for a broader consideration of American modernism's complex interchange with self-taught art. Scholars, leading experts, curators, and art historians across diverse geographical and cultural contexts were invited to reconsider the significant role that marginalized practitioners—particularly individuals from the BIPOC, immigrant, and disability communities—played in the development of modernism in the United States. Redressing these artists' gradual exclusion from the art-historical canon in the postwar era, and situating their works within a broader artistic, cultural, and socio-historical context, the symposium illuminated non-teleological narratives of American art.

We were grateful that many funders collaborated to make this project possible. I would like to thank the Terra Foundation for American Art, as the symposium and its proceedings have been brought to fruition with their support.

Editor's note

MARGARITA SÁNCHEZ URDANETA, Director of Publications and Editorial, American Folk Art Museum

MATHILDE WALKER-BILLAUD, Curator of Programs and Engagement, American Folk Art Museum

On January 27th, 2023, the symposium *Unexpected Partners: Self-Taught Artists and Modernism in Interwar America* unfolded alongside the exhibition *Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered*. Conceived as an extension of the exhibition and the symposium's scholarly pursuits, the proceedings explore modernism, its foundational paradigms, and the terminology surrounding the movement. With a focus on the exclusionary practices carried out by European and North American institutions, the project contemplates artists who navigated their creative and institutional paths without formal academic training.

The contributions[1] in this publication guide us through the concise yet influential career of Morris Hirshfield, an early exploration of the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) history, akin transnational institutions and practices, and several artists. It is important to note two things. Firstly, this revision of modernism transcends the confines of an exclusively North American perspective, giving rise to a redefined map of modernism. Secondly, these newly articulated positions are shaped through the nuanced filters of class, gender, and race, thus unraveling, expanding, and, more importantly, complicating the definitions of self-taught, naïve, outsider, and "modern primitive" art.

In line with the symposium's structure, Richard Meyer's keynote presentation introduces the historical research showcased at the 2022 exhibit *Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered,* organized at the American Folk Art Museum (AFAM) and later exhibited in the Cantor Arts Center. Here, Meyer aims to provide a more comprehensive view of American art by shedding light on the work of Morris Hirshfield.

The first session, "*Modern Primitives,*" revisits a pivotal moment when the works of William Edmondson, Séraphine Louis, and Morris Hirshfield were displayed as original expressions of modernity at MoMA. Jennifer Marshall, Brooke Wyatt, and Susan Davidson's contributions reveal the ways in which MoMA's early exhibitions *Sculpture by William Edmondson* (1937), *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America* (1938), and *The Paintings of Morris Hirshfield* (1943) shaped a pluralistic but discriminatory art field in the United States.

Inside/Outside Conundrum, the second session, investigates the construction of self-taught as a concept. By narrowing down on Oscar Howe and Morris Hirshfield's creative agency and achievements, Lynne Cooke and Bill Anthes illuminate how these artists challenged modern categories that discursively uphold hierarchies and produce the exclusion of certain art practitioners.

The third and final session, *Remapping Modernisms,* offers a multinational and decentered view of the artist whilst exploring their subaltern position. Focusing on the study of Brazilian artists, Julia Bryan-Wilson's contribution examines the art practice of Madalena Santos Reinbolt, and Rodrigo Moura discusses the exhibition *Popular Painters and Other Visionaries* (2021). Moreover, Nicole Smythe-Johnson brings forth the Caribbean as a site of contention, with particular attention to the work of the Jamaican painter John Dunkley. The articles call for an inter-American geography of modernism that attends to the material conditions of production, employment, and migration.

In her closing remarks, art historian Jane Kallir reviews the various mythologies that occluded the creative processes of the so-called "modern primitives" in the interwar period. Here, Kallir asks a series of fundamental questions regarding the porous nature of the employed terminology and the process of recovering the voices and positionalities of self-taught artists.

We are delighted to present this significant series of contributions and discussions that enhance the knowledge of the practices and histories of renowned artists like Morris Hirshfield, William Edmondson, Séraphine Louis, Oscar Howe, James Castle, Madalena

Santos Reinbolt, John Dunkley, Sénèque Obin, Horace Pippin, Micius Stephane, Heitor dos Prazeres, Rafael Borjes de Oliveira, and many others. These conversations offer a more nuanced and representative tableau of modernism.

1 Adapted from the symposium, the articles and Q&As were reviewed by the authors for this publication. Furthermore, you can access the original recordings by clicking on the hyperlinks provided as a footnote in each contribution.

Keynote

Change Partners and Dance: Morris Hirshfield's Modernism

RICHARD MEYER

Robert and Ruth Halperin Professor in Art History, Stanford University

Installation view of *Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered.* American Folk Art Museum, NY. September 23, 2022–January 29, 2023. Photo: Eva Cruz/EveryStory.

In 1938, RKO Radio Pictures released *Carefree*, starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, with music by Irving Berlin. Toward the end of the movie, Astaire glides across the dance floor of a swanky nightclub until he is next to Rogers, whose character is dancing with her fiancé. Astaire sings to her, "Must you dance every dance / With the same fortunate man? / You have danced with him since the music began. / Won't you change partners and dance with me?" Shortly after Astaire finishes the song, Rogers exits the room (in apparent irritation at this serenade) and retires to an outdoor pavilion. Astaire follows, and the couple engages in a dance sequence whose beauty outdistances everything in the film prior to this moment. While the whole premise of *Carefree* is to have Rogers switch partners and dance with Astaire, the moments when she does are no less magical for that.

Modern works of art and the stories we tell about them likewise benefit from engaging in new partnerships and choreography. Received knowledges change when we juxtapose them with obscured or half-forgotten stories. Narratives of individual achievement and heroic innovation give way to a view of multiple art worlds and competing versions of modernity. It is not a question of choosing between the canonical and the eccentric, but rather of devising a framework within which both may be seen to constitute art history. This has been a central goal of my work on Morris Hirshfield, in both written and curatorial form.

I was drawn to Hirshfield for a number of reasons. I was captivated by the artist's unlikely story, from poor Jewish immigrant tailor to internationally recognized artist, and the visual intricacy and delightful eccentricity of his work. But as I researched the artist, I became increasingly convinced that his brief, but spectacular, career (from 1939 to his death in 1946) illuminates mid-century modernism in ways that have not been previously known or explored. This conviction was sparked not by Hirshfield alone, but by the artist's work in dialogue with Sidney Janis, Peggy Guggenheim, Piet Mondrian, Andre Breton, Alfred Barr, and the Museum of Modern Art, among other individuals and institutions in the early 1940s. As I argue in *Master of the Two Left Feet*, this was an active dialogue—or series of dialogues—between Hirshfield and his interlocutors rather than, as was often claimed by detractors at the time, a one-way process in which artworld elites exploited a guileless old man (a "goat" as one critic called him) for their own amusement and preening self-satisfaction.

In what follows, I demonstrate the ability of Hirshfield's art to change partners and dance, both in the 1940s and today. Far from being orchestrated exclusively by others, these changes flowed, and continue to flow, from the power of his work and its refusal to submit to the categories—folk, modernprimitive, naïve, outsider—to which it has been assigned.

In 2015, I visited the newly reinstalled Modern galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. For the first time, pre-1945 European and American works were hung side by side. This defied the longstanding judgment that American art before World War II was either derivative of or simply inferior to its European, particularly French, counterparts. Early twentieth-century American art was previously displayed at the Metropolitan Museum in separate quarters. The loosening of geographic and stylistic categories in the reinstallation enabled unforeseen interactions to unfold. On one wall, a well-known work by Jean Dubuffet, *Woman Grinding Coffee* (1945), partnered with Hirshfield's little-seen painting *Stage Beauties* (1944), donated to the museum by Carroll and Donna Janis in 2013. The pairing offered wildly divergent views of figuration, frontality, and femaleness unfolding on different continents at nearly the same historical moment. It coupled a canonical modernist with a little-known, self-taught artist.

In *Stage Beauties*, a dazzle of colors and patterns show-cases a trio of female performers. Each of the "beauties" has been outfitted in a boldly striped costume that both rhymes and contrasts with those of her companions. The longer one looks at the painting, the stranger and more delightful it becomes. While the women's faces and torsos are presented frontally, their legs are turned in sharp profile. There is simply

no way, anatomically speaking, to reconcile their upper and lower halves. The costumes worn by the showgirls do not so much resolve this problem as distract from it by becoming their own spectacle of sartorial improbability. Dresses extend into semi-flaccid sausage-shaped tails; the red-and-yellow headdress of one figure is accessorized with a pair of antennae.

In contrast to *Stage Beauties*, Dubuffet's *Woman Grinding Coffee* presses the female figure against, and nearly grinds her into, the molten brown, tar-thick ground of the picture. Widened to encompass nearly the entirety of the canvas, the figure is both cursorily drawn and crudely distorted. Her moon face is smeared and abraded by brown pigment; her pigtails resemble nothing so much as bloated feet, the right one with a detached big toe. A harsh terrain of craggy, irregular ruts, and sludgy desire to make, as he put it, a monument to the beauty of "dirt, trash, and filth."

When I visited the museum in 2015, I spent time with both the Hirshfield and Dubuffet, among many other pictures. As I was about to leave the modern galleries, I was drawn back to *Stage Beauties*. Something on the surface of the painting was creating a glimmer or sparkle of light. The glint seemed to emerge from the eyes of the "stage beauties," particularly the central one. As I could not understand how this effect was produced, I approached the picture more closely to determine whether there was some other material—a bit of glitter, perhaps, a splinter of silver leaf or foil—embedded in it. I could not, however, find anything but oil paint. As I moved yet nearer to the picture to scrutinize its brushwork and texture, I sensed the increasing concern of a museum guard. After a few moments, she firmly asked me to step back from the work. I complied.

I had been going to the Metropolitan Museum for decades—I had even worked there for a year—but had never seen a picture by Hirshfield there nor heard his name mentioned. I had not, in fact, seen a painting by the artist in person anywhere prior to this moment. The mistake in my encounter with *Stage Beauties* was not my failure to locate the source of its glimmer nor my improper nearness to the canvas. The mistake was in how long it had taken me to see a painting by Hirshfield. The mistake was not of my own making—or at least not exclusively so—but that of art history. Even as I left the Metropolitan Museum, I was still captivated by *Stage Beauties* and by the difference it posed to the narratives of modern art I had been taught. I wanted to be part of that difference. The glint in the eyes of the central figure in the painting was also a spark. It helped convince me that Hirshfield's art deserved more attention. Both a book and museum show came out of that conviction.

The distinction between self-taught artists such as Hirshfield and avant-garde art was not as severely policed in the 1930s and 40s as it would be in subsequent decades. Which is to say, the Metropolitan Museum's reinstallation was something of a throwback to an earlier moment in the understanding of modern art.

In 1941, MoMA presented "a new installation" of its permanent collection. While the museum's storied collection has been on display in one version or another virtually ever since, such exhibitions were not a museum convention at the time. Prior to viewing works by Gauguin, Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso, visitors entered a gallery devoted to *Modern Primitives: Artists of the People*, eighteen non-professional, self-taught painters from France, Britain, and the United States. Rather than positioning these artists as subordinate to the European avant-garde, the museum offered their works as visually innovative and genuinely original expressions of modernity. Among the paintings on display were ten newly acquired works of self-taught art, including Hirshfield's *Tiger* and *Girl in a Mirror*.

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Sidney Janis, world-famous art dealer, curator, collector, and the discoverer of Hirshfield, liked to recount an anecdote of Piet Mondrian on Hirshfield: Mondrian, despite the restricted regime of his own

art, was noted for his quick response to originality, however different, in other painters. Not long after his arrival from abroad [in 1940], he selected from a group of paintings by leading international advance-guard artists including his own work, a painting by an artist unknown to him, remarking: "Excepting Picasso, this is the strongest picture here." It was a painting by Morris Hirshfield.

At the time, Janis owned works by de Chirico, Klee, Leger, Rousseau, and Dali as well as Mondrian himself. Hirshfield would unquestionably have agreed with this point of view, but he did not in turn prove receptive to Mondrian's art. At the opening of his own exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Hirshfield, noticing a picture hanging in the Museum foyer, inquired about it. It was, as Janis noted, Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. When Hirshfield learned the painting had recently been purchased by the Museum, he was incredulous. Janis quotes him as saying in astonishment, "They paid money for that?"

The visionary abstract artist recognizes the originality of the self-taught painter and former slipper salesman. Hirshfield, by contrast, is baffled that MoMA should acquire a painting such as *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. The judgment of history has, of course, been just the reverse. Mondrian not only belongs at MoMA, but the history of modern art cannot be told without him. Hirshfield, by contrast, has been largely invisible within canonical accounts of modernist art since the 1940s.

Since I wrote the book and finished working on the show, I have found myself pondering a new question: What does the story about Hirshfield and Mondrian (and Janis) tell us about the ways in which vanguard modernism embraces the unschooled and seemingly unsophisticated? Hirshfield does not need, or at least does not want, to embrace modernism in the same way. Does his refusal to do so credentialize him, even further, as an outsider?

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Hirshfield's peak moment of public visibility occurred when the Museum of Modern Art mounted a one-person show of his work in 1943. The show included all 30 paintings created by the artist to date, a curatorial feat that was not especially difficult, since his first paintings were only four years old at the time. Janis, the champion of the artist's work, as well as a member of MoMA's advisory committee, guest curated the show with the support of the museum's founding director, Alfred Barr.

Even as Hirshfield was dismissed and trivialized, the most scathing critiques of the show were saved for the museum itself. *Art Digest* published a short piece titled "Museum of Murdered Art" that accused MoMA of peddling cheap entertainment in the manner of a burlesque house." This comment is especially striking given that the following year, Hirshfield would create *Stage Beauties*, a painting that strongly evokes burlesque performance."

According to several critics, the high-falutin museum had embraced lowbrow art to demonstrate its supposedly vanguard, but ultimately vacuous, taste.

A great deal of critical disapproval focused on a single object in the exhibition. The object was not, as might be expected, a painting by the artist, but rather, an educational display by the curator. Janis created an oversized, illustrated diagram that sought to explain the "religious, cultural, and art-historical" sources of Hirshfield's painting, *Inseparable Friends* on display nearby. The diagram featured ten reproductions of the painting alongside twelve illustrations of artworks and objects ranging from a velvet Torah covering to *Three Graces* by Lucas Cranach the Elder. Janis employed thread and straight pins in different colors to link particular images to one another and to explanatory texts. The thread and pins recalled Hirshfield's former career as a tailor while underscoring the three-dimensionality of the diagram.

The unhappy response to the diagram resounded throughout several of the nastiest reviews of the show. The *New York World Telegram* opined, "these

most complicated explanations have been grotesquely worked out for the simplest pictures imaginable…the whole performance is too absurd and pathetic." The *New York Times* described Janis's arcane interpretations as ill-suited to Hirshfield's lightweight art. It was, according to the newspaper, "as if Hegel were pausing to demonstrate a lollipop." The *College Art Journal* likewise remarked that "the effect is quite like that of a sensitive butterfly, fragile and brilliant, trying to impart its graces to a Mack truck." The comments drew upon irreconcilable objects—a butterfly and a Mack truck, a philosopher and a lollipop—to underscore the absurdity of Janis's diagram. The critics mean to impress us with the cleverness of their analogies. Their wordplay mocked Hirshfield, Janis, and MoMA simultaneously—the first for his simplicity, the second for his pedantry, and the third for its impudence in plucking a Brooklyn tailor from obscurity and placing him center stage in the art world.

Harsh recriminations came not only from outside the museum but also, and more surprisingly, from within. In the eyes of Stephen C. Clark, chairman of MoMA's board of trustees, the exhibition compromised the museum's professional standing and commitment to aesthetic excellence. It was, in other words, in bad taste. Although Barr had not organized the show, he was held to account for it. Less than two months after the exhibition closed, he was dismissed from his position. Though there were multiple causes for this dismissal (conflicts over administrative and fundraising duties and ill will between Barr and Clark), the director's support of the Hirshfield show was adduced as evidence of his faulty leadership.

The firing of Barr in the wake of the Hirshfield show would have longstanding repercussions for the museum's curatorial activities and collection building. To take but one example: MoMA increasingly dissociated itself from self-taught and otherwise non-professional art. In 1938, Barr mounted *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America* as the third in a series of exhibitions on the most important movements and tendencies in modern art. After World War II, however, the museum increasingly swept self-taught artists, with the exception of Rousseau, out of the history of modernism. The last one-person exhibition that MoMA devoted to an unschooled painter took place in 1943. The artist was of course Hirshfield. At last, in Nov 2021-March 2022, the museum mounted a full-scale exhibition of drawings by the self-taught artist Joseph Yoakum. Might we be moving toward a moment in which such exhibitions will be less remarkable than less deviant, from recent curatorial practice and policy at MoMA?

I offer a suggestion as to why I hope this will be the case. That suggestion is kicked off by a young Sidney Janis who left high school in Buffalo, NY in his senior year to work as a ballroom dancer. He appeared in second-tier vaudeville houses on the East Coast that were part of the so-called Gus Sun circuit. Though moderately successful, Janis and his various female partners (including Grace McCann) never attracted anything like the visibility of the leading dance team of the day, the brother and sister act of Fred and Adele Astaire. In "Master of the Two Left Feet," I titled a section on Janis "The Dancer" because I wanted to suggest how smooth he was in learning the steps necessary to succeed in the New York artworld. Hirshfield, by contrast, was always positioned as an outsider to that world, even at the very moments his art was being taken in.

If Hirshfield could not compete with the elegance of Janis's choreography, he had other gifts that should, by rights, be acknowledged. He was, for example, not only the founder of a highly successful footcare and wear company called EZ WALK Manufacturing, he was also an inventor and designer who was granted 24 patents by the U.S. government for orthotic devices (ankle straighteners and arch supports) as well as unique designs for boudoir slippers. Hirshfield was a creative person long before he picked up oil paint and brushes; he was inventive decades before he was embraced, and then more or less dumped, by MoMA.

As I was thinking about how to make this vivid in the exhibition, it occurred to me that some of his patented designs might best be experienced in material

form. I approached an artist, Liz Blahd, who had fabricated shoes in the past and asked her if it might be possible to create slippers to the specifications of Hirshfield's patent illustrations. Not only was it possible, Blahd said, but she would like to make them herself. She fabricated thirteen pairs of slippers in merino wool felt with soles in kidskin suede. One additional pair, in pink, was crafted more luxuriously in cashmere. The trims, tassels, florets, and other ornamental features are variously cotton, silk, velvet, and yarns of mohair and wool. Blahd researched historically accurate colors for boudoir slippers of the early 1920s and selected among them. She lightly stained the fabrics with tea or coffee so that they more closely conformed to the appearance of vintage textiles. Blahd's slippers transformed my sense of Hirshfield as a footwear designer. His sober line illustrations submitted to the patent office in Washington became vivid objects a century later.

Blahd's beautiful slippers became, for me, a metaphor for what I think art historians, at their best, might do. We return to the past in order to make it come alive in the present. Hirshfield's slippers are not irrelevant to his paintings—as we hope viewers see by the juxtaposition of the slippers to the subsequent paintings in which flamboyantly styled footwear appears. But it is not just about visual resemblance. Making the slippers today asks people to think about Hirshfield's life as a maker 100 years ago.

A number of visitors have asked me where they can buy a pair of the slippers. My response is always the same—"there are no pairs—there are only single slippers for each design. And they are not for sale. These slippers have been made by Liz Blahd, a contemporary artist in response to the creative vision of another artist, Morris Hirshfield." I'm asking visitors to move beyond the mental habit, which is mine as well, of viewing desirable objects through the lens of potential acquisition. This, of course, is the lens through which Hirshfield hoped his low-heeled, relatively inexpensive, felt slippers would be seen. They were made to sell.

Now, however, the slippers are made to be looked at rather than purchased, to be seen both as visual and material designs worthy of attention in their own right. Changing habits of looking, like changing dance partners, is not a simple process. And, as Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Morris Hirshfield, and Liz Blahd demonstrate, finding the right footwear to do it in may be an art in itself.

Watch a recording of this presentation here.

Session 1: "Modern Primitives"
Introduction

ESTHER ADLER

Curator in the Department of Drawings and Prints,
Museum of Modern Art

Alfred Barr (left) with President of Nicaragua, Anastasio Somoza and his daughter, Lillian Somoza at the exhibition *Art in Our Time: 10th Anniversary Exhibition,* May 16, 1939. Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

In a favorite photograph from The Museum of Modern Art Archives, dapper young Director Alfred H. Barr, Jr. stands with then President of Nicaragua Anastasio Somoza and his daughter Lillian Somoza. The visit, and the clearly staged press image that commemorated it, date to May 1939, the occasion of MoMA's 10th anniversary. Marked by a series of exhibitions titled "Art in Our Time," the anniversary also celebrated the museum's opening of its first bespoke building space; the caption provided for the photo highlights Somoza's visit to "the new $2,000,000 glass-walled building of The Museum of Modern Art."[1] The most striking element of the photograph, however, is not the people or the building, but rather the towering sculpture at left: a five-and-a-half foot tall carved eagle, purportedly made for a Rhode Island Tavern.[2] Wooden, figurative (or rather avian), and by an unidentified American artist, this sculpture seems an odd choice as the sole visible art object representing a museum that played a decisive role in defining the "modern" and "contemporary" in art in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1939, however, it was neither a curiosity nor particularly remarkable. This wooden eagle, prominently displayed and promoted, is rather evidence of how the art that MoMA referred to as "American folk and popular art" was a critical part of the story of "Art in Our Time," as told by the museum in its first decades.[3]

In introducing the first panel of this symposium, titled "Modern Primitives," and centered on pivotal exhibitions from the early history of MoMA, it is useful to consider the overall programming landscape of the museum during that era. The institution's inaugural exhibition in 1929 was *Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, Van Gogh*, which established it as one of the few places in New York where audiences could view European modern art. These foundational figures remain celebrated today, with their work on view in the museum's galleries. Lesser known, perhaps, is that three years later, in 1932, MoMA presented *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750–1900*. Amidst the "weather vanes and cigar store figures, toys, and wildfowl decoys, ships' figureheads and the paintings on velvet made by young ladies in 'female Seminaries'" on view in the exhibition was *Baby in Red Chair*, now an iconic and much-beloved example of early American painting.[4] Lent to that exhibition, alongside virtually every other work on view, by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, it was officially accepted as her gift to The Museum of Modern Art in 1939. This generous contribution included nearly 50 other works, further enriching the museum's holdings.[5] When the museum's collection was reinstalled in 1941, a selection of these works occupied the first gallery. As Barr explained at the time, "The Modern Primitives have been chosen to open the series of new galleries for two reasons: first because with the ten new acquisitions, it is the finest and most representative group of its kind in any museum in the world; and secondly because it seems the best introduction to a general survey of modern painting such as the Museum collection will eventually present."[6]

This extraordinary and celebratory statement comes as a surprise today, especially considering that it is unusual to find work like this on view at MoMA now.[7] Why, then, was this art so critical to the institution's displays during its first decade? Because, as Barr would explain in correspondence from the time, "Folk or popular paintings and sculpture are more or less the discovery of modern artists."[8] They were, then, understood and admired not on their own terms necessarily, but because of their interest to the contemporary artists that MoMA championed in other, separate displays. Though this viewpoint led to the exhibition of extraordinary works of folk art, it created an extremely narrow lens through which to consider them—one that prioritizes viewers' interests and responses rather than the creative agency of the artists themselves. This has, of course, been a recurrent issue throughout the museum's history. Consider, for example, the broad range of art from other cultures that was exhibited at MoMA as "sources" of Modern art tendencies: *American Sources of Modern Art (Aztec, Mayan, Incan)* in 1933, *Indian Art of the United States* in 1941, and the now infamous *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* in 1984. Fortunately, scholars have

been revisiting the museum's early exhibitions, both to critique the ways in which MoMA's presentations shaped early dialogue around self-taught artists' work, and also to help expand the understanding of that work from multiple vantage points. I'm thrilled to introduce the speakers, whose papers will do exactly this:

Jennifer Jane Marshall, Professor and Chair in Art History at the University of Minnesota, is currently working on a highly anticipated monograph on sculptor William Edmondson (American, 1874–1951). She will speak on Edmondson's 1937 exhibition at MoMA.

Brooke Wyatt is Luce Assistant Curator at the American Folk Art Museum, where she is currently working on a series of exhibitions from the Museum's collection. She will discuss the work of Séraphine Louis (French, 1864–1942), included in the 1938 MoMA exhibition *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America*, drawing from her doctoral dissertation, "Séraphine Louis and French Self-Taught Art in Transatlantic Modernist Discourse."

Susan Davidson, art historian and curatorial advisor to the American Folk Art Museum on the exhibition *Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered*, will speak on Hirshfield's career and long history with The Museum of Modern Art.

Watch a recording of this presentation here.

1 For more on the series of exhibitions surrounding the museum's tenth anniversary in 1939, which also served as MoMA's contribution to the World's Fair of that year, see the extensive archival material available on the museums's website https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/history/. This image, and the accompanying caption that was provided with it, are available at maid.moma.org, under the object number ARCH.2749.

2 See *Art in Our Time* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1939): 24, work #11.

3 The phrase "Art in Our Time" has long been used by MoMA to various ends and remains part of the museum's mission statement today. This photograph of Barr, the head of a Latin American nation, and a piece of American folk art that was put forth as an example of "fresh, honest vision," is equally fascinating as an indicator of the museum's role in international politics at that time, specifically in Latin America. The full caption of the photograph includes the following quote from Somoza: "For me, this sculpture symbolizes a Nicaragua protected by friendly wings of the American Eagle". For more on the link between MoMA and Latin American art and politics around this time, see Michele Greet, "Looking South: Lincoln Kirstein and Latin American Art," in Samantha Friedman and Jodi Hauptman, *Lincoln Kirstein's Modern*. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019): 145-153, esp. 146.

4 This laundry list of included objects is found in the museum's press release for the exhibition, available on MoMA's website: https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_324982.pdf?_ga=2.67266579.328588569.1689007360-933176284.1654885317. Baby in a Red Chair is the first work listed on the checklist for the exhibition, also available: www.moma.org/documents/moma_master-checklist_324981.pdf?_ga=2.28599742.328588569.1689007360-933176284.1654885317.

5 See list dated April 16, 1954 in MoMA Department of Painting and Sculpture Files. The majority of these works were transferred to the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum in Colonial Williamsburg in 1954.

6 Barr quoted in "Museum of Modern Art Opens New Series of Galleries with Ten New Acquisitions of Modern Primitives." Press release 411020, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Available online: https://moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1703.

7 A recent exception is the collection gallery titled Masters of Popular Painting, which was on view on the Museum's fifth floor from it's reopening in October 2019 until Summer 2023. See https://www.moma.org/calendar/galleries/5142.

8 Barr to Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., November 4, 1938. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York: AHB mf 3264: 1111-1112.

William Edmondson at MoMA, 1937

JENNIFER JANE MARSHALL

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Photograph of Alfred Barr, Elizabeth Catlett, Dorothy C. Miller, and Charles White at MoMA for the exhibition, *Young Negro Art*, 1943.

If you have ever learned anything about the Museum of Modern Art's early years during the 1930s, or about its first director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., you have likely seen the infographic he created to help explain recent changes in the visual arts to his public audience. Made for MoMA's 1936 exhibition, *Cubism and Abstract Art,* Barr used the form of a flow chart to outline modern art in a way that clarifies its internal relationships, changes over time, and patterns of influence or descent. The chart has a scientific feel. It behaves something like Darwin's "The Descent of Man," but for the avant-garde, like Darwin's phylogenetic "Tree of Life," but applied to MoMA's primary educational goal: to teach urban and suburban, well-educated, largely white, middle-class Americans how to untangle—and maybe even appreciate—what otherwise looks like a mess.

As scholars before me have noted, and I've also had occasion to write about, Barr approached his work as MoMA's first director and chief curator much like a natural scientist. He collected specimens from the vast international phenomenon known as "modern art," organized them according to shared visual characteristics, and from this, made a genealogical model of modern art: a re-conception of its seemingly bizarre "-isms" as inherently emergent artistic values, the result of natural selection. Modern art was as though it had been *revealed* to Barr's scholarly analysis, as though discovered by his curatorial eye.

At least this was the put-on of charts like these—even if, by 1936, the family tree approach to explaining contemporary art was already something of a cliché, if not verging on an arch joke. (The cartoonist, Miguel Covarrubias, would offer his own send-up in the May 1933 issue of *Vanity Fair.*) One of the goals for this symposium, as I see it, and one of the achievements of an exhibition like *Morris Hirshfield, Rediscovered,* is to make good on the opportunity to review museums as one site among many in which modern art's values are *made,* not discovered, *manufactured* rather than simply classified, and, crucially, *creatively and socially produced,* rather than passively reproduced and handed down. We may think of art in this way already, but I'm emphasizing the point because to re-view art as something produced is a potentially powerful way to dislodge the reproductive imagination at the heart of culture's biological metaphors. Also, by this shift, we might help art history shake loose from its dreams of racial purity and the nightmares of racist violence that come with it. So what if we imagined modernism's relationships more like a map than a tree? More like a geographical arrangement than a familial one?

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It would have been by rail that thirty-one limestone sculptures by William Edmondson made their way from Nashville to Manhattan in New York during the summer of 1937.

The show featured twelve works by the Tennessee artist. Not quite half of these portrayed contemporary types: three were female forms. There was a *Woman with Bustle,* a *Lady in Cloak,* and a work known as *Bride.* The two male forms were exhibited as *Lawyer* and as *Preacher,* though Edmondson's figures of orating men often go by both titles interchangeably.

These genre figures appeared as though carved from life by Edmondson as he observed it in his Nashville neighborhood, and this feeling of everyday America would have played well at MoMA—especially in 1937 when the museum placed a high premium on local color. During the same season as Edmondson's run, MoMA hung an exhibition of American Scene Regionalist paintings, hosted the debut of Selznick's Technicolor *Tom Sawyer,* displayed film stills from Griffith's *Birth of a Nation,* and showed Lester Beall's posters for the New Deal Rural Electrification Program. Together, these installations offered a regionalist-heavy approach to contemporary art in the United States, perhaps an attempt to make "the Modern" more relevant to more audiences. What's more, even as the five displays added up to a decidedly heavy emphasis on the American South, they failed to unify into a single viewpoint, instead sampling perspectives ranging from Black artistic self-determination, white nostalgia for a pre-industrial,

slave-owning past, and technocratic support for New Deal modernization. Any visitor, regardless of politics or taste, could find an American South for them at MoMA that season.

Two works in the Edmondson show on display portrayed animals: a set of mourning doves (part of Edmondson's work as a monument maker for cemeteries) and a resting ram. These works were not merely animalia, but theological, allegorical forms. If any visitors missed this, one monument in particular would have revealed the exhibition's major theme. One of a handful of works in Edmondson's *oeuvre* that doesn't depict a human figure, *Noah's Ark* comprises four tiers: two figurative, house-like forms (replete with windows and a gabled roof) sit atop two non-figurative, rough-edged platform stones (giving a rolling sense of ocean waves). Although many titles for Edmondson's works are iffy, appended by collectors and curators and sometimes changing over the decades since his death, we have reason to believe Edmondson named *Noah's Ark* himself. Partly, this is because the sculpture doesn't otherwise conform to the boat shape we might expect, but we also know that the artist posed with this work for a portrait before the piece was shipped to New York, an occasion for sharing and recording Edmondson's title.

The last four objects in the 1937 MoMA installation only further developed the theme of Edmondson's religiosity, which may well have been the motif that governed how the museum's curators picked their twelve objects from the thirty-one that were sent. And this theme, too, embroidered the same Southern sentiment elsewhere then on view in the museum's galleries. Rounding out the checklist of *Sculpture by William Edmondson* was an angel, a crucifixion, and two works called *Mary and Martha*. At least three known works by Edmondson depict the two New Testament sisters, although he always showed them to be identically reclined in rest, This departs from the parable, which contrasts Martha, overly busied by her earthly duties, and a more authentically dutiful Mary, whose rest made her ready to receive Jesus's teachings. Of the two *Mary and Martha* forms exhibited in New York in 1937, MoMA shipped one to Paris the next year. Perhaps MoMA's preference for the motif stemmed from how the pair hit hard at the exhibition's core themes of everyday life and Christian piety. In this way the exhibition helped manufacture what has since been received as the major motifs of Edmondson's oeuvre: the religious and allegorical, and the here and now.

If this sweet blend was at all meant to feel elegiacally archaic, MoMA's *Towns of Tomorrow* preview of the coming 1939 World's Fair would have sharpened the point. Edmondson's world, like Tom Benton's and Tom Sawyer's, was passing away. Indeed, the very spaces into which Edmondson's hand-carved works offered a view—and the very people who viewed them—would have made the contrast between Edmondson's world and Manhattan all the clearer. *Sculpture by William Edmondson* was not installed in MoMA's original brownstone, nor did it appear in Goodwin/Stone international-style showpiece. Staged between October and December of 1937, *Sculpture by William Edmondson* went up in MoMA's temporary quarters, in the mezzanine level of one of the buildings at Rockefeller Center. This put it on the calendar of a larger transitional phase for MoMA, characterized not only by its headquarters upgrade, but by a strategic report drafted by Artemas Packard and funded by Nelson Rockefeller. The Packard Report called for a more populist approach to modern art and, with it, bigger audiences. All of the thirty-one works that had been crated up and moved to Manhattan during the late summer of 1937 had been rather recently made; Edmondson had only just started carving sculpture a few years prior. He'd taken up stone-carving as an avocation at midlife after retiring from a wage-earning career spent mostly in custodial positions, including at Nashville's Woman's Hospital, a pay-what-you-can clinic run by women that provided health services on a sliding scale to patients, many of whom traveled from out-of-state. Edmondson described his turn to art-making as the result of a religious calling. He spoke of pictures hung in the sky and his ease at making them permanent in stone. He spoke of angels

in the eaves of his house, Jesus sitting at the foot of his bed, the voice of his Heavenly Daddy, and, again and again, to any white reporter or patron who'd ask, he spoke of the artistic gift that God had given him. Never once did Edmondson defame that gift with false modesty or self-deprecation or apparent doubt.

Edmondson's art-making visions came at a felicitous historical moment, a time of widespread urban revitalization thanks to Roosevelt's New Deal and its work-relief programs. This benefited him indirectly in the form of freely gotten art supplies. All the limestone architectural scrap that was churned up or discarded from Tennessee's dozens of building projects became civic surplus, much of which found its way to Edmondson's ample yard.

Because he worked with found materials and cut his art directly from them, Edmondson's practice put him within a modernist context that MoMA embraced for contemporary sculpture. The practice aligned him with the direct-carving movement, representative works of which were also on view at MoMA in that fall of 1937. Chaim Gross, Henry Moore, and Isamu Noguchi all had pedestals that season and would have paired nicely with Edmondson for any wandering visitor eager to connect the dots.

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But how did *Sculpture by William Edmondson* come to be assembled in the first place?

It's dispiritingly predictable how the show would eventually be framed and received: appearing in the popular media as a gee-whiz, fish-out-of-water story. MoMA's press releases set the tone, with language characterizing the artist as someone who had never seen a work of sculpture except his own, who was touched and simple, and eager for praise. The ensuing press clippings were equally acquiescent to a stereotyped view of Edmondson.

But the lifespan and cultural significance of an art exhibit, much like the lifespan and cultural significance of a work of art, begins long before its completion and public debut. What forces, coincidences, and broad, social assemblages had to happen for *Sculpture by William Edmondson* to have its MoMA run? The standard story told about this is true, even if it leaves out a number of important details. The most-told story centers on the photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe, and, as she put it so flatly in 1969, "I'm the one that got the show."

An aspiring art and fashion photographer in 1937, Dahl-Wolfe, had taken a series of photographs of Edmondson while visiting her in-laws in Tennessee. She later showed those pictures to Carmel Snow, then newly appointed editor of *Harper's Bazaar*. Snow agreed with Dahl-Wolfe that the pictures and the story together would make good content for the magazine, where Dahl-Wolfe herself had started to take assignments. But the idea was quickly scuttled by *Harper's* publisher, William Randolph Hearst, who "wouldn't allow it," as Dahl-Wolfe later recounted, because of his "terrible prejudice about black people." If not *Harper's,* what would be the right venue for introducing Edmondson's talents to sophisticates?

Disappointed, Dahl-Wolfe pressed on, "I showed them to Tom Mabry" Once photographed by the socialite and Harlem hanger-on, Carl Van Vechten (who remembered Mabry as "one of the famous beauties of the 20th century"), Mabry is little remembered in MoMA's institutional lore. He served as the Museum's Executive Director in the mid-1930s, taking over the role from Alan Blackburn, who had rather publicly resigned from the Museum at the end of 1934. Blackburn's departure claimed more than a few headlines; he packed up with Philip Johnson in a brand new Packard and set out to drive from Manhattan to Louisiana. They were in search of an acolyte's roost at Huey Long's right hand.

If Blackburn and Johnson's fascist-populist leanings carried them down South from New York, it might be said that Mabry's democratic-cosmopolitan leanings carried him upward and opposite along a similar route. In fact, he'd been back and forth between the Middle South and the Yankee North throughout his early adulthood: a bachelor's degree at Harvard, followed by a master's degree at Vanderbilt, then the MoMA job came after a two-year administrative post as assistant to the president of Fisk University in Nashville. Mabry's employment at one of the country's most prestigious Black universities didn't come from nowhere. It was part of a pattern of the Clarksville, Tennessee native, who frequently crossed the color line in his activities in pursuit of both higher learning and arts and letters. This is surely part of what brought him into Van Vechten's orbit (not just the brooding brow and strong jaw).

Before his post at MoMA, Mabry had multiple points of connection to the Black artistic milieus of both New York and Nashville. He had worked for Alfred and Blanche Knopf, the publishers who'd supported so many of Harlem's literati; he was friends with Walter White, the NAACP leader; and he had a secret, but passionate, love affair with Nella Larsen, best known for her 1929 novel Passing. During his grad school days at Vanderbilt, Mabry had agitated to get James Weldon Johnson on his thesis committee. Johnson, the sociologist and poet who wrote the lyrics to *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (and was also once photographed by Van Vechten), had a faculty post at Fisk but was not permitted to join Mabry's committee among the all-white faculty. Mabry's was an activist's petition made with the expectation of failure. Some of this spirit may have been behind a party Mabry once threw. In an attempt to recreate the interracial cultural foment he had enjoyed in New York City, he invited a crew of intellectuals to his family cabin outside Nashville. It did not go well. The guest list, which included not only Johnson, but also Langston Hughes *and* Vanderbilt advisors, got Mabry, as he'd later recall, "nearly … thrown out. I was goddamn sore."

All of this would seem to have equipped Mabry especially well to Louise Dahl-Wolfe's pitch on behalf of Edmondson. And it must have, since he used her photographs—"all enlarged and … lovely," she would later boast— to circulate the idea around to MoMA's curators and secure the exhibition. But Mabry himself didn't have any particular connection to Edmondson or any prior knowledge of his work, even though Fisk's campus was only two and a half miles north of Edmondson's Nashville home and studio, and even though Mabry's employment at Fisk exactly coincided with Edmondson's ascendence to art making. Indeed, Mabry's seemingly distracted disinterest in Edmondson has been his biggest legacy in the secondary literature on the sculptor. In a memo he drafted on the topic of the show, he refers multiple times to "William," and ends the note by asking (one hopes with chagrin), "What is William's last name?"

There's even less paper trail to illustrate Alfred Barr's investment in the exhibition, although he did supply some language for the press release praising the sculptor's directness of approach. Aside from Mabry, I would count Dorothy C. Miller as the most important MoMA curator behind the wheel of *Sculpture by William Edmondson*. As she put it in 1968: "I remember our little Edmondson exhibition vividly since I installed it." In a photo taken in 1942, Miller is seated between Elizabeth Catlett and Charles White, the husband-and-wife artists who were featured as part of MoMA's partnership with the Harmon Foundation. Miller was similarly part of a powerhouse coupling, attached to Holger Cahill, who had curated MoMA's first American folk art exhibition in 1932.

Miller began her career at MoMA as assistant curator in 1934, and would go on to have a nearly thirty-five-year career at the institution. Few took the work of culture broker more seriously than she did. When Edmondson was re-discovered in the late 1960s, Miller served as a living rolodex: connecting researchers to the many collectors and artists who had purchased works by the sculptor in the 30s and 40s, but keeping this dispersed collection out of public view. Miller

enjoyed pointing people to Betty Parsons, who kept some Edmondson doves on the desk at her gallery.

In her recollection of the Edmondson show, Miller underscored her point about its littleness, just a dozen works and "no catalog was published." Moreover, she added a note of regret, "I am sorry [that] we did not buy an Edmondson sculpture, but I think all the best examples were already sold." Indeed, the MoMA show served as a point-of-sale for approximately ten sculptures. Mabry bought one; so did MoMA President A. Conger Goodyear, and Millard Meiss, the art historian. Dahl-Wolfe ended up keeping the rest. Some she displayed at her home (shared with the artist Meyer Wolfe), a country house in New Jersey, which they called The Creamery. For the others, Dahl-Wolfe made arrangements with Julien Levy to sell. She talked Levy into halving his listed prices with the goal to move product and return profits to Edmondson.

Dahl-Wolfe did not do this alone, though her photos certainly worked efficiently as a vehicle. She was acting as part of a team of white artists and culture brokers who had developed a relationship with the sculptor and wanted to see to it that he got his due.

"Tom Mabry," Dahl-Wolfe later explained "was a friend of ours through the Starrs."

Alfred and Elizabeth Starr's connection to Mabry came through the social conveyance known as the shared alma mater. Like Mabry, Alfred was also a Tennessee-born Harvard alum who would go on to become a member of Vanderbilt's English Department. And Mabry had a connection to Liz, too, this time by way of U.S. Route 41—the stretch of road that connected Nashville and Clarksville, the Montgomery County town where Tom and Liz had known each other growing up.

In Mabry's MoMA correspondence about the Edmondson show, he is frequently adamant that Liz Starr get the credit she deserves for her artistic insights into the sculptures. There was talk at one point about her drafting an essay for a catalog. It was surely Liz and Alfred who worked with Edmondson to pick the 31 works to pack and ship north to Manhattan. By then the couple had purchased numerous works from the artist and had begun to pay him a bit of a stipend as part of the arrangement. Nor was the relationship casual or particularly unusual for Starr, whose primary business was a chain of 44 theaters across six Southern states, which he ran with his two brothers. Called the Bijou Theatres, these venues featured Black performers for Black audiences. Ethel Waters remembered Milton Starr fondly in her autobiography. She portrayed him as a "soft-spoken Southerner and a Jew" who had once arranged for her safe passage out of Atlanta and away from a violent theater owner: "I thanked Jesus all the way [on the train] to Nashville."

Upon Edmondson's death in 1951, Alfred Starr would serve as a pallbearer. By 1972, Liz would express exhaustion. After four decades of stewarding Edmondson's name and legacy, she wrote: "Sometimes I wish I had never discovered William, I get so tired of it all."

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I've tried to emphasize modernism as a set of emergent practices born from social movement.

With all the busyness of activity, which I've tried to write out in a way that captures its many coincidences and complications, I'm probably running a little afoul of what Edmondson himself would have said about these arrangements of accident. None of this was fated to happen. And I'm running afoul, too, of both Edmondson's religious, artistic practice (carving, cutting away, as though art merely awaited his chisel) *and* of Barr's scientific, curatorial practice (classifying, arranging, demonstrating, as though art merely came to him by natural selection).

I'm going to insist instead that modern art's forms and values, and that a brief event called *Sculpture by William Edmondson,* all happen just because of the

accidents and connections that are borne of social actions and human decision making.

This is an obvious conclusion, which is maybe the best kind. Because I'm hoping that a reminder of the constant activity by which art is *produced* might help shake loose the last remnants of a genealogical model of modernism and might finally deracinate the family tree of modernism's imagination. That is, a networked and social geography of modernism might finally uproot art history's nineteenth-century belief in art as an automatic expression of race or national spirit. With a new map in place, we may be reminded of the conscious work, social relationships, and duties that drive the art world's movements and its ever-emerging modernists.

Watch a recording of this presentation here.

Séraphine Louis: A Disquieting Modernism

BROOKE WYATT

Luce Assistant Curator, American Folk Art Museum

Séraphine Louis (1864–1942). *Les raisins,* c. 1915. Oil on wood,
19 x 24.5 cm. Centre Pompidou, AM 3331 P. Photo: Christian Schryve.

Is it the case that popular art can gain access to modernity by riding on its back, or is it rather that it has the right not only to win access to modernity but also to have its own "modernity"?

—Ticio Escobar[1]

Even if outsiders were never modernism's most privileged other, they were always possibly its most needed."

—Darby English[2]

"Artiste-peintre"

In the painting known as *Bouquet* (c. 1927–28) and across her œuvre, French artist Séraphine Louis Maillard (1864–1942) deploys intricate systems of layered brushwork, rendering interpretations of botanical forms in a proprietary blend of pigments. Her palette is dominated by bold, contrasting colors in a range of opacities achieved by mixing the household enamel Ripolin, oil paint, and adding painting mediums such as varnish and lacquer. *Bouquet*'s composition is dominated by a densely swarming mass that oscillates between dissolution and coherence; a plethora of colorful dots strung together that seem to writhe across the canvas like the bodies of so many caterpillars. These forms are quickly subsumed into a creeping, all-over abstraction, only to reassemble themselves into discrete entities. Nearly the entire surface is punctuated by repeating orbs of paint nestled among wispy lines; close inspection suggests that each was rendered by a single, fluid brushstroke. In the upper right corner of the canvas, the signature "S. Louis" appears in viridian green. A trailing flourish defines the final "s." Louis employed this signature with exacting consistency in nearly all her works, one of many elements attesting to the sustained, independent studio practice that the painter initiated and directed across three decades. Louis's project is a study in human perception and observation catalogued through evolving inquiries into the possibilities of two-dimensional representation. Central among her interventions are a synthesis of organic growth and decay that she realizes through a merger of decorative and abstract practices, situated as unfolding across time and space, manifesting in paint on canvas.

Despite the complexity of Louis's innovations, her work has been largely relegated to the margins of art historical discourse, dictated by her status as a self-taught, working-class, white woman who spent the last ten years of her life in a psychiatric hospital. Born in 1864 in the village of Arsy in the Oise region, north of Paris, Louis worked for some two decades as a housekeeper in a convent in the town of Clermont until c. 1904–6, when, in her early forties, she took up residence in nearby Senlis. Continuing to support herself with domestic labor, Louis embarked fully on the artistic project that she pursued continuously until early 1932 when she was committed to the asylum, her studio practice cut short.

Since it was first exhibited internationally in 1937, Louis's work has entered the collections of institutions including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, among others. A critical analysis of the presence of Louis and other self-taught artists at definitional moments in the evolution of canonical modernism reveals the stakes of inclusion within that history for artists whose designation as such hinges upon a qualifier: self-taught artists, outsider artists, *art brut,* visionary, folk, and many more such titles. The study of self-taught art, grounded in an ethics of inclusion, has broad implications for the fields of art history and curatorial practice. Such analyses put pressure on the hierarchical binaries, linear temporalities, and markers of difference that are so foundational to modernist discourse.

Upon Louis's admittance to the hospital, a diagnosis of "chronic psychosis accompanied by megalomania"—what today would be labeled as schizophrenia following the prevailing Western medical model—was issued by the attending physician, Dr. Le Maux.[3] Le

Maux recorded that Louis stated her profession as "*artiste-peintre,*" or fine artist, a claim that was read as demonstrative of the delusions and aggrandized sense of self-importance expected to accompany the diagnosis she was assigned. The suggestion that a working-class, unmarried, childless woman not only aspired to, but realized, a career as a professional artist was deemed so ludicrous that it was dismissed as the product of a deranged mind. Although perhaps the most severe example, this was not the first, nor the last, time that Louis's autonomy as an artist, and as a human being, was co-opted and circumscribed.

Meanwhile in Paris, plans were underway to include Louis's paintings in an exhibition entitled *Modern Primitives* (*Les Primitifs Modernes*) set to open at the Galerie Bernheim Jeune in the summer of 1932. Organized by the German émigré writer, collector, and art dealer Wilhelm Uhde, the show anticipated a pair of exhibitions that came to define the relationship between self-taught artists and the modernist avant-garde in Europe and in the Americas.[4] The first, staged in Paris in 1937, was *Popular Masters of Reality* (*Les Maîtres Populaires de la Réalité*). *Maîtres* represents a pivotal moment in the exhibition history of works by French self-taught artists (and one Swiss artist, Adolf Dietrich), as it was likely the largest group of works by so-called *naïfs* yet assembled in a European context. The show traveled to Zürich and London before opening at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in April 1938 as *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America*. In New York, *Bouquet* (cataloged as "Cluster of Fruits") and three other works by Louis were exhibited outside of Europe for the first time.

"*Masters of Popular Painting* is the third in a series of exhibitions outlined in 1933 and intended to present some of the major divisions or movements of modern art,"[5] wrote MoMA's founding director Alfred H. Barr, Jr. as he prefaced the exhibition catalog by placing *Masters* in a historical lineage, central to the museum's program in its first decade of operation. The series began with *Cubism and Abstract Art* and *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* (both 1936), two exhibitions that have received recent scholarly excavation.[6] However, *Masters of Popular Painting* and its French origins have yet to be fully unpacked for the critical insights they provide into the relationship between self-taught art and the modernist avant-garde during the interwar period. Also at stake is the broader definitional project of modernism in which MoMA (and the institutions in its network) were, and remain, engaged. What does the role of the self-taught artist at midcentury reveal about modernism's undergirding in primitivist thought, embedded as it is within the ideological operation of imperialist and settler colonialist systems? And what are the implications of such queries for curatorial and art historical practices in the contemporary moment?

Louis's case is particularly illustrative: in her work as well as her life circumstances, Louis was an outlier among outliers with regards to other self-taught artists included both in the MoMA exhibition and its European precedents.[7] Not only was Louis the only woman whose work was exhibited, she also had the distinction of being confined in a psychiatric hospital. It is telling that both exhibition catalogs wrongly stated that she was deceased, an error that continued to haunt the literature well past her actual death in December 1942.[8] Equating Louis's incarceration with her death--perhaps a misunderstanding, perhaps a convenient oversight, or something in between--hastens the silencing of the artist and the conscription of her voice in the service of dominant narratives.

From *nature morte* to *nature vivante*

Before important scholarly disruptions of the last fifteen years or so, Louis's paintings were long overshadowed by mythologized biographical accounts, their critical reception fraught with distortions and elisions.[9] Self-taught artists are no strangers to such phenomena: an overreliance on biography often serves to emphasize markers of difference that extend well beyond accounts of art school credentials or formal training.[10] Such processes range in their impact—at worst, they traffic in a tokenizing spectacle and a fetishistic othering. This excess baggage of

over-determined interpretation not only shifts our focus away from the artworks themselves, it operates to encode and reify racist, gendered, classist, and ableist hierarchies that govern access to elite cultural realms. Louis's paintings, read through her social standing and life circumstances, have served as sites of projection, instrumentalization, and appropriation. A critical examination of this process, together with an attentiveness to the archive that Louis leaves behind in the form of her work, meanwhile, elicits possibilities for seeking out the artist's agency. What would it mean to approach Louis's considerable artistic production as the "material site" of the artist's voice, borrowing the words of art historian Anne M. Wagner?[11] This is not to discount the conditions of making that indelibly shaped the work, or to discount the lived experience of the maker; nor is the intent to deny or diminish the violence of structural and institutional oppression. Quite the opposite. The goal is to foreground Louis's work by considering her paintings as the main source of reliable primary source research.

To return to *Bouquet*, a crucial aspect of Louis's project is observable in this painting: there is a shift in dimensionality. Thanks to a spatial optics borne of the undulating, repeating forms, and the contrasting colors and values, viewers can experience the sense that we are encountering a three-dimensional, or even multi-dimensional object. The components of Louis's image work together to generate an encircling rotation, a torque, and this movement around a center situates the painted forms in space, suggesting the interplay between the organic elements and the surrounding light and air, almost a respiration. In *Bouquet,* Louis describes her observations and perceptions of the natural world using the medium of paint and also deploying strategies for the representation of organic matter, allowing it to exist, alive in three-dimensional space.

In another work exhibited in both the *Maîtres* and *Masters* exhibitions, *Feuilles claires*, c. 1930, cataloged in *Masters* as "Autumn Leaves"), Louis offers a mediation on the phenomenon of organic growth as it occurs across both space and time. She depicts the minute oscillations of plant growth (and also, decay) using a patterned application of dots and waving wisps that trace the length of every hovering leaf and curling stem. In this painting, Louis harnesses what art historian Bibiana Obler calls the "resources of the decorative" to enact not only a shift from two to three dimensions, but an intervention at the level of temporality.[12] The development of Louis's mark making into this system of dots/wisps is remarkable in its repetitive intention. Louis "decorates" every surface of the organic forms that dominate the painting, a strategy that disrupts the medium's temporal operation. Rather than functioning as a stagnant image perceived by the viewer in simultaneity, the plant-form in *Feuilles claires* comes alive with tempestuous movement and approaches a narrative state more akin to time-based media.

The composition pulsates with the animated motion of stems that twist and arc, and of leaves that rustle and unfurl. Considering T. J. Demos's assertion that "The ability to play with time, to postpone it, to quicken it, is a distinctly modern phenomenon," we might situate S. Louis's experimentation as constitutive of a field of avant-garde practice in which she is not credited.[13] Operations are present in Louis's work that can't be contained within modernism's teleological frame, which don't adhere to a lineage of Enlightenment dualism, where representations of organic life stages past, present, and future activate the composition. In *Feuilles claires,* the pictorial strategies and material innovations central to the artist's studio practice are synthesized into a visual language encompassing a waxing and waning through cycles of growth, decay, and regeneration.[14] It is a watershed moment in Louis's representation of organic forms where the still life genre, or *nature morte,* morphs into a vital, living ecosystem, a *nature vivante*.

S. Louis

Louis disrupts the still life tradition and pushes the genre into new territory, subverting gendered condescension about decorative methods and floral subject

matter.[15] Hovering at the top of the canvas between the center and the right-hand corner of *Feuilles claires,* Louis's signature, "S. Louis," is itself delineated by a series of wispy dots. Her work with the dots in *Feuilles claires* is so complete, so thorough, that the motif continues onto her signature; her signature embodies the painting's dimensional and temporal work. Louis's daily experience of traveling on foot between the homes of her employers, walking for kilometers between towns and villages, would have provided ample opportunities for her to observe the natural world amidst changing seasonal conditions, year after year. I imagine her pausing to study plants and trees both domesticated and wild that crowd along roadsides, taking note of agriculture ranging from small-scale training of vines to fields of cultivated crops, gathering perceptions of botanical form and mass, of light and shadow, and bringing this knowledge and engagement with nature back to the studio. Her life spent executing demanding, repetitive manual labor while managing a mental inventory of minutiae, I imagine Louis had an intimate and refined knowledge of materials, surfaces, and textures.

No doubt, many artists seeking work within mainstream art world channels covet representation by galleries who develop marketing strategies and liaise with collectors and institutions. In the case of artists for whom such established networks are inaccessible, or whose participation is contingent on their "outsider" status, the outsized influence of mediators like Wilhelm Uhde is deployed amidst extreme imbalances of power and access. Here, issues that shape the field of self-taught art again highlight pressing ethical considerations with implications across disciplines, those related to power differentials, questions of agency and self-determination, and fair compensation and recognition (financial, cultural, and otherwise). In such transactions, narratives of "discovery" are mythologized and become historical records, often to be recycled in subsequent decades.[16] In the case of Louis, Uhde's activities generated a framework that continues to shape the interpretation of Louis's work. While Uhde's writing maintains some attentiveness to Louis's practice, it often departs wildly from any grounding in the work, instead serving the internationalist art historical grand narratives that he is often at pains to outline. Because questions of agency and autonomy loom large within a commodification system, and in particular, one where value is derived from markers of difference, I want to reiterate the importance that Louis's work be read as a rare and unique site of unfiltered primary source material. We are left to contend with the internalized biases that shape our viewing of every artwork we encounter.

Uhde lived in Senlis and later in Chantilly, where, as a gay man, he moved in circles of lovers and friends. Prior to the outset of World War I, he rented an apartment in a dwelling where Louis was employed as housekeeper. Uhde dates their initial meeting to 1912 and recounts it extensively in his writing, although he did not publish on the subject until 1928.[17] In Uhde's narrative, astonished by an encounter with a still life by Louis, he proceeded to purchase all of her existing paintings, which he added to his collection of works by Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Raoul Dufy, and Henri Rousseau.[18]

In some of Louis's earliest surviving works (c. 1915), she covers the surfaces of pots and vases with painted floral motifs.[19] In her essay, "Séraphine Louis, Works and Working Process," art historian Manja Wilkens considers Louis's use of Ripolin enamel and contends that not only was the material available for sale at the local Senlisian hardware store, its qualities combine tackiness and viscosity to promote adherence to a variety of surfaces.[20] Small-scale paintings on wooden panels such as *Les raisins*, c. 1915) evidence Louis generating tensions between foreground and background, exploring figure-ground relationships, and experimenting with movement and directionality. Leaves with jagged edges gesture and point, directing our gaze, while clusters of grapes hold volume as they splay out diagonally across the picture, not unlike the body of Christ in the Pietà. Louis's signature as "S. Louis" is prominent in the lower-right corner where it begins and ends with the embellishment of a trailing, fluid brushstroke.

Paintings such as *Les raisins* were likely bought and sold by Uhde up until the start of the First World War, when he was forced to return to Germany.[21] Back in France after the war, a second period of Uhde's patronage began in 1927, at which time he supplied Louis with a stipend, began including her work in group exhibitions, and furnished her studio with large-scale canvases and paints delivered from Paris. As the effects of the stock market crash of 1929 rippled across the Atlantic, reaching France by 1931, this period of financial and material support was abruptly halted. The extent of Uhde's influence from the late 1920s onward, both materially and historiographically, often overshadows the fact that Louis had been painting independently for well over a decade during the intervening years, not to mention little-accounted-for works the artist completed prior to their initial encounter in 1912. When Uhde resumed his patronage in 1927, it was only after he encountered Louis's work in an exhibition in Senlis to which the artist had made an autonomous submission.[22]

It was Uhde who established the naming convention of "Séraphine de Senlis," invoking the town's 12th century Gothic cathedral and former status as seat of the French monarchy. The name positioned Louis as a noble shepherdess visited by divine inspiration in the tradition of Giotto and other "primitives" of the Early Renaissance, evoking tropes of rural piety and simplicity. Despite Uhde's nomenclatural acrobatics, Louis's specifications are clearly and consistently documented by her signature, "S. Louis." Her chosen name is most often painted, sometimes in layers of multiple colors; at times it is etched into the background color, or occasionally it appears more than once in a single work in different areas of the composition. Despite Louis's insistence on the linguistic and material presence of her nom de plume*(au)*, her first name, "Séraphine," has remained her most enduring appellation, likely initially a shorthand for Uhde's romanticized version.[24]

Rarely does Uhde identify a specific work of Louis's for analysis. In florid prose, he speaks in sweeping, general terms: "A rare passion, a sacred fervor, a Medieval ardor has been embodied in these still lifes."[25] Accounts of language that the artist may have used to describe and differentiate her works is anecdotal, and the extent to which Louis titled her paintings is speculative. Beyond what is preserved and documented in the paintings themselves, most accounts of the artist's activities arrive filtered through Uhde's interpretation. Uhde provided titles, aided, in some cases, by his sister Anne-Marie Uhde, also a painter. A title like *Bouquet* illustrates the limitations imposed by such practices. "Bouquet" feels an inadequate noun to describe the swirling networks of orbs and modulated leaf-forms that traverse the composition. As an actual bundling of organic matter, such a bouquet would be unwieldy, nearly impossible to hold or contain. Beyond the problem of being bland or inaccurate, the potential gap created by having no reliable indication of how titles connect to the works creates additional layers that potentially obscure the nuances of the artist's project, grounding in limited terms what might otherwise encompass much greater complexity.[26]

"Privileged Primitives"

In 1928, Uhde staged an exhibition at the Paris gallery Quatre Chemins entitled *Painters of the Sacred Heart* (*Les Peintres du Cœur Sacré*), which coincided with the publication of his book *Picasso and the French Tradition* (*Picasso et la tradition française*).[27] S. Louis was featured alongside Henri Rousseau, André Bauchant, Camille Bombois, Emile Boyer, and Louis Vivin. This otherwise unconnected group was assembled by Uhde to embody an aesthetic vision of uncorrupted purity.[28] As he writes, "above all, because, full of a simple and modest love, they create their works from a heart that is pious and strong."[29] In Uhde's formulation, white, self-taught artists such as Louis were positioned not as exoticized, racialized others, but as familiar, unthreatening muses. This primitivist strategy was of particular utility at a moment when anti-colonialist movements were gaining strength amidst rising nationalism and xenophobia in France.[30]

While the financial success of Uhde's project regarding the "*naïfs*" remains unclear, he established a working model of "home grown primitives" that found traction in the climate of the long 1930s.[31] Uhde's model conveniently bridged prevailing trends celebrating an idealized, mythologized peasantry and the reactionary, even anti-modern cultural programs embodied by Neo-Classicism and the "Call to Order" (*rappel à l'ordre*).[32] Social tensions along the intersection of class, race, and gender, as well as related political tensions in response to rising anti-colonial movements inevitably provided a backdrop to these maneuverings. During the interwar years France was engaged in heightened repression as well as ideological battles to legitimize and project an image of unity in the Empire.[33]

Social anxieties nevertheless permeated and manifested in the cultural sphere. For example, the invitation for *Painters of the Sacred Heart* contains an announcement that Quatre Chemins would soon showcase an exhibition of "Negro Art" (*L'Art Nègre*).[34] When the *Modern Primitives* exhibition, organized by Uhde, debuted at the Galerie Georges Bernheim in the summer of 1932, it followed in the wake of the 1931 Colonial Exhibition (*Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris*), an expansive and propagandistic display of French imperial power that was visited by an estimated 33 million people.[35] This hypervisibility is sharply contrasted by the comparative erasure of cultural production made by artists living in the then-colonies. The venue for the *Modern Primitives* exhibition, the Galerie Georges Bernheim, hosted a 1929 exhibition of paintings by Kalifala Sidibé, one of a small number of recognized (i.e., named) artists from West Africa who exhibited their work in Paris during this period. In her study "Global Art 1929: Kalifala Sidibé," Irene Albers notes, "[in the moment of the late 1920s-early 1930s] '*art nègre*' continues to be associated with an anonymous and faceless art, expected to be as free as possible from European influences."[36]

For ethnically French "*naïfs*" working within the metropole, such as Louis, Rousseau, and Bauchant, there was no primitivist mandate positioning them as geographic outsiders to Europe itself. Boundaries remained firm, however, around France's elite cultural sphere. Art historian Marion Alluchon traces how the *naïfs* became instruments in the service of both conservative agendas seeking to discount the avant-garde (in particular, modes of abstraction associated with the avant-garde) and by left-leaning, internationalist figures such as Uhde.[37] Alluchon argues that the *naïfs* were positioned by the right and left alike as "privileged primitives," highlighting how such strata of distinction illustrate the depth and complexity of primitivism's operation as both a discourse and a structural principle.[38]

In an essay entitled "*Les peintres d'instinct*" ("Instinctual Painters," 1939), Louvre curator René Huyghe collapses the categories of "*l'art des primitifs,*" "*l'art nègre,*" "*l'art populaire,*" and "*la peinture féminine,*" reducing the artists behind such works to amateur imitators: "mascots" who provide inspiration to the avant-garde but rarely make original contributions.[39] In a passage from Huyghe's text that was later reprinted as an epigraph in the *Maîtres* catalog, Huyghe asserts that so-called popular painting "compensates for the lacunae of modern art, and above all the extreme weariness caused by constantly encountering barriers to poetry posed by the conscious intellect. It is the confirmation of a current dogma by an art situated outside of time."[40] Uhde's intent, meanwhile, may have been to embed the "modern primitives" in a historical lineage, but in practice the discourse of primitivism worked to maintain a sense of temporal otherness, denying these painters coevality with mainstream French modernism along deeply entrenched lines at the intersection of class, race, gender, and disability.[41]

"Popular Masters" and "Modern Primitives"

The cultural utility created by Uhde and others in the phenomenon of the "modern primitives" in the late 1920s and early 1930s soon took on new valence in its scale and visibility. The 1937 Paris exhibition *Popular Masters of Reality* (*Les maîtres populaires de la*

réalité) was a pivotal show in the reception history of Louis and other French *naïfs*.[42] Organized by Maximilien Gautier and Andry-Farcy of the Musée de Grenoble and staged at the Salle Royale, the exhibition title can also be translated as "Working-Class Masters of Reality."[43] The exhibition traveled to Zürich and London before becoming *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America,* which opened at MoMA in 1938.[44] These presentations were concurrent with the 1937–38 "Degenerate Art" exhibitions underway in Nazi Germany. Articulations of modernism and national identity across Europe and the Americas were indeed being renegotiated across cultural, social, and political spheres, as evidenced by the title of the 1937 Paris World's Fair: *L'Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie modern* (The International Exhibition of Arts and Techniques in Modern Life).

The growing alignment of realism with popular art defining the Paris exhibition followed earlier presentations in the capital and also beyond France. For example, the exhibition *Popular Painters of Yesterday and Today* (*Peintres Populaires d'Hier et d'Aujourd'hui*) was staged in 1929 at Paris's Galerie Drouet and organized by Waldemar-George. Even earlier, Swiss artist Adolf Dietrich had been included in the *New Objectivity* (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) exhibition that began at the Mannheim Kunsthalle in 1925, a definitive moment for artists such as Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, and George Grosz who engaged strategies of realism amidst the climate of hyper-inflation and social upheaval following Germany's defeat in World War I and the dissolution of the German Empire. In 1932, works by Louis, Rousseau, Bauchant, and Bombois were included in an exhibition of French Modern Art at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, which suggests an additional degree of mobility for the relationship between the *naïfs* and the École de Paris in discursive constructions of French modernism.

Amidst the configuration of "popular" painters as realists, Louis is again an outlier. All of the painters included in *Maîtres Populaires de la Réalité* evolved distinctive approaches to medium and subject matter. If realism is imagined as a spectrum, the deviation of Louis's practice from the norm is significant. Louis's work is grounded in observation and concerned with representation of natural phenomena; however, it departs from realism in important ways. Her approach to botanical forms synthesizes decorative strategies and approaches the description of forms *across time and space,* a process arguably more akin to the Cubist practice of reducing the matter of everyday life to a system of planes that offer multiple viewpoints on still life objects within the same frame. Or, consider Cézanne's flattening the space of the picture frame and description of objects and landscapes through the push-pull of contrasting colors and the play between positive and negative space.[45]

Questioning Louis's status as one of the *naïfs,* critic and collector Antatole Jakovsky, wrote in 1949: "What characterizes the *naïf* painters, is overall their profound attachment to reality…"[46] Jakovsky differentiated Louis's practice, not because of the work's formal qualities, but by his classification of her work as a "mediumistic" practice, one of "exorcism," an outcome of "paranoia."[47] Clearly the difference in Louis from other white French self-taught artists was noted in her gender and assigned diagnosis, demonstrated by her not being permitted to live freely and the dissolution of her studio practice. Her outsider status stems from her perceived location as "too far" beyond the conventions in place for her gender, for her social class, even her Catholic faith. As theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson observes: "One of the hallmarks of modernity is the effort to control and standardize human bodies and to bestow status and value accordingly."[48]

When *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America* opened at MoMA in New York in April 1938, the reference to realism in the French title, *"Popular Masters of Reality,"* had notably disappeared.[49] A coterie of U.S. (and one Canadian artist) artists assembled by MoMA curator Dorothy C. Miller augmented the presentation of European artists.[50] On both sides of the Atlantic, a particular construction of masculinity was at work, grounded in a rugged,

working-class ethos. In Hoger Cahill's essay for the U.S. section of *Masters,* entitled "Artists of the People," Cahill describes the artists as "shop-trained men" and describes their positioning in relation to fine art training as "not unlike that of the old masters. [...] a tradition of craftsmanship which grew out of the handling of tools and materials, rather than an academic tradition passed on by art schools."[51] Cahill also takes inventory of various trades that artists worked in, stating for example, that "John Kane was a carpenter, house painter and mine and factory worker," and Horace Pippin and Pedro Cervántez were "workmen."[52] Both artists of color, Pippin was a veteran who served in the First World War, while Cervántez was conscripted by the Federal Art Project branch of the Works Project Administration (WPA) at the time of the exhibition, factors that may have bolstered their "American" status among the otherwise white "artists of the people."[53] In the field of American art, Katherine Jentleson identifies the interwar 1930s and the realization of Barr's strategic plans for the MoMA as the first instance of social crisis and upheaval generating an interest in artistic production deemed to be outside of typical parameters, writing that "the cultural forces that facilitated enthusiasm for these artists included the yearning for an authentically American modernism between the wars and the redefinition of the artist as worker within the ideology of the Federal Art Project."[54] This historical moment is encapsulated in the *New York Times* from April 27, 1938: in a review of MoMA's *Masters of Popular Painting* exhibition, Edward Alden Jewell notes in the piece's headlines, " 'Primitive' Works of Art Exhibited," and "French Lead Foreigners." Tellingly, Jewell titles the show he reviews immediately after *Master of Popular Painting,* a Works Project Administration "Easel Division" watercolor show, "Another Federal Show," suggesting the preponderance of such federally funded exhibitions into the late 1930s.

In the months leading up to 1936's *Cubism and Abstract Art,* Alfred Barr made several drafts of a diagram that has since proliferated the visual annals of twentieth century modernism.[55] Barr's chart is notable not just for the artists and movements it explicitly contains, but also as a record of absence, displacement, and exclusion.[56] Art historian John Ott points out how "'Negro Sculpture,' boxed off from the triumphant forward march of abstract art, effectively exists outside of time in Barr's art historical diagram."[57] Rousseau is positioned in this flow of history second only to such figures as Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gaugin, Paul Cézanne, and Georges Seurat (together, the subject of MoMA's inaugural exhibition in 1929), and as the figure most directly influential to Cubism, an interesting prospect considering Rousseau's use of naturalistic tonal gradations and presentation of forms as if viewed from a unified angle. A sense of ambiguous time pervades Jean Cassou's preface to the European section of *Masters:* "Astonishing and inexhaustible revelation. These pictures were not painted for the ignorant: they were painted for the wise. Sunday painters? They are painters of all week, of every week, of eternity."[58]

Unlike works by Bombois and Bauchant, Louis's work not acquisitioned by MoMA at the time of *Masters* and did not figure into the museum's installation of works from the permanent collection in the exhibition *Modern Primitives: Artists of the People,* on view from October 21, 1941 to April 30, 1944. In MoMA's current hanging of its collection, on view (with rotations) since 2019 after its expansion and renovation, Louis's work *Tree of Paradise* has been exhibited alongside Black U.S. self-taught artists Bill Traylor, Frank Albert Jones, and Minnie Evans in a presentation entitled "Masters of Popular Painting."[59] Meanwhile, in the nearby gallery "Picasso, Rousseau, and the Avant-Garde," works by two masters of modernist primitivism are placed in direct dialogue: Rousseau's *The Dream* (1910) and Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (June–July 1907).

A Disquieting Modernity

The revelation of Louis's findings—that an approach to painting that mobilizes decorative elements and foregrounds virile, organic forms can manifest through abstraction—was at odds with prevailing discourse. Despite the tendency of her contemporaries

to consider the abstract and the decorative at odds, in Louis's work they are interwoven practices.[60] Further categories are eroded and collapsed, as the realism reserved for the "modern primitives" was anachronistic and quaint, hardly the analytic and innovative exploration of perception and representation at work in Louis's practice. Louis's work offers a set of possibilities for picture making, representation, and for existing in the world, giving form to the experience of being a human relating to the natural world. Uhde may have sensed the breathing, respiration, rustling of leaves unfurling in a work like *Feuilles claires,* which hung in his home. He writes, "It is difficult to live in the shadow of such paintings; even when sleeping, one is oppressed by their presence."[61] When Uhde published these words he foreshadowed the circumstances that would unfold within the space of a few years in which the artist was arguably present in the form of her paintings, yet physically and historically absent due to her incarceration and death, both prematurely cited and actual.[62]

On the 14th of November 1945, a retrospective of Louis's work had recently closed in Paris at the Galerie de France, and Uhde penned a letter to his friend Jean Cassou. Uhde speculated that "there are no flowers in heaven, so it is abstract painting that she [Louis] is exercising now."[63] At first glance, Uhde's remarks might seem to suggest that the idea of Louis engaging in abstraction was a fantastical proposition, something that could only happen in paradise. However, it is also possible to read in Uhde's words that he saw a longstanding potentiality toward abstraction inherent to Louis's painting.

While it is possible to analyze Louis's paintings using the tools of formalism, ethical concerns remain about the ethics of inclusion and the risk of maintaining what Kaira M. Cabañas calls "epistemic control," "inscrib[ing] the work within a dominant language that retains the privilege of making the art of "others" legible and knowable, even "global." Knowledge production is revealed as a one-way street of appropriation and reassertion of discursive power."[64] As Marion Alluchon suggests: "the dissentions between partisans of realism and those of abstraction no longer hold, it is time to consider [these artists] no longer as *primitifs* but as artists in the fullest sense. The task is no longer to find ways to encircle them with categories but to regard their works in a new light, to analyze them with the aid of tools and assessment frameworks that perhaps remain to be invented."[65] I add that we must also allot space for those forms of knowledge and representation whose opacity resists being fully known or assimilable.

Artists Arthur Bispo do Rosário and Martín Ramírez both created extensive bodies of work sourced from materials drawn from the milieu of their respective decades-long incarceration in psychiatric institutions.[66] In the case of S. Louis, I argue that it was the very production of her artworks, before confinement--their ambitiousness, and the audaciousness inscribed within such a practice, which led directly to her sanctioning and attempted silencing. Although Louis made no known conventional artwork after her committal, approximately twenty letters survive from her time at the institution, addressed to authority figures such as doctors and the chief of police.[67] As material objects, or drawings, the letters operate at the nexus of image and text. Envelope folds, graph paper lines, dots, and layers of text accumulate and begin to coalesce into forms that encroach upon one another and engage the edges of the paper frame. The letters attest to Louis's expressiveness as well as a sense of audience. They are often signed with variations on the following phrase: "S. Louis Maillard *sans rivale*" (unrivaled).[68]

This epistolary archive does not contain overt discussion of her previously painted works, although she does suggest that conditions in asylum are not conducive to painting. Louis's works have been read as evidence of psychic disturbance and as attempts at symptom management. Yet, Louis's approach to painting, as her letters make clear, was first and foremost a professional occupation, one that was physically, materially, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually demanding, and impossible to continue in asylum. As Louis's insistence on her identity as an

artiste-peintre attests, her works stand as acts of resistance, expressions of agency, and documents of self-determination. Faced with Louis's work, we are pressed to consider our own implication in the perpetuation of modernism's primitivist legacies, in the urge to name and categorize, to assimilate into existing value structures, and to co-opt and appropriate into existing discourse. Faced with Louis's work, we grapple with the disquieting presence of an unknown and not-fully-knowable modernity.

Watch a recording of this presentation here.

1 Ticio Escobar, "Issues in Popular Art, in *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America,* ed., Gerardo Mosquera (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 108.

2 Darby English, "Modernism's War on Terror," in *Outliers and American Vanguard Art,* ed. Lynne Cooke (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2018), 39 (emphasis in the original).

3 For a discussion of the circumstances surrounding Louis's committal to psychiatric hospital, see Hans Körner and Manja Wilkens, *Séraphine Louis, 1864–1942: Biographie / Werkverzeichnis* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2009), 16. Following the current versions of the American Psychiatric Association's DSM-V and the ICD 10 published by the World Health Organization, Louis's diagnosis would fall within the category "Schizophrenia Spectrum and Other Psychotic Disorders."

4 An early advocate of Cubism as well as the work of French self-taught painter par excellence Henri Rousseau, Uhde published essays critical of the German Empire and studied the art of the Early Renaissance in Florence before relocating to Paris in 1904. Uhde moved in avant-garde circles: he was briefly married to the artist Sonia Delaunay-Terk in a "marriage of convenience," and he sat for a portrait by Picasso in 1910 (Pulitzer Arts Foundation Collection, St. Louis, Missouri).

5 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., preface to *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America,* by Holger Cahill et al., (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 9-11.

6 See, in particular, essays by Marci Kwon, Angela Miller, and John Ott in Sandra Zalman and Austin Porter, eds., *Modern in the Making: MoMA and the Modern Experiment, 1929–1949* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

7 Lynne Cooke's curatorial intervention *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* began at the National Gallery in Washington in January, 2018 and travelled to the High Museum in Atlanta before ending at LACMA in March, 2019. Of the eighty artists behind some 250 works (c. 1735–2017), each artist has a direct connection to the United States by birth or immigration with the exception of four geographic "outliers": Camille Bombois, Séraphine Louis, Henri Rousseau, and Dominique-Paul Peyronnet, none of whom are known to have travelled outside of France. See Lynne Cooke, ed. *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2018).

8 Louis was one of 3,063 patients at the asylum of Clermont-de-l'Oise who died during the Second World War as a direct result of policies enacted by the Vichy regime in which the provision of food and medicine to asylum inmates was heavily restricted. See Alain Vircondelet, *Séraphine : De la peinture à la folie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2009), 154. See also, Pierre Durand, *Le train des fous,* Paris: Éditions Syllepse, 2001; Isabelle von Bueltzingsloewen, "Les 'aliénés' morts de faim dans les hopitaux psychiatriques français sous l'Occupation," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire.* Vol. 4 no. 76. 2002. 99-115.

9 My work is indebted to the formidable scholarship of Manja Wilkens, Jeanne-Bathilde Lacourt, Marion Alluchon, and others who have established a critical and theoretical foundation for approaching Louis's work. See Lorquin, Bertrand et al. *Séraphine de Senlis.* Paris: Gallimard and Fondation Dina Vierny-Musée Maillol, 2008; Hans Körner and Manja Wilkens, *Séraphine Louis, 1864–1942: Biographie / Werkverzeichnis* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2009); Tourte, Dominique and Jeanne-Bathilde Lacourt, eds. *De Picasso à Séraphine: Wilhelm Uhde et les primitifs modernes.* Villeneuve d'Ascq, France: Éditions Invenit and LaM, 2017; Lacourt, Jeanne-Bathilde and Àlex Susanna, eds. *Du Douanier Rousseau à Séraphine: Les grands maîtres naïfs.* Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2019. See also Manja Wilkens, *Welche Moderne? In-und Outsider der Avantgarde,* Berlin: Distanz 2023, catalogue accompanying exhibitions at the Sprengel Museum Hannover and Kunstsammlung Chemnitz.

10 As curator Catherine Morris reflects about the artist Judith Scott (1943–2005), "One of the biggest challenges to presenting the work of an artist whose voice was sharply circumscribed by her life experience is to avoid adding layers of interpretation that can calcify into a narrative fable." Catherine Morris, "Judith Scott and the Politics of Biography," in *Judith Scott: Bound & Unbound,* eds. Catherine Morris and Matthew Higgs (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum in association with DelMonico Books, 2014), 10.

11 Anne M. Wagner, Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keefe, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, 13.

12 Bibiana K. Obler, *Intimate Collaborations: Kandinsky and Münter, Arp and Taeuber* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 7.

13 T. J. Demos, "A Matter of Time," *Tate Etc.* issue 9 spring 2007. https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-9-spring-2007/matter-time. Accessed November 1, 2023.

14 I am indebted to curator Marieke Jooren, both for her work on the exhibition *Naive Realism from Rousseau to Grandma Moses* at the Museum MORE in Gorssel, Netherlands (March 25–June 25, 2023), and for our conversation in which she shared her insights about cycles of growth and decay represented in Louis's work.

15 For more on gendered tropes in the still life genre, see Astrid Ihle, "Other Women, Other Flowers: On the Floral Motif in the Work of Female Outsider Artists," in *Gewächse der Seele: Floral Fantasies between Symbolism and Outsider Art,* Ingrid von Beyme et al. eds., trans. Steven Lindberg et al., 209-213. Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag and Ludwigshafen am Rhein: Wilhelm Hack Museum, 2019.

16 See Jennifer Jane Marshall, "Find and Seek: Discovery Narratives, Americanization, and Other Tales of Genius in Modern American Folk Art," in *Outliers and American Vanguard*

Art, ed. Lynne Cooke (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2018), 52-63.

17 See Wilhelm Uhde, *Picasso et la tradition française* (Paris: Éditions des Quatre-Chemins, 1928), first published in the original German in 1926.

18 See Hans Körner and Manja Wilkens, *Séraphine Louis, 1864–1942: Biographie / Werkverzeichnis* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2009) 46-59.

19 Ibid., 209.

20 Manja Wilkens, "Séraphine Louis: Works and Working Process," in *The Shadow of the Avant-Garde: Rousseau and the Forgotten Masters,* ed. Falk Wolf and Kasper König, trans. Alison Gallup (Ostfildern: Museum Folkwang and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2015), 240-42.

21 Uhde's collection was sequestered as "enemy goods" and later sold at auction, however, auction records do not list any works by Louis. See Tasseau, Vérane. "La vente de séquestre de la collection de Wilhelm Uhde (30 mai 1921)." In *De Picasso à Séraphine: Wilhelm Uhde et les primitifs modernes,* edited by Dominique Tourte and Jeanne-Bathilde Lacourt, 35-59. Villeneuve d'Ascq, France: Éditions Invenit and LaM, 2017.

22 Hans Körner and Manja Wilkens, *Séraphine Louis, 1864–1942: Biographie / Werkverzeichnis* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2009) 64-75.

23 Uhde makes an explicit association with the French terroir and evoking naming conventions for Italian Early Renaissance painters such as Guido da Siena. Vasarian legends of divinely-endowed genius and intimate connection with nature are elicited (as in the case of painters such as Giotto, or Giotto di Bordone) and connected to Louis's childhood in the French countryside, further elucidating parallels with the Italian "primitives," whose work had been steadily gaining renewed interest since the mid-nineteenth century. See Holger Schmid, "*Le monde ancien et moderne de Wilhelm Uhde,*" in *De Picasso à Séraphine: Wilhelm Uhde et les primitifs modernes,* eds. Dominique Tourte and Jeanne-Bathilde Lacourt (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Éditions Invenit and LaM, 2017), 26.

24 Here, I differentiate from the practice in Brazil of abbreviating artists' names such as "Bispo" (for Artur Bispo do Rosario) or "Djanira" (for Djanira da Motta e Silva), indicative of widespread recognition and cultural significance. In the case of referring to S. Louis as "Séraphine," not only is it not how she identified herself, but in the historical and geographic context of interwar France, and arguably today, this first-name-only appellation lends a diminutive, familiar valence that distances Louis from the role of serious artist. The endurance of Uhde's marketing strategies attests to the leverage often accorded to art world "insiders" in processes where works by so-called outsiders are assimilated and commodified.

25 See Wilhelm Uhde, "Séraphine ou la peinture révélée." *Formes: Revue internationale des arts plastiques* 16 (June 1931) 111-117. Uhde's interpretation, however endowed with writerly embellishments, became codified. For example, Uhde states here that after his patronage resumed, Louis was no longer "reduced" to using pilfered lamp oil as a painting medium, a scenario portrayed to dramatic effect in the 2009 biopic, *Séraphine*. Directed by Martin Provost. TS Productions, 2008. In their biographical study and catalogue raisonné, Hans Körner and Manja Wilkins have discounted this veracity of such accounts. See Hans Körner and Manja Wilkens, *Séraphine Louis, 1864–1942: Biographie / Werkverzeichnis* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2009), 110.

26 See Körner and Wilkens, 102 and 109. See also Julia Bryan-Wilson, "What Titles Can Do," *Archives of American Art Journal* 58 no. 2 (Fall 2019): 93-99, for a consideration of the gendered, commercial, and archival histories of artwork titles.

27 See Uhde, *Picasso et la tradition française,* 60-80. Uhde engages in a theoretical maneuver aligning Picasso with a "Greco-Germanic [Gothic] romantic ideal" and positing a "French" tradition embodied by Braque, Seurat, and Rousseau. Uniting together in Paris, these two "oppositional and complementary" elements give birth to "European Painting" an internationalist concept for a unified and harmonious European patrimony. *Picasso…* was published by Quatre Chemins, a gallery, bookstore, and press focused on avant-garde including Cézanne, Degas, Picasso, and one woman, Marie Laurencin. The title of Uhde's book was reprised in 2017 for the exhibition *De Picasso à Séraphine : Wilhelm Uhde et les primitifs modernes.* The exhibition *Les Peintres du Cœur-Sacré* has been re-staged on more than one occasion, most recently in Germany at the Museum Frieder Burda, Baden Baden and the Museen Böttcherstraße, Bremen with works from the Sammlung Zander in Köln (2022–23).

28 At this time, Rousseau was well-established in France as a figure adjacent to the avant-garde, while in the United States, after his appearance in the Armory Show of 1913 and subsequent exhibition by Max Weber in New York, his reputation as a member of the avant-garde tout court was assured, his status as "Le Douanier" somewhat lost in translation. Romy Golan notes Rousseau's notable presence in the 1922 Paris exhibition *One Hundred Years of French Painting* (*Cents Ans de Peinture Française*), organized by André Lhote. See Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France Between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 47.

29 *Picasso et la tradition française,* 77. With the exception of Louis (based in Senlis) and Rousseau (already deceased), the artists all lived in or frequented Montmartre. The iconic domes of the quartier's Basilica of Sacré Cœur were a frequent subject for Louis Vivin, as was the Cathedral of Notre Dame.

30 In a 1926 address calling for Pan-African solidarity, Senegalese anticolonialist Lamine Senghor proclaimed, "Blacks have been asleep for far too long. But beware, Europe! Those who have been sleeping for too long will not return to sleep once they have woken up" (*Les noirs ont dormi pendant trop longtemps. Mais, méfiez-vous, Europe ! Ceux qui ont dormi pendant trop longtemps ne vont pas retourner dormir quand ils se réveilleront*)." See Amzat Boukari-Yabara, "Pour des lendemains noirs d'éclats de soleil," in *Marianne et le garçon noir,* ed. Léonora Miano (Paris: Pauvert, département de la Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2017) 109.

31 Thank you to Barbara McCloskey for her suggestion of the phrase "home grown primitives." See also Marci Kwon's discussion of "domestic primitives," in "Folk Surrealism," in *Modern in the Making: MoMA and the Modern Experiment, 1929–49,* eds. Austin Porter and Sandra Zalman (London: Bloomsbury, 2020): 19-34.

32 Golan describes the *rappel à l'ordre* as a movement whose "political and cultural agenda was largely aimed at repressing the trauma of war [...] a collective ethos driven toward the restoration of what had been *before* the war: a world stilled, and a vision infused—from the paintings of ex-fauves and cubists-turned-naturalists, to those of the so-called *naïfs,* all the way to the surrealists—by nostalgia and memory." See Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia,* ix. For an in-depth consideration of the "largely rhetorical role played by the peasantry in the French imagination," see Golan (ibid., 45-46.) Golan also comments (indirectly) on Uhde's discursive positioning of Louis and the other "Sacred Heart Painters": "the success of these *naïfs* was what the French call une fortune critique, a reputation based on a discourse constructed by critics rather than the workings of the market." Ibid., note 102 p. 178.

33 Hannah Feldman's argument that the term "postwar" in accounts of French modernism obscures France's violent suppression of decolonial liberation struggles can also be productively applied to the interwar period. See Hannah Feldman, *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945–1962* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014).

34 No artists' names are indicated in the announcement, suggesting the anonymous and dislocated presentation often reserved for African and Afro-descended artists in interwar Parisian exhibitions. Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Don Raoul Leven, Archives M.N.A.M., Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

35 See Janine Mileaf, "Body to Politics: Surrealist Exhibition of the Tribal and the Modern at the Anti-Imperialist Exhibition and the Galerie Charles Ratton," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* no. 40 (Autumn 2001): 239-255.

36 Albers notes how Sidibé did not attend the exhibition opening because he was denied permitted to travel to Paris from present-day Mali, and that the cover of catalog showcases not a painting by Sidibé but a photograph of the artist and his family in a "'primitive' setting." See Irene Albers, "Global Art 1929: Kalifala Sidibé," in *Neolithic Childhood. Art in a False Present, c. 1930,* eds. Anselm Franke and Tom Holbert (Berlin: Diaphanes and Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2018) 107-15.

37 See Marion Alluchon, *Primitifs modernes ? Définir l'art naïf en France dans les années 1930* (Lyon: Éditions Fage and Paris: Fondation Giacometti, 2022) 60-65.

38 Alluchon ibid. 76-77 and also LaM. Joyce S. Cheng: "...the contemporary era is still in search of a functional language for addressing a historical phenomenon that, perhaps more than any other, exposes Western bourgeois modernity's dependency on its 'other.' This dependency is material (the exploitation of indigenous labor and natural resources of the colonies) as well as symbolic (the construction of the primitive as the antipode of the modern, therefor justification for progress)." Joyce S. Cheng, "Primitivisms," in *Neolithic Childhood. Art in a False Present, c. 1930,* edited by Anselm Franke and Tom Holbert, 185-87 (Berlin: Diaphanes and Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2018), 5.

39 René Huyghe, "La Peinture d'Instinct," in *Histoire de l'art contemporain: La peinture,* Reprint, ed. René Huyghe (New York: Arno Press, 1961), 186. This work was first published as a book in 1939. Beginning in 1933, Huyghe published the work chapter by chapter in the journal *L'Amour de l'Art.* Uhde contributed to Huyghe's project but took a different approach. Titled "Henri Rousseau et les primitifs modernes," Uhde's essay asserts the legitimacy of the self-taught artists he promoted and describes their work as worthy of serious art historical consideration. "What distinguishes our painters [from amateurs], it is that they are creators [...] there is a continuity to their work [...] and it is for this reason that we inscribe their names in the great history of art." Wilhelm Uhde, "Henri Rousseau et les primitifs modernes," ibid., 189.

40 René Huyghe, "La Peinture d'Instinct," in *Histoire de l'art contemporain: La peinture,* Reprint, ed. René Huyghe (New York: Arno Press, 1961), 188.

41 For a foundational discussion of the denial of contemporaneity, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). See also Terry Smith, *Art to Come: Histories of Contemporary Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019).

42 The exhibition's title echoed that of an earlier exhibition, *Les Maîtres de l'art indépendant* 1895–1937, held at Paris's Petit Palais in 1937 (and including Henri Rousseau).

43 With the notable exception of Louis, many of these artists may have fit more accurately into the petite bourgeoisie than the working class. Henri Rousseau worked as a municipal inspector, Louis Vivin as a postal clerk. See Jenevive Nykolak, biographical entry for Henri Rousseau in *Outliers and American Vanguard Art,* ed. Lynne Cooke (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2018), 361.

44 *Maîtres Populaires de la Réalité* travelled to the Kunsthaus Zürich where it was on view from October 16 to November 28, 1937. The show was then presented by the London gallery Arthur Tooth & Sons Ltd. from February 17–March 12, 1938.

45 See George Braque's painting *La Mandore* (1909–10), originally part of Uhde's collection, in the collection of the Tate since 1966.

46 "Self-taught painter, she is surely that. A Sunday painter also. But is she naive, Séraphine? Not so much. Or better, yes and no. Because, in effect, can we really classify among the naïfs all of these visionary painters, all of these painters of fixed ideas, spirits or mediums who visit and approach so often the *paraoïaques* and who do not paint except for to exorcise themselves. What characterizes the naïf painters, is overall their profound attachment to reality..." Anatole Jakovsky, *La Peinture Naïve* (Paris: Jacques Damase, 1949) 87-88.

47 Jakovsky's interpretation is in dialogue with Jean Dubuffet's development of art brut. For an examination of gender and constructions of the feminine in the field of art brut, see Cécile Cunin. "Guirlandes de fleurs et sorcellerie. Féminin naturel, féminin surnaturel et autres perspectives sur l'art brut au prisme du genre. (Flower garlands and witchcraft. Natural feminine, supernatural feminine and other perspectives on art brut through a gender lens.)" *Déméter* 8 Summer 2022. https://www.peren-revues.fr/demeter/825.

48 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept," *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 598.

49 See Marion Alluchon, *Primitifs modernes ? Définir l'art naïf en France dans les années 1930* (Lyon: Éditions Fage and Paris: Fondation Giacometti, 2022) 74. See also Marieke Jooren, "Naive, Primitive or Realistic Without Rules?," in *Naive Realism from Rousseau to Grandma Moses,* ed. Marieke Jooren, (Zwolle: WBOOKS and Museum MORE, 2023), 12-23.

50 For more on Dorothy C. Miller's role as curator of painting and sculpture at MoMA, see Angela Miller, "American Exceptionalism at the Modern, 1942–1959: Dorothy Miller's Americans," in *Modern in the Making: MoMA and the Modern Experiment, 1929–49,* eds. Austin Porter and Sandra Zalman (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 231-247.

51 Holger Cahill, "Artists of the People," in *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America,* by Holger Cahill et al., (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 95-105.

52 *Masters* occasioned the first showing of Pippin's work at MoMA, the second for Cervántez: he was included in the 1936 exhibition *New Horizons in American Art*.

53 Josephine Joy, another self-taught artist who worked with the WPA, was the first woman to have a solo show at MoMA. William Edmondson, whose 1937 exhibition was the first for a self-taught artist at MoMA and also the first solo show of work by a Black artist. See Katherine Jentleson, "From *Masters of Popular Painting* to *Naive Realism,*" in *Naive Realism from Rousseau to Grandma Moses,* ed. Marieke Jooren, (Zwolle: WBOOKS and Museum MORE, 2023), 34-35. See also Jentleson, Katherine, *Gatecrashers: The Rise of the Self-Taught Artist in America* (Oakland, CA: The University of California Press, 2020). See also Angela Miller, "'The People Looks upon Its Own Life': Self-Taught Art Between the Wars," in *Boundary Trouble in American Vanguard Art,* 1920–2020, ed. Lynne Cooke (New Haven: Yale) 58-77.

54 Katherine Jentleson, "Cracks in the Consensus: Outsider Artists and Art World Ruptures," in Thomas J. Lax, ed., When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South, New York, NY: The Studio Museum in Harlem 2014), 106.

55 The diagram's official title is *Diagram of Stylistic Evolution from 1890 until 1935.* For a thorough catalogue of Barr's drafts for the diagram, see Glenn D. Lowry, "Abstraction in 1936: Barr's Diagrams," in *Inventing Abstraction 1910–1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art,* ed. Leah Dickerman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 358-363. See also Richard Meyer, "How to Make a Modern Primitive," in *Outliers and American Vanguard Art,* ed. Lynne Cooke (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2018), 42-51.

56 For a discussion of modernist art history as a primitivist, colonialist discourse, see Partha Mitter, "Interventions: Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (December 2008): 531-548. See also Jennifer Jane Marshall, Machine Art, 1934 (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 100.

57 John Ott, "Occidental Arrangements: MoMA's Emerging Global History of Art at Midcentury," in Sandra Zalman and Austin Porter, eds., *Modern in the Making: MoMA and the Modern Experiment, 1929–1949* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020) 197-213. See also John Ott, "Hale Woodruff's Antiprimitivist History of Abstract Art," *The Art Bulletin 100,* no. 1 (April 2018): 124-145.

58 Jean Cassou, preface to the European Section of the Exhibition in *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America,* by Holger Cahill et al., (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 15-16. Cassou was the founding director of Paris's Musée National d'Art Moderne. He served as commissary for the French section of the inaugural 1951 São Paulo Bienal, where Louis was the honoree of the French pavilion. Named as one of France's "great dead," Louis was featured with a larger number of works than the other artists she was exhibited alongside, including Picasso, Fernand Léger, and André Masson. See Cassou's catalog entry for the French section of the 1951 São Paulo Bienal, where Louis is referred to as "a great who has already died" (*um grande que já morreu*). Louis had six works in the French section, while Fernand Léger and Alert Gleizes each had five, Picasso had four, etc. Jean Cassou, "O Advertêcia e o prefácio para a Sala França," in *Catálogo I Bienal* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1951), 87-90. On the inclusion of four French "modern primitives" in the first installment of *documenta* in 1955 (Bombois, Louis, Rousseau, and Vivin), see Raphael Gross et. al., eds., *documenta: Politics and Art* (Munich: Prestel and Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2021).

59 *Tree of Paradise* (c. 1928) was acquisitioned by MoMA in 1971. In 1972, the work was shown along with Picasso's *The Charnel House* (1944–45) and *Repose* (spring 1908) in an exhibition featuring new acquisitions entitled *Twentieth-Century Pioneers.*

60 For a c.1930s perspective on these dynamics, see René Huyghe, "Introduction," in *Histoire de l'art contemporain: La peinture,* Reprint, ed. René Huyghe (New York: Arno Press, 1961), 27. Huyghe sets up an opposition between Picasso and Matisse across lines of the decorative and the abstract.

61 "*Il est difficile de vivre à l'ombre de pareils tableaux ; même en dormant, l'on est oppressé par leur présence.*" Wilhelm Uhde, "Séraphine ou la peinture révélée," *Formes: Revue internationale des arts plastiques* 16 (June 1931): 117. Previously published in Wilhelm Uhde, *Picasso et la tradition française* (Paris: Éditions des Quatre-Chemins, 1928). All translations my own unless otherwise noted.

62 See Liat Ben-Moshe's productive framing of incarceration and institutionalization as a continuum: Liat Ben-Moshe, Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press 2020.

63 "Il écrit à Jean Cassou le 14 novembre 1945 : 'Séraphine m'a confié qu'elle se trouvait très bien au ciel, n'ayant plus besoin de faire des ménages, même pas le sien. Ce sont les anges apprentis qui s'en occupent. Ainsi elle peut se donner toute la journée à la peinture. Mais comme il n'y a pas de fleurs au ciel, c'est la peinture abstraite qu'elle exerce maintenant." See Françoise Cloarec, *La vie rêvée de Séraphine de Senlis* (Paris : Éditions Phébus, 2008), 169.

64 Kaira M. Cabañas, "Whose Global Modernism?" *UC Press Blog,* February 8, 2021, accessed July 16, 2023, https://www.ucpress.edu/blog/54471/whose-global-modernism/. See also James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," in *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History,* ed. Jack Flam with Miriam Deutch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 351-68.

65 Alluchon, Marion. *Primitifs modernes ? Définir l'art naïf en France dans les années 1930.* Lyon: Éditions Fage and Paris: Fondation Giacometti, 2022, 78.

66 See chapter 4, "Bispo's Contemporaneity," in Kaira M. Cabañas, *Learning from Madness: Brazilian Modernism and Global Contemporary Art.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018. See also Víctor M. Espinosa, *Martín Ramírez: Framing His Life and Art.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015.

67 Louis's existing letters are held at the Centre Hospitalier Isarien in Clermont de l'Oise and were published for the first time in 2021. See Pierre Guénégan, ed., *Séraphine Louis: Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint* (St. Alban: Lanwell & Leeds, 2021), 578).

68 "*Sans rivale*" was also the inscription Louis indicated should be engraved on her tombstone. After her death in 1942, she was buried in a communal plot at the Clermont cemetery, where she remained until c. 2008 when a plaque bearing Louis's words was installed. Espace Culturel Séraphine Louis is nearby and recently staged an exhibition of Louis's work and her surviving letters. *Séraphine Louis: De la vie rêvée à la vie réelle,* (July 1–27, 2022).

Morris Hirshfield: The Master of the Two Left Feet Steps Out in Manhattan

SUSAN DAVIDSON

Independent Curator

Leonora Carrington (seated), André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, and Max Ernst with Morris Hirshfield's *Nude at the Window,* 1942. Photo: Hermann Landshoff.

Rather than focusing on the visual imagination and pictorial flair of Morris Hirshfield's paintings, this paper examines the artist's meteoric rise in the New York art world in the 1940s. Born in 1872 in Poland, Hirshfield immigrated to New York City in 1890 at the age of eighteen. Shortly after arriving, he found work as a pattern cutter in a women's cloak and suit factory, eventually working his way up to tailor. Like most upwardly mobile emigrants, Hirshfield saved his money while honing his skills, opening a competing shop with his brother, fittingly called Hirshfield Brothers. Twelve years later, Hirshfield established the E-Z Walk Manufacturing Company, a wholesale foot-care company specializing in arch support and ankle straighteners. He expanded its offerings with ladies' boudoir slippers based on the thirty-four patents he registered between 1913 and 1934. Illness, unluckily, forced Hirshfield to retire in 1937 at the age of sixty-five, at which time he took up painting.

Hirshfield's trajectory toward becoming a recognized artist begins with two key figures who are often overlooked in his rise. Two years into his retirement, Hirshfield had completed only two paintings, each realized by working on top of pre-existing canvases that decorated his Brooklyn apartment. He thought highly enough of his nascent works of art to approach a local curator, John I.H. Bauer at the Brooklyn Museum, hoping for an honest assessment of his efforts.[1] Fascinated, but unable to purchase any of the pictures, Bauer suggested Hirshfield take his artwork into Manhattan to the Hudson Walker Gallery where he might find ready buyers.[2] Embarking on the D-train from Bensonhurst, Hirshfield alighted at Columbus Circle, walking the short distance to 57th Street where the commercial art galleries were clustered. Not fully knowing what to make of Hirshfield's work, Walker nonetheless held onto the paintings Hirshfield showed with him.

Enter Sidney Janis, who like Hirshfield had begun in the rag trade owning M'Lord Shirts. Janis's financial success allowed him to reinvent himself as a respected collector and part-time curator, becoming an influential member of the Advisory Committee to the Museum of Modern Art. In his quest to identify new talent for an exhibition at the museum he had offered to organize, Janis happened into the Hudson Walker Gallery one afternoon. Little interested him, however, upon departing, he noticed several works of art oddly turned to face the wall. His curiosity piqued; he asked Walker to reveal one of the paintings:

What a shock I received! In the center of this rather square canvas, two round eyes, luminously glaring into the darkness, were returning my stare! It brought to mind the sequence in Duck Soup *in which Groucho Marx, confronted by an unexpected image in his mirror, was taken aback, only to find the image oddly enough immobile. The image I saw was just as unexpected and the round unflinching eyes continued to stare, impervious to my sudden start. They belong to a strangely compelling creature, which sitting possessively upon a remarkable couch, immediately took possession of me.*[3]

Janis's visceral reaction to *Angora Cat,* and the second painting, *Beach Girl* (both 1937–39), was to acquire both for inclusion in his forthcoming exhibition *Contemporary Unknown American Painters* at MoMA.[4]

This was an extraordinary launch for the untrained and newly minted artist and marked the beginning of Hirshfield's rapid ascent in the New York art world. Hirshfield's arrival was especially remarkable given that he had only been painting for three years. Janis established a lifelong friendship with the former tailor, serving as his mentor and agent, and, foremost, his chief collector. He frequently traveled to Bensonhurst to choose works of art that, in turn, he peddled to various family members and the savvy collectors who populated his address book.

Janis's influence at MoMA during these years was considerable, especially in furthering Hirshfield's career. He advocated for the museum to acquire *Girl in a Mirror* and *Tiger* (both 1940) for inclusion in the

collection presentation, "Modern Primitives: Artists of the People."[5] Janis's genuine fondness for primitive, self-taught, or naïve art inspired him to write an important publication on the subject, *They Taught Themselves* (1942). Hirshfield's *Nude at the Window* (1941) graced the frontispiece and Janis devoted twenty-six pages and seven illustrations to Hirshfield's oeuvre, more than any other artist discussed in the text. Rather than a book tour, Janis organized a nationally touring exhibition of the artists, including four Hirshfield paintings.[6]

Janis officially became Hirshfield's agent, as confirmed by terms outlined in a February 26, 1942 document between the two.[7] The contract identified the twenty-two paintings Hirshfield had created thus far, but did not define the financial arrangement.[8] Already more than half of the listed works of art had been sold, owing to Janis's endeavors.[9] Beyond the three works sold to Janis himself and the two works previously acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, collectors such as screenwriter Donald Ogden Stewart of *The Philadelphia Story* fame had bought three paintings—*Landscape with House II* (1940), *Nude on Sofa with Three Pussies* (1941), and *Landscape with Swans* (1941). Samuel Lewisohn, a financier and trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, owned *Girl with Dog* (1940) and Janis's brother, Martin, then operating a shoe business in Albany but soon to follow his brother into the art world, owned *Landscape with House* (1940) and *Mother Cat with Kittens* (1941). While this contract clearly established Janis's dealer role, he would not officially become one until 1948 when he opened his eponymous gallery at 15 East 57th Street which focused on European modernism and American Abstract Expressionism. In a nod to his early start with Hirshfield, Janis continued to represent the Brooklynite, the only self-taught artist in his stable.[10]

The other important protagonist in cementing Hirshfield's career emerged when collector and art impresario Peggy Guggenheim returned to America from war-torn Europe. She and her then husband, Surrealist artist Max Ernst, settled into a townhouse overlooking the East River on Beekman Place off Manhattan's 51st Street. Their home became a center of activity for many of the émigré artists who found themselves on American shores. Guggenheim's attention was devoted to opening Art of This Century, her museum/gallery that would showcase her abstract and Surrealist art collection.[11] Ernst occupied his time painting and spending Guggenheim's money in collecting indigenous art. One encounters Guggenheim's European modernism in an image of Ernst seated in an elaborately carved chair with Hirshfield's *Nude at the Window* (1941) prominently displayed on the wall above him. Guggenheim purchased the painting from Janis sometime between February (where it is listed as unsold in the contract) and the fall of 1942 when this image was taken.[12] Evidently intrigued with the painting, Ernst used it as a prop in a Surrealist-styled "performance." He brought the painting from the living room to his studio, assembling his friends, André Breton, Leonora Carrington, and Marcel Duchamp to participate in a staged photograph. The three men stand behind Hirshfield's nude, chins resting on the painting's frame while their eyes gaze downward admiring the female's form. At right, Carrington sits in a rocking chair with a large gourd between her legs, and at left, a fur cloaked mannequin—a surrealist trope and possibly a reference to Hirshfield's former career as a tailor—wears a mask as she stands guard over the scene. Whether Hirshfield was aware of this event, the resultant photograph, or ever visited the Beekman Place townhouse is unknown. But Hirshfield's style of painting made a significant impression on Breton and Duchamp who included *Girl with Pigeon* (1942) in their upcoming "First Papers of Surrealism," the only self-taught painter in the exhibition.[13]

In Janis's ongoing efforts to promote Hirshfield and his art, he persuaded his museum colleagues to mount a retrospective exhibition of the former tailor's output, assembling the thirty pictures of women, children, animals, and landscapes the artist thus far had created.[14] The exhibition generated not only extensive press, but considerable rancor centered on the fact that such an august institution would devote

real estate to an untutored and relatively unknown artist. While the critics lambasted the museum, labeling Hirshfield "the master of the two left feet" for his propensity to depict his female's feet in such a manner (a holdover from his slipper manufacturing days) who hailed from "deep in the wilds of Brooklyn,"[15] they especially turned their ire on Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the director, calling for his dismissal.[16]

It may be surprising to learn that works of art on loan to museums were for sale in the 1940s, a practice now abandoned for obvious ethical reasons. Ignoring the critical backlash, Hirshfield's work nonetheless piqued the attention of several people who were eager to purchase examples. Dr. Albert England found the exhibition "well arranged and exceedingly interesting," inquiring about the prices for *Peacock* (ca. 1942), *Patriotic Children* (1942), and *Leopard Family* (1943).[17] J.P. Dearing, an associate of the Stuart Art Gallery in Boston, requested prices for just over half the works on display.[18] Dearing did not proceed with acquiring any work, but borrowed four paintings for a gallery exhibition the following year, the brochure of which contained an introduction by none other than Sidney Janis.[19]

The one documented sale from the Modern exhibition was made by Guggenheim. Keen to expand her collection, she wasted no time in visiting the show to which she was also a lender. She became enamored with *Two Women in Front of a Mirror* (1943), surely the best painting in the exhibition. Its sale price was $1,100, also the highest priced of all works in the show. Guggenheim, who typically drove a hard bargain, unquestionably paid the full price plus the 10% commission for a total of $1,300.00.[20] The percentage of this sale Hirshfield received is unknown since details of his financial arrangements with Janis remained unspecified. A hint may be found in correspondence Hirshfield later sent to Janis: "I am in receipt of your letter, also checks...I only hope that the time will come soon when you will be able to sell more paintings, with better prices, where both you and I can realize a little money for our work."[21]

In his quest to build a robust market for the artist, the following year, Janis arranged for a selling exhibition at the Julian Levy Gallery, New York, which traveled in an enlarged version to the James Vigeveno Galleries, Los Angeles.[22] Both Janis and Hirshfield were hopeful that additional sales would be forthcoming. Accordingly, Janis more than doubled the price achieved by the Guggenheim sale for the recently completed *Stage Beauties* to $2,500.[23] Perhaps the price was too high, as the work failed to find a buyer at the Los Angeles presentation. James Vigeveno nonetheless within a few years was able to place *Girl with Scarf* (1945) with Martin Janis, Sidney's brother now living in Los Angeles. *Pheasants* (1945) was sold to Mary Vernon Wolfe during her first marriage to *Wizard of Oz* composer, Herbert Stothart, and *Girl and Dog* (1945) during her second marriage to art historian and director of J. Paul Getty's art collection, Dr. Paul Wescher.

Hirshfield died in July of 1946 at the age of seventy-four. Janis wrote a touching tribute published in *View,* the Surrealist magazine, to which the artist had contributed the cover illustration the previous year.[24] As Janis had not yet opened his commercial gallery, he engaged Guggenheim to organize a memorial exhibition that assembled the artist's output produced between the close of MoMA's exhibition and Hirshfield's death. The breadth of Hirshfield's fanciful imagination, elaborate patterning, and rich palette was revealed in the twenty-two pictures—ten of which were lent anonymously by Janis—on display in Art of This Century's Daylight Gallery with prices ranging from $700 to $1800, an uptick that often occurs with an artist's death.2[5] The critical response also improved: "Hirshfield has made a new world; a bold, revolutionary, colorful world of unsophisticated perspective and curiously shaped inhabitants, and one disquietingly hypnotic to those outside it."[26] Guggenheim would close Art of This Century two months later to return to Europe.

Hirshfield's exposure in New York quickly vanished in the immediate aftermath of his death. The short but fulfilling career he experienced, rightly, had

positioned him at the pinnacle of modernist activities in the city. Hirshfield family's inventory passed seamlessly to Janis's control who continued his advocacy until his own death in 1989. Janis arranged solo exhibitions in Europe in the 1950s, bringing Hirshfield's eccentric works to European audiences. For the remainder of the twentieth century, Hirshfield's art was mostly seen in the arena of self-taught, naïve, or primitive art.

In 2015, Richard Meyer delivered the Hilla Rebay Lecture at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, where, at the time, I held the position of senior curator. He was just beginning his Hirshfield research and accordingly chose the artist as his lecture topic. Little did he know I, too, had been quietly pushing to reprise Hirshfield's career with an exhibition at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice. We immediately bonded and, as co-curators, secured the exhibition on the museum's calendar. Seven years on, my departure from the museum and the challenges posed by Covid-19 altered our plans. Undeterred, we were able to bring Hirshfield full circle from Brooklyn to Manhattan with the exhibition, *Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered* at the American Folk Art Museum where his magical and original oeuvre was, once again, the talk of the town.[27]

Watch a recording of this presentation here.

1 Bauer (1909–1987) was curator of American Painting at the Brooklyn Museum between 1936 and 1952. He ultimately became director of the Whitney Museum of American Art from 1968 to 1974.

2 Walker, who died in 1976, trained at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum and briefly worked as a curator at the University of Minnesota Art Museum before opening his gallery on 57th Street in 1936 that focused on American painting.

3 Sidney Janis, *they taught themselves: American Primitive Painters of the 20th Century,* New York: The Dial Press, 1942, p. 15. Foreword by Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

4 The exhibition dates were October 18—November 19, 1939, Member's Room, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Hirshfield's third painting, *Tailor-made Girl* (1939), was included in "American Painting Today," Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, November 1–28, 1939 lent courtesy of Hudson Walker Gallery, who valued it at $500.00. For Hirshfield's exhibition history, see, Susan Davidson, "Exhibition History" in Richard Meyer, *Morris Hirshfield: Master of the Two Left Feet* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2022), pp. 316-318.

5 The exhibition dates were October 21, 1941–April 30, 1944.

6 The exhibition of the same title opened at the San Francisco Museum of Art, August 5–September 3, 1941. It traveled to the Stendhal Gallery, Los Angeles, September 26–October 11, and as "They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters of the 20th Century," Marie Harriman Gallery, New York, February 9–March 7, 1942. Statement by André Breton. The Hirshfield works shown were: *Beach Girl* (1937–1939), *Angora Cat* (1937–1939), *Lion* (1939), and *Nude at the Window* (1941).

7 "List of Paintings by Morris Hirshfield." For unknown reasons, Hirshfield did not sign the contract. I would like to thank Robert Rentzer (Hirshfield's grandson) for sharing this document from his family's archives.

8 "Complete List of Paintings by Morris Hirshfield as of June 1945," Rentzer Family Archives. Financial records between the artist and Janis are scant. For an explanation of how transactions may have occurred, see Richard Meyer, p. 149 and note 163, p. 230.

9 For the full provenance of Hirshfield's painted oeuvre, see, Susan Davidson, "Catalogue of Works" in Meyer, pp. 233–315.

10 Janis would mount three Hirshfield exhibitions before the gallery closed in 1999, ten years after Sidney's death.

11 For a detailed account of Guggenheim's collection and exhibition activities, see Susan Davidson and Philip Rylands, eds., *Peggy Guggenheim and Frederick Kiesler. The Story of Art of This Century* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2004).

12 Guggenheim may have seen the painting in the traveling version of "They Taught Themselves" when it was included in the New York venue at Marie Harriman Gallery, February 9–March 7, 1942. The painting is recorded in Guggenheim's inventory prepared by Bernard J. Reis, "Art of this Century: Inventory of Artworks as of December 31, 1942, Bernard and Rebecca Reis Papers, Research Library Special Collections & Visual Resources, The Getty Institute, Los Angeles (portions are duplicated as the Bernard J. Reis Papers, 1934–1979, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC). The painting is no longer recorded in Guggenheim's collection inventories at the end of 1945, suggesting she sold it, perhaps through Janis. By 1949, the painting belonged to Martin Janis, see Davidson, "Catalogue of Works" in Meyer, p. 248.

13 "First Papers of Surrealism," Whitelaw Reid Mansion, New York, October 14–November 7, 1942. For more on this historic exhibition, see https://www.toutfait.com/a-new-look-marcel-duchamp-his-twine-and-the-1942-first-papers-of-surrealism-exhibition/ and Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, and Surrealist Exhibition Installation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

14 "The Paintings of Morris Hirshfield," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 23–August 1, 1943. By the exhibition's opening Janis had additionally acquired *Lion* (1939), *Inseparable Friends* (1941), and *Girl with Pigeons* (1941) for his personal collection.

15 M[aude] R[iley], "Tailor-Made Show Suits Nobody," *Art Digest* 17, no. 18 (July 1, 1943), p. 15 and "Naïve Lion," *Newsweek,* July 5, 1943, 92.

16 Although not the exhibition's curator, Barr nonetheless was held responsible and accordingly forced by the trustees (who held more substantial administrative quibbles about his leadership) to relinquish his directorship. He remained at the museum as a director of museum collections until his retirement in 1967. For more on his dismissal, see Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), pp. 359–376; Alice Goldfarb Marquis, *Alfred Barr: Missionary for the Modern* (Chicago and New York: Contemporary Books, 1989), pp. 202–203; and Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 356–361.

17 The prices ranged from $475 to $1,100, considerable sums for an artist without an established market. See, Dr. Albert C. England, Jr. to Museum of Modern Art, July 29, 1943, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, EXHS 234.2. Curator Monroe Wheeler replied the following day with the prices: *Peacock* and *Patriotic Children* were $825 each and *Leopard Family* was $935. Dr. England did not proceed with purchasing any work. In his reply, Wheeler stated that museum purchases carried a 10% commission. It is likely that the commission was split equally between the museum and Janis.

18 J.B. Deering to Museum of Modern Art, July 3, 1943, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, EXHS 234.2.

19 "Self-Taught Painters," Stuart Art Gallery, Boston, October 19–November 23, 1944. The artworks shown were: *Flower Garden* (1941), *Opera Girl* (1941), *Birds on Grass* (1944), and *Nude with Cupids* (1944).

20 The painting is recorded in Bernard J. Reis, "Art of this Century: Inventory of Artworks as of December 31, 1943, Bernard and Rebecca Reis Papers, Getty. At the time of purchase, it was the most expensive work in Guggenheim's collection.

21 Morris Hirshfield to Sidney Janis, October 24, 1944, reproduced in William Saroyan, *Morris Hirshfield* (Parma, Italy: Franco Maria Ricci Editore, 1976), p. 133.

22 "Recent Paintings by Morris Hirshfield," Julien Levy Gallery, New York, November 21—December 7, 1944 and "Morris Hirshfield," James Vigeveno Galleries, Los Angeles, January 8—25, 1945. The checklist for the Levy exhibition has been assembled based on reviews of the exhibition while the Vigeveno brochure included a checklist and excepts of reviews from the Levy exhibition.

23 Sidney Janis, "Memorandum of Understanding," November 14, 1944, Rentzer Family Archives. The language used suggests an "on-consignment" agreement.

24 Sidney Janis, "Morris Hirshfield Dies, *View* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1946), p. 14. Hirshfield's cover image appeared on the October 1945 issue (vol. 5, no. 3).

25 "Memorial Showing of the Last Paintings of Morris Hirshfield," Art of This Century, New York, February 11–March 1, 1947. For more on this exhibition, see Jasper Sharp, "Serving the Future: The Exhibitions at Art of This Century 1942–1947," in Davidson and Rylands, *Peggy Guggenheim & Frederick Kiesler,* pp. 343-344. Guggenheim had previously shown Hirshfield's *Elephant with Trappings* (1943) in "First Exhibition in America of," April 11–30, 1944.

26 Jon Stroup, *Town & Country* (February 1947), press clipping, Art of This Century scrapbook, Peggy Guggenheim Papers, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Archives.

27 The exhibition dates were September 19, 2022–January 29, 2023. The exhibition was voted "Best of Art 2022" by the *Wall Street Journal* and the accompanying monograph received the 2022 Dedalus Foundation book award, among many other accolades for both the exhibition and monograph.

Q&A: Session I

Esther Adler (moderator): I want to thank Susan, Brooke, and Jennifer for those remarkable presentations, which I really enjoyed, and I thought we could spend a few minutes talking about some commonalities within the presentations. Something that occurred to me quite early on was how much of the research and the presentations, as they existed in this symposium, had to do with the role of the mediator—the person who rises to the forefront and champions the artist—and the inevitable power dynamic between that person and the artists.

In many ways, these mediators are the reason that we know this work, can see this work, and the reason this work has survived for us to look at now. But of course, it's often through the lens of that mediator, and the various things that would have affected their decisions in terms of how to position and present the work continue to shape the way the artists and their work is understood now. I wonder if each of you could talk about how, in your practice, you balance that—as we of course, are our own mediators—in terms of presenting both of these issues.

Jenn Marshall: So much in that question, so much in all the talks! My notebook is full already, and we're only halfway through—not even through our day. I'm thinking of Susan (Davidson) with the sales of works from an exhibition, which was true for the Edmondson show, too. I was quickly going back to my notes on the sales from the Edmondson show: the Ark sold for $60, or was listed for $60 anyway. *The Preacher and The Lawyer*, those were two-figure sales—under $100. So to see numbers in the four figures, it's such a contrast. (Louise) Dahl-Wolfe asked Julien Levy to halve the prices, because she didn't think they could go for $120, so move them to $60 to get money back to Edmondson.

So that's a story in which Dahl-Wolfe is acting in effect, with some speed and haste and in the interest of returning money to the artist, who—as far as we know, there's one or two conflicting accounts—doesn't go to his own show at MoMA, unlike Hirshfield.

I do think there was this sort of network of well-meaning and activist, and self-consciously interracial artists or artistic agitators that saw themselves as acting on behalf of an artist, but doing so in a wide range of capacity and activity, if we compare across [our symposium] panel.

Then how gender plays into Brook's paper [is interesting], to see exactly how you know, even within the outsider canon, there are still pitched hierarchies between how artists are experiencing the process of being mediated. How we do that, too, is part of politics and praxis; within my practice where and how honorariums sit in my bank account or go elsewhere, how to distribute some of the sort of benefits that accrue to the mediator, and attempt to take the lessons from my own history.

Brooke Wyatt: In the case of Séraphine Louis and the relationship with her mediator in many ways defined her career. Wilhelm Uhde, his writings about Louis, or the idea of Louis, or the idea of her work that he put forward was recycled and reused subsequently so many times. He published his own books and essays about Louis and other artists, and then those excerpts from those texts were reprinted in exhibition catalogs as recently as 2009.

So not only did he shape the histography, and the exhibition history of Louis, his interpretation of her work became foundational. And even more so, he actually *named* her. He gave her the name of Séraphine de Senlis and just "Séraphine." And I want to highlight how [it happened in a] very different context than, for example, Brazil, where using the first name of an artist doesn't have the same kind of effect. If Louis had signed her painting Séraphine, then I would say, by all means, let's refer to her as Séraphine. But I'm trying to start moving towards referring to her as S. Louis because that's how she signed almost all of her paintings.

And, I guess, how I push back against there always being this mediating figure standing between an artist

and the reception of their work is by trying to foreground Louis's work as the only reliable source of primary material that's out there. Because any comments that are attributed to Louis—they're anecdotal, right? We have the letters that she penned while she was incarcerated. She doesn't speak directly about or her paintings [in the letters], however, so focusing on her work is, for me, one way to kind of push back against what I found in a lot of the literature from the 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s that was so focused on myths and tropes of an errant, overly eroticized, sexualized femininity, or Louis's Catholicism being almost exploited to distort or obscure the fact that, whatever her views and whatever her motivations were, she nonetheless spent her days working as a house cleaner, and then her nights off, painting all night. That's a serious studio practice that she made a lot of sacrifices for—so I just suggest that we focus on what actually is on the canvases.

Susan Davidson: I think that it's not unusual for artists to have intermediaries; they kind of rely on them. The artists themselves are not always their best salespersons. Despite the fact that Hirshfield actually took his work first to the Brooklyn Museum in the hopes of getting some level of feedback, I don't think he ever expected what ended up happening for him in the relationship that he had Janis built together. But there's no doubt that Janis really went to great lengths to promote the artist, and rather successfully, not in not only just in the 40s, but in the 50s, to important shows in Europe—in Paris, and in Zurich—and a lot of sales made to Europeans at that time. But by the 60s, the interest in his work, and I think a lot of untrained artists started to fall off. And it hasn't been until more recently, that that reconsideration has been given to these remarkable painters and sculptors. Which brings us really here today, what the exhibition is, has been about.

Adler: The thing I find particularly interesting is if we were doing a symposium about really any other artists that we have on view here at MoMA, the amount of time we would spend talking, for example, about who brought that work to the attention of the curator, who eventually did the show, or did that [make sense] within the various ways in which the work was received. I always find that fascinating, but it's much less likely to happen with a trained versus untrained artists, which brings me to another question about the ways in which often these artists are mediated or understood, which is the biography.

I thought was particularly apparent in both in Brook's presentation and Susan's as well—the idea that what the artists did for their day job and the various maladies or other life events that affected the artists *explained* the work in a way that is either completely ignored with more mainstream artists, or that is discussed in conjunction with, as opposed to [given as] the rationale behind the work.

And so I thought each of you could talk about the way that biography specifically played into your thinking about how you present the artist's work.

Davidson: I'll just say for Richard, Valérie, and I, as we thought about the exhibition of Hirshfield's work, we actually pretty much removed the biography element from it with the exception of showing his early patents, and therefore the recreation by Liz Blatt. So, I mean, I think the exhibition was more about on type of works that he was making, broken down into, you know, various genres, whether it's animals or stage beauties or landscapes, etc.

That said, we did make an exception with the whole surrealist component because it was important for both of us to really place the artists within the context of what was going on in the New York art world, which he was interacting with. I mean, if you read his invitation list to his MoMA show, it's a very impressive group of high-level New York collectors and shakers. So, despite the fact he seemed to be out in the wilds of Brooklyn, he was actually pretty stepping right into what was going on in Manhattan. But it's also really hard not to look at a biography for an artist; it informs so much of how their work comes forward in a way.

Marshall: Yeah, I might even push back in some ways on some of this because the idea of mediators for artists—and I think what's exciting about our talks today, and about the field of self-taught art—is how that kind of social network or practice or decision-making is part of the conversation, not kind of kept sort of beyond, out of view, as though it's just the artist genius that happened and all things were taken care of.

Likewise, with biography, I think storytelling about how life and work inter-mesh, and the social practice of being a person in this certain historical moment, is part of the work's becoming. And so, while those focal points for the self-taught field have absolutely been a source of baggage...

I think in Edmondson's case, he knows very well how he's being narrowly devised as a mythological, biographical figure. I think he plays that as part of his medium and constructs himself within that space.

...so I'm not discounting the ways in which [insistence on biography] has obscured the artworks and make the sort of charge to us, to bring the artworks forward. But I would hate for us to bring the artworks forward and lose some of the contextual texture of the social networks of the lived experience.

I want more of that in traditional art history rather than less of that here—is the pushback.

Adler: I think that's absolutely right, Jennifer.

Wyatt: I specifically didn't rehearse Wilhelm Uhde claims the way he starts every writing about Séraphine by saying that he met her because she was working as his house cleaner in Senlis, where he was renting an apartment. I also didn't—even though I myself am trained as a mental health therapist—I don't try to psychoanalyze Louis or her work, although many have. I'm not saying [interpreting her work] through a lens informed by a critical art therapy practice wouldn't be interesting, as it would be for any artist, to respond to what Jennifer Marshall just said. The stakes of biography are so high with self-taught artists, and I think that's why this field has so much to teach broader fields of modern and contemporary art about the ethics of inclusion and of looking at biography.

Mathilde Walker-Billaud (curator): I want to jump in; we have a question for you, Esther, and I think everyone here can address it:

Where does this particular moment, with the inclusion of self-taught artists, stand in the history of MoMA? And can it serve as a form of model for other institutions, especially in a moment where we look for more inclusivity and diversity?

Adler: I hope so. I mean, I think that's really why, as many people noted, all of this work all of a sudden was on view again in 2019, which was yet again the Museum's rethinking of the way it presents permanent collection, and the type of stories that we tell. So I think part of it is a recognition, as Jennifer so beautifully put it, that, in fact, these different ways of looking at art beyond just the objects [or] the figure who did it, into the networks and the conversations with reporters, and that all of that is part of the story that we *can* tell at an institution like this.

Walker-Billaud: There's a question about Hirshfield's process for you, Susan. Did Hirshfield work on paper first, then enlarge and put it on canvas? What were his influences?

Davidson: Well, he did make drawings for every painting. So, he did start by drawing. How he actually transferred them...? They're full-scale, the exact same size as the pictures, and about 40 of them are extant. The others, I think, were thrown out. But we were unable to really determine how he transferred the tracing onto the canvas. It was not done by pouncing, which would have been a traditional method where you poke holes in the paper and then spread charcoal or some other light medium over it to give you the tracing. It remains an interesting puzzle for us to figure out.

Adler: Did you guys look at carbon paper—would that have been available?

Davidson: Yeah, there were no traces of carbon paper on the paintings or on the drawings.

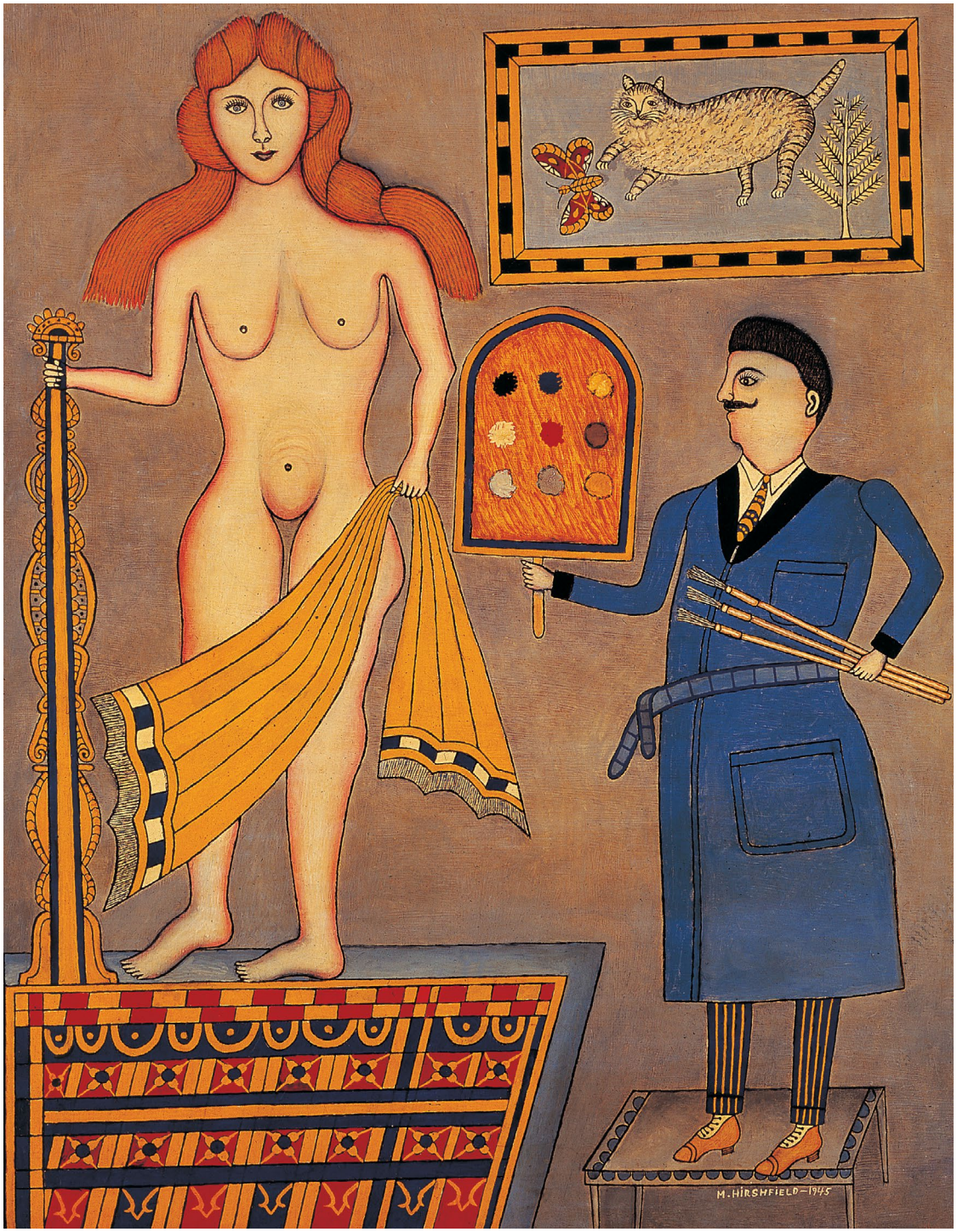
Walker-Billaud: Another mysterious element.

Davidson: It truly is.

Session 2:
The Inside/Outside Conundrum
Introduction

VALÉRIE ROUSSEAU

Curatorial Chair for Exhibitions & Senior Curator,
American Folk Art Museum



Morris Hirshfield (1872–1946). *The Artist and His Model,* 1945. Oil on canvas, 44 x 34 in. American Folk Art Museum, Gift of David L. Davies, 2002.23.1. © Robert and Gail Rentzer for Estate of Morris Hirshfield / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

This session on the "Inside/Outside Conundrum" explores the broad categories of self- taught art, folk art, and Native art which emerged from hierarchical discourses and enforced boundaries with dominant, elitist practices. Artists historically associated with these negativized terms for not corresponding to art mainstream's standards were often exoticized rather than being considered modern and innovative. Prone to being mythologized in their biographies, these artists were regularly parked under restrictive labels referring to uniform and timeless expressions.

Morris Hirshfield was initially classified as a so-called "primitive" and "naïve" artist by the art establishment of his time, during the interwar period. Despite an early embrace by artworld luminaries, he was considered in this community, by the mid-1950s, a curiosity. The marginalization of unschooled artists from dominant narratives of modernism—then rather focused on professional artists—drove other networks to consolidate in a reactionary manner. A distinctive field thereby formed, to which specific artists active outside traditional artistic networks, specialized museums, exhibitions, and publications became associated. Key collectors like Sydney Janis and Jean Dubuffet, for instance, played a pivotal role in the preservation and the channeling of specific satellite art worlds. During the last decades, a growing number of scholarly studies have closely examined the circumstances, sometimes problematic, of the discovery of these artists, and the legacies of their collectors. The exhibition *Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered* at the American Folk Art Museum (AFAM), and the related symposium sought to reconsider this heritage, while critically revisiting its epistemology.

In this session, Bill Anthes traces the tensions at play in the formation of the artistic identity of Yanktonai Dakota painter Oscar Howe. Anthes provocatively states that "Howe's work, as it appeared in these artworld contexts, make an illuminating case study of the place of non-European and 'outsider' arts as they sit in relation to modernism." As we seek to identify pervasive issues of artistic categorizations, we are invited to examine the conditions that could have shaped the inside/outside conundrum, starting with the defining role of the "artist community" itself as a factor for artistic recognition, and incidentally exclusion. While moving away from the proscription of "Indian painting" and exploring an abstraction rooted in Dakota's traditions, Howe actively engaged in the characterization of his work, cognizant of the powerful institutional and social biases of his time.

This level of input differs with Hirshfield, as with most creators historically associated with self-taught art. There is a toll for not being part of such a peer system framework, like their professionally trained counterparts, defined by sets of common art-historical grounds, rituals, reciprocal engagements, and shared vocabularies. As Alan Bowness proposes in his publication *The Conditions of Success: How the Modern Artist Rises to Fame* (1989), artistic acclaim follows a four-stage predictable process: it starts with the peer recognition and related inclusion, which evolves towards the critical attention, patronage by collectors and dealers, and ultimately the public praise found in institutions[1] like museums.

Collaterally, the long confinement of Hirshfield outside the art historical canon was partly impacted by the very context where he decided to exercise his art, away from a peer community, while caught in a third-party validation channel that leaves others speaking on his behalf. These circumstances, which bring to mind "the indignity of speaking for others" articulated by Gilles Deleuze in a conversation with Michel Foucault in 1972, exacerbated the stereotype of the loner, as it set him in a soliloquy fashion. Closer examination shows that such artists were repeatedly depicted as passive players in their artistic emergence.[2] Incidentally, a dominant narrative—that reputable taste makers championed his works and included them in prestigious shows—superseded other aspects of Hirshfield's artistic path and creative agency, notably that he was not "self-taught" per se, but trained in a different fashion, or that he had his own ideas about world art history and the artworks he encountered in museums.

The reflections of Aimé Césaire on the *négritude* offered an alternate route to the authoritative institutional discourse and avenues for a true change of perspectives enriched by every particular: "We need to have the patience to take up the task anew; the strength to redo that which has been undone; the strength to invent instead of follow; the strength to 'invent' our path and to clear it of ready-made forms, those petrified forms that obstruct it."[3] Pointing issues of appropriation and pre-imposed grid of criteria for works produced under very different circumstances, Anthes suggests in his presentation that we revisit Howe's Indigenous aesthetics,"that linked Howe's modernism not to European precursors but to an identity and culture rooted in specific lands and traditions."

In her talk, Lynne Cooke contributes to a re-evaluation of the modernist genealogy through Hirshfield's decorative sensibility. Such perspective is offered in the "Catalog of Works" prepared by Susan Davidson in Richard Meyer's publication *Master of The Two Left Feet: Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered,* which defies the tunnel vision that was formed over time of this artist. Looking at the chronology of his paintings assembled for the first time, it is illuminating to realize that Hirshfield regularly circled back on themes over his seven years of creative activity, rejecting the praised value of "progress" and evolution in the art.

The exhibition, which gathered more than the half of the artist's lifetime production, highlighted compositional and textural aspects of his oeuvre: like a collagist who relies on preexistent sources, Hirshfield reused segments of his preparatory drawings—likely with the help of tracing paper—to execute renderings of women and animals, bringing to mind the cut patterns and dress forms seen in the workshop interior of fashion houses. This method aligns with an aesthetic that appears to be formed of independent blocks of stitched-like sections, at the opposite of the overall dream-inducing effect of Henri Rousseau's paintings, to which Hirshfield's art is often compared. His tendency to decompartmentalize breaks the pictorial unity for the benefit of close ups and a formal exercise.[4] This mechanism also objectifies the figures depicted by the artist, as Cooke points out when exploring his "multifaceted and singular engagement with pattern and ornamentation"—a device that became "the primary vehicle for radical formal invention and experimentation, as they were for Matisse, above all the great Modernists." Meanwhile, the surface of Hirshfield's paintings reveals the remarkable obsessiveness with which he decorated the backgrounds of half of his body of works with repeated motifs and brush strokes. One could suggest that the physical demand and trance-like activity to achieve such renderings might have played a daily soothing role to alleviate his painful arthritis.

Hirshfield oeuvre and Howe's art, despite this distinction, both intersect with a myriad of traditions once obscured by discriminatory standards of class, gender, race, and artistic education. They convey other sets of relationships and aesthetic achievements that we have only begun to unravel and magnify in an attempt to reimagine narratives of modern and contemporary art history.

Watch a recording of this presentation here.

1 The artist Kerry James Marshall poses the challenge of the underlying motivations behind institutional policies leading to the inclusion of artists of color: "I think many feel … that you never really get an honest, critical, appraisal of the work on aesthetic terms. It's always positioned to serve some useful social function at times when museums are criticized to reorganize their priorities. If we want to bring artists in from the margins, then the art has to undergo that same kind of critical assessment as everything else." In Marshall, "Self-Taught Artists and Institutional Narratives: Can Museums Find a Balanced Response to an Exclusionary Past? Leslie Umberger Speaks with Kerry James Marshall," in Valérie Rousseau (ed.), "The Fate of Self-Taught Art," *The Brooklyn Rail,* Critic's Page, July–August 2018.

2 This critique resonates with AFAM's recent exhibition on the legacy of avant-garde psychiatrist Francesc Tosquelles, who led the Saint-Alban-sur-Limagnole hospital during World War II. The project demonstrates that one of the patients, Auguste Forestier—who soon became one of Dubuffet's art brut protégés—was actively involved in the distribution of his sculptures within the surrounding community of the asylum, and among avant-garde artists who were hidden on this site with other members of the French resistance.

3 Aimé Césaire, "Letter to Maurice Thorez," Paris, October 24, 1956, in *Social Text,* no. 103, Summer 2010, p. 152. (translated by Chike Jeffers).

4 Read the analysis suggested by Randall Morris in "Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered," *The Burlington Magazine,* no 165, January 2023, p. 83-86.

Autodidact: "only a matter of degree"?

LYNNE COOKE

Senior Curator for Special Projects in Modern Art, National Gallery of Art

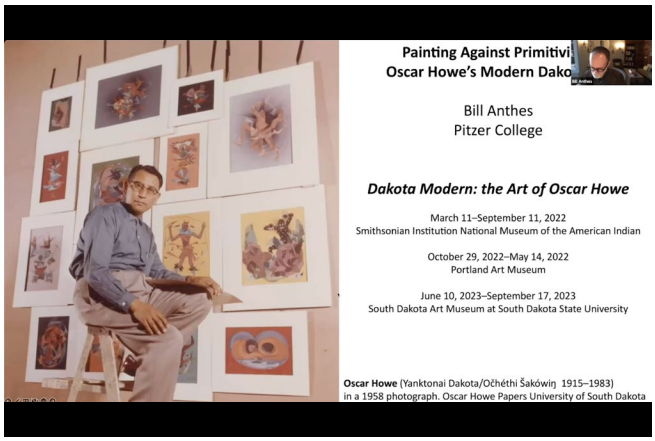
In the United States in the '30s, the concept of the self-taught artist denoted a creator with no formal academic training and, by extension, no knowledge of art history. Defined by a lack, the art of the paradigmatic autodidact was segregated hierarchically from that of its mainstream counterparts. That deficit was not, however, ineluctably negative: for the work of "modern primitives," as these creators were also then known, was enthusiastically embraced by the artistic avantgarde and the cultural elite. By the decade's end the binary opposition dividing established and marginalized forms of practice was destabilized—hollowed out—as self-taught artists such as John Kane, Horace Pippin and Morris Hirshfield gained an unprecedented measure of agency in the crafting of their professional identities, the reception of their work, and even the shaping of their career trajectories. The register of difference was calibrated less in terms of the fundamental and exclusionary than as a matter of degree.

Watch a recording of this presentation here.

Painting Against Primitivism: Oscar Howe's Modern Dakota Art

BILL ANTHES

Professor of Art History, Pitzer College



As a young artist, Yanktonai Dakota painter Oscar Howe (1915–1983) mastered "Studio Style" painting, so named for educator Dorothy Dunn's "Studio" program at the Santa Fe Indian School, which Howe attended from 1934 to 1938. Studio Style paintings were characterized by firmly outlined figures, flat colors, simplified (or absent) backgrounds, and nostalgic subjects. A burgeoning interest in Studio Style painting on the part of anthropologists, art collectors, and audiences embodied twentieth century modernist primitivism as well as a distinctly midcentury American search for a usable past. Studio Style paintings–shown in venues across the Southwest and Oklahoma, as well as at the Museum of Modern Art and overseas–were modern works by living artists, but were considered to be the unschooled, authentic expressions of a timeless and essential Native American culture and identity. But the style was institutional in its origins and in the words of art historian J.J. Brody, the result of a symbiosis between "Indian painters and white patrons." By the 1950s, Howe had moved beyond the prescribed aesthetic of the Studio Style in works merged individual innovation with customary Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Sioux) culture and aesthetics. While his groundbreaking works of the 1950s were misinterpreted and criticized as being derivative of European modernism, Howe saw no contradiction in an art that sought to "bring the best things of Indian culture into the modern way of life."

Watch a recording of this presentation here.

Q&A: Session 2

Valérie Rousseau (moderator): So in light of these moments of tension, and contention, related to the inclusion of artists like Morris Hirshfield and Oscar Howe in these narratives, do you currently perceive in your respective professional fields, institutional resistance or tensions among peers, or also dissonant positions on the part of the artists themselves in the current research that you are developing?

Bill Anthes: I suppose I can take a first shot at that. I have encountered some friction from Indigenous artists, particularly contemporary indigenous artists, who actually would prefer that Howe's work not be included in our histories of modernism and our framing of the contemporary. I've encountered some—although I wouldn't call this unanimous, or entirely representative—but some comments suggesting that we should be talking about Howe really still only in the context of Očhéthi Šakówiŋ, or Dakota, or maybe more broadly indigenous arts—and that shoe-horning him into a history of modernism in hopes of transforming a history of American art is, in some ways, a disservice to what is unique about him and what is important about him. I'm kind of in two minds about that obviously, as a historian of American art who works with Indigenous artists, but I find it an interesting echo of the way Howe defined his own practice back in the 50s.

Lynne Cooke: I think I'd answer the question in relation not so much to a division in positions amongst colleagues, but to what might be said to those who subscribe to an idea of outsider art in the terms in which it was framed by Roger Cardinal, which I think is still very strong, unfortunately; it determines a great deal in terms of public reception, although it's totally unviable. And by that, I mean, the category represents—as Cardinal himself came to acknowledge—an ideal, not an actuality.

It posits a creator who is internally driven, indifferent to the world around him ("him," as it was at the time) and motivated by inner feelings, not interested in communication, not part of a community, and therefore hermetic, solipsistic, and, ultimately, incommensurable. Clearly, I don't subscribe to that. I think the battle is to try and dislodge this persistent, misleading stereotype, and this [dismantling] is happening from many directions, both within the museum, through curatorial activities, exhibitions and acquisitions, and through a great deal of new scholarship, which is bringing a rigor and in-depth research to the subject that has never happened before.

Rousseau: Which leads to my second question. Bill, it is amazing to witness the many resources you found regarding Oscar Howe's position towards the art establishment and his refusal to [submit] to one-size-fits-all categorizations. This is something that is often lacking with self-taught artists like Morris Hirshfield, yet we're starting to uncover more, these first-person testimonies, if you will. To you both, Lynne and Bill: can you expand a bit more on your methodology that prioritizes the artists' self-representation, maybe using concrete examples from current research?

Anthes: When I and my collaborators began this project, amongst a certain circle of art historians and curators, there was a certain kind of understanding of Howe—and a lot of it was built around that painting Umine Wacipe, and the story and the letter and that's kind of as far as most understanding went. We were lucky to find a very rich archive, part of it held by Howe's family, and the rest of it at the University of South Dakota, where Howe taught for many years. It was a remarkably intact archive, which is incredibly helpful in our research.

In some ways, it's an index of Howe's lack of esteem, or notoriety, in the larger art world, that all of this material had been sequestered in Vermillion, South Dakota and a couple of other places for half a century and not been much explored. So we set out hoping to just tell a longer story with what we could find in Howe's own words, because there was a lot of it to work with. We were fortunate to have a really deep collection as a result of him having had an institutional affiliation, as well as a couple of mediators—to use a word that came up earlier today—who kind of undertook to be caretakers and stewards of all that

material and made sure that it ended up in an institutional home, rather than being lost. So maybe he's exceptional in that way.

Cooke: I second your statement in that the presence of a strong archive, or its absence, is absolutely critical to this. And I think we can see it in a comparison, say, of Horace Pippin and Bill Traylor. Anne Monahan's recent monograph on Horace Pippin, which is transformative and which is based on an extraordinary amount of archival work, not all in one place, but across a whole field of military history and religious affiliations, and so on, is transformative. By rigorously piecing this data together, bit by bit, she's given us an understanding of Pippin as embedded in a network within the mainstream art world—engaged with artists and professional associates—, and a conceptual and critical way of approaching his work, context by context, in relation to, say, commissions, certain kinds of exhibition possibilities and so forth.

And on the other hand, we have the case of Bill Traylor, where there's really no archive to speak of. In 2018, Leslie Umberger made a remarkable show of Traylor's work and produced a very substantial catalogue in which he charted a biography of the artist that was nuanced, complex, and groundbreaking. However, in terms of interpreting his works, there remains a barrier. As Kerry James Marshall says in the essay he contributed to that catalogue, when you look at these works with their complex subjects, involving animals and figures interacting, you're on your own, caught up in speculation—destined to match your wits against those of the artist!

So, one response to the absence of archival material has been to take Saidiya Hartman's idea of critical fabulations and to construct curatorial fabulations and critical fabrications, by drawing on contemporary literature, and related kinds of material to create a hypothetical reading, and maybe in that way, to throw light on meanings in the work, if not on the intentions of the maker.

Rousseau: Mathilde, do you want to take a question from the audience?

Mathilde Walker-Billaud (host): I have a question for Bill. How do you make sense of the art establishment's understanding of Howe's work as self-taught, and unpack what appears to be a contradiction?

Anthes: Yes, it's something that jars because Howe was anything but self-taught, earning an MFA in the 1950s when I would hazard a guess that many professional artists had not bothered to get the graduate degree. But I also think, as I alluded to, there's a certain training we can identify in his upbringing with his maternal grandmother, too. Yet, kind of persistently, throughout his career, he's caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, being identified as a primitive and always linked to that identity, and marked in terms of distance from the mainstream, but at other times, being seen as inauthentically Indigenous because of his connections to world art history and modernism. So he's one of those characters that, for me, encourages us—gives us the opportunity—to think a little bit about the constructiveness of some of these categories. I think it was Lynne who was using the word "uncredentialed" as opposed to untrained, which I think is probably a more helpful term to use when thinking about these artists' status in an art world.

Walker-Billaud: We actually have a question on that. Someone asks us to discuss what the term self-taught means, and if you can give us a sense of your position towards that word if you were to use it.

Anthes: I'm going to punt that one to Lynne.

Cooke: Well, "self-taught" was used in the 30s and 40s, usually to mean lacking formal academic training in credentialed art schools, and with that would come lack of a knowledge of art history and its protocols. Recently, however, ground-breaking work by scholars from different disciplines, has complicated, even undermined, the concept of self-taught as autodidact.

Take James "Son Ford" Thomas. Drawing on sociological and anthropological material, distinguished folklorist William Ferris pointed to the role played by what is called "fireside training" in shaping his practice: the skill sets and vernacular forms of making that Thomas, as a young person, acquired within his community. Similarly, many young Black women learned how to sew quilts: they didn't go to school to learn that; they were taught by their mothers or grandmothers and other women within the community. That kind of training doesn't register—isn't usually acknowledged—within the term self-taught.

And then there's the kind of training that is a form of self-schooling, or homeschooling, that you find, say, in the case of Henry Darger, who, as Michael Moon has shown, was immensely well-versed in popular print material of the time: religious broadsides, cartoons, and more generally, articles in the daily newspaper. Such sources formed the ground on which he built a sophisticated, fantastical allegory, based on the Civil War: the remarkable illustrated narrative cycles known as The Vivian Girls. That example of homeschooling involved the artist assembling a singular set of materials from which he constructed a complex, conceptual practice. Again, the concept of self-taught, as used in the literature on this field, doesn't generally recognize such self-determined intentional forms of pedagogy.

Session 3: Remapping Modernisms
Introduction

ANGELA MILLER

Professor of Art History, Washington University

James Castle (1900–1977). Untitled (Chair Construction), c. 1930.
Corrugated cardboard, spit, soot, ribbon, string, 31 3/4 x 16 in.
Museum of Modern Art, gift of the family of James Castle, 8.1999.

"Remapping Modernisms" shifts our understanding of self-taught artists, focusing on two Afro-Brazilian self-taught artists and one Jamaican Afro-diasporic artist. Expanding beyond the US to include the southern hemisphere reveals shared elements among self-taught artists as well as important differences stemming from the distinct conditions of work, migration, and race that distinguish the global south. In these three figures we discover a geography of work organized transnationally, and within which the U.S. is *decentered* in its role as a primary pivot of both political and economic power.

These three case studies locate their subjects within a rich cultural environment shaped by physical labor and by artisanal handwork. They variously express communal forms of knowledge that have been passed across generations and shaped by the rhythms of community work and the experience of migration. Deeply entangled in everyday life, the creative energies of making that we find in these works is inseparable from the movement of people and things across space, and by the daily struggle for dignity and selfhood.

Julia Bryan-Wilson situates the embroidery of Madalena Santos Reinbolt in the visual traditions and long histories of women crafting things. She finds therein a depth and complexity mostly denied to craft objects. Demoted as "women's work," craft has been rendered largely invisible by the category of Art which—since its 18th century origins in the aesthetic ideal of transcendence and freedom from work and necessity—has been imbricated in gender, race, and class hierarchies of value. What happens, Bryan-Wilson asks, if instead of associating art with this originating masculine flight from the contingencies of the everyday, we understand art as an expression of work? Such a reframing might then drive a re-evaluation not only of craft but also of self-taught art in its relation to the everyday.

The imprint of work traditions and the procedures of designing and cutting also shaped the art of Morris Hirshfield: the ways in which he projected patterns and shapes, fitted together like jigsaw, onto the empty surfaces of his canvases seem to come directly out of his career as a tailor and slipper designer. His endlessly generative visual imagination—unencumbered by learned compositional forms—went into overdrive in the presence of the blank canvas. Santos Reinbolt and John Dunkley share these space-filling energies with Hirshfield. Yet operating apart from the composition-making of trained artists, such methods of creating have long been consigned to a lower register, specifically, that of the decorative.

Santos Reinbolt also holds in common with Hirshfield a disregard for established hierarchies of visual importance. With their insistence on overall patterning and on the integration of figures into a landscape as animated and intensely alive as the figures, both artists disrupt figure/ground hierarchies. John Dunkley likewise dispenses with consistencies of scale to create landscapes in which the human element recedes in importance within the surge of natural forms.

Summoning work as an element intrinsic to artists outside the academic frame points toward the more generative role played by *methods* of fabrication. For Santos Reinbolt, the piercing of the needle puncturing the fabric carries meaning: needle, thread, and fabric working together to create objects of power and beauty that impart a "cathartic" charge. Material resistance, prefigured resistance, to the barriers of a world structured around color and class. We see how work and process, the tools and methods of making, themselves contain meaning; and how craft, artisanal work, and art, working through different pathways, are each driven by the energies of transformation.

James Castle's painstaking reconstruction of a chair in two dimensions elevates this purely utilitarian object into something blessed by workmanship. Made of the most base and unstable materials of spit, soot, and corrugated cardboard, Castle's chair asserts its own obdurate materiality as the vehicle of a different, non-utilitarian logic: a redemption of the ordinary into something beautifully figured; something one cannot sit on but which demands recognition.

Work emerges once again as the subtext of Dunkley's *Going to Market* in Nicole Smythe-Johnson's paper. Instead of borrowing a familiar colonialist trope whose function was to render Jamaica aesthetically and economically available, Dunkley's "*man with donkey*" is enfolded into a symbolic landscape that references his own migratory travels as a sailor. Smythe-Johnson argues that these travels generated a pan-African consciousness of his place within an expanded hemispheric world presaging post-colonialism. On the "nowhere" edge of imperial powers, Jamaica's migratory workforce, made up of men like Dunkley himself, drew it into a central position within global development. Jamaica's workers collectively forged a new transnational and potentially revolutionary identity. In Dunkley we find an artist whose marginal position as poor and black paradoxically granted his imagination greater power to envisage a world decolonized. Movement—physical, political, cultural—often happens from the margins.

Rodrigo Moura finds in Brazilian painters of the vernacular world of everyday work the beginnings of a collective energy of change. Nurtured by a growing labor movement, they found the confidence to claim an indigenous ownership of culture, one that transformed Brazil from a colonial society of Europe to one that summoned recognition by nationalizing institutions of art as they grappled with the inherited canons of modernism. These artists vaulted across the considerable class divisions within Brazil, and the legacies of a very elitist artworld, to take on high art institutions.

In these three bodies of work we glimpse the transformative potential of artwork that exists on the margins: the power—as Santos Reinbolt—to paint the garbage can, and the world, in different colors; to express a creative pride that pushes against the restrictions of class; to give rise to a new transnational politics of identity shaped by migratory labor; and to draw national culture toward a recognition of its own material and cultural base.

Self-taught artists working outside the boundaries of the art world, these papers suggest, are more attuned to the originating conditions of modernity, driven, as Paul Gilroy and others have argued, by uprootedness and mobility. How does that begin to redefine modernism itself more fully as a set of value hierarchies and institutions that need to be interrogated in relation to the powerful authority of vernacular experience?

Watch a recording of this presentation here.

Rethinking John Dunkley: The Black Geographies of a Subaltern Modernism

NICOLE SMYTHE-JOHNSON

Independent Curator

John Dunkley, (1891–1947). *Frog Among the Rocks,* n.d. Mixed media on plywood, 20 x 16 in. Private collection.

I have never been sure what to make of John Dunkley's *Going to Market*. In an oeuvre of strange paintings, it is among the strangest. In the foreground, a dark-skinned man stands behind a donkey, looking wearily out from under the brim of his hat. His arm rests on the back of the donkey who is loaded with a basket. The figure is not rendered in great detail. The black lines depicting his facial features are barely visible against his almost equally black skin, and we cannot tell what is in the basket. But details are unnecessary. The "native man with donkey" has been a trope of Jamaican representation since the 1890s and "effort[s] by the colonial government and tourism interests to constitute a new idea of Jamaica."

Art historian Krista Thompson introduces her study of early photography in the Anglophone Caribbean, *An Eye for the Tropics*, with her encounter with a contemporary staging of the "man and donkey" at Dunn's River Falls, a tourist attraction on Jamaica's north coast. The passage indicates both the persistence of "tropicalized" representations from this late nineteenth and early twentieth century period, and the specifically photographic nature of such images. She writes:

The "native man with donkey" was a stock character in many photographic representations of the Anglophone Caribbean taken during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth. The icon had been imprinted on numerous photographs and postcards since the start of the tourism industry in the 1890s [...] More than a century later, the man at Dunn's River Falls made his living by transforming himself and his donkey into this age-old image (itself likely based on past representations) in order to elicit the interest of tourists, who would then, in turn, render him into yet another photographic image.[1]

Born in 1891, just over two generations after the emancipation proclamation in the British colonies in 1834, Dunkley came of age in a time of transition and economic uncertainty. With the decline of King Sugar, local elites were looking for a new economic vision for the island. If Jamaica was no longer a sugar plantation colony powered by slavery, what was it? The banana industry, which would come to be known as Green Gold, and tourism became important ingredients in answering that question. Led by Henry Blake, the island's British governor from 1889–1897, they called this vision "the New Jamaica". Photography was an important tool in constructing and presenting the fertile, civilised, and open-for-business New Jamaica that the colonial government hoped to bring into being.

New Jamaica representations were an effort to quell the post-emancipation fears of "potential travellers and white settlers," who saw "the tropics and the Caribbean as places of wild nature and unruly natives." Instead, New Jamaica imagery presented the island as potentially profitable for investors and "tamed, safe and artfully cultivated" for tourists.[2] New Jamaica representations were part of a pictorial program that transformed the American tropics from "nature at her most dangerous," the "white man's grave," to nature at her "most loving," paradise.[3]

Referencing *Coconut Palms* by A. Duperly and Sons and James Johnston's *Scene on the Rio Cobre*, photographs used to market Jamaica in a widely sold album and a travelling lantern show respectively, Thompson summarizes the features and function of New Jamaica imagery:

Photographs and written accounts of the New Jamaica frequently described, visualised, or fetishized parts of the island's vegetation that displayed signs of cultivation—generally aspects of the landscape that had been overhauled and transplanted by various colonial regimes and North American and British business interests for profit. Such images naturalized the island's past and present plantation landscapes and attendant agricultural products of colonial cultivation as indigenous, aesthetically pleasing, and characteristic parts of the island's environment.[4]

She then traces the history of New Jamaica imagery to two visual genres used in earlier representations of Jamaica: imperial picturesque landscapes of the late eighteenth century and naturalist painting of the nineteenth century. The imperial picturesque emerged in Jamaica at the height of sugar production in the colony, a period of great economic prosperity for Jamaica's plantocracy but also of emerging abolitionist activism within England. Imperial picturesque landscapes were generally commissioned by planters, who hired British painters to produce imagery that might counter the flood of abolitionist imagery being produced in England at that time, the infamous diagram of the "Brookes" slave ship (1787) being among the best known of these.

In the imperial picturesque, the genre's commitment to the depiction of "natural" spaces, untouched by human cultivation, was reconciled with the highly constructed landscape of the sugar plantation. Plantation landscapes were not only shaped by fields of sugarcane, and later bananas, they were also defined by the many other plants that were brought to Jamaica as part of colonial transplantation projects. These plants have become, and remain, emblematic of the island's tropicality: royal palms, coconut palms, citrus, mangoes, tamarind, banana, hibiscus, and even sugar were all brought to Jamaica from other parts of the globe between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The history of those transplantations and the indigenous environments that were razed to produce them are part of the "violent relandscaping" that went hand-in-hand with the colonial project.

Yet imperial picturesque paintings, like *View of Port Maria* by British artist James Hakewill (1778–1843), presented the violently overhauled landscape as natural and, in fact, nature's most perfectly imaginable manifestation. This had the dual outcomes of naturalizing what Michael Dash has called "the radical modernization from the outside," that was the colonial project, and allowing planters to claim "credit for their roles in realizing the landscape's ideal form."[5] The genre's preference for the "loitering peasant" over the "industrious mechanic" in the British context, also meant that through the picturesque lens, the enslaved were represented at ease, their conditions "equal to or superior to the generality of the working classes of the free communities of Europe," as Hakewill would note in his "few remarks on the moral condition" of Jamaica, which accompanied his *A Picturesque Tour of the Island of Jamaica* (1825).[6]

In naturalist paintings of the nineteenth century—the second progenitor of New Jamaica imagery—we find images of Jamaican flora with attention to the peculiar and eccentric presented as typical through their systemization in naturalist grids. The impact of this in Jamaica, but also throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, was a form of representation that reinforced fantasies of the tropics, heightening and exoticizing the island's vegetation, while legitimizing tropical fantasies as reality through their interpretation as "scientific, objective and real." British painter Marianne North considered herself, "a naturalist who studied nature through paint."[7] And when American artist John Martin Heade exhibited his paintings of Jamaica in Boston, a heated debate over the veracity of the images unfolded, with one reviewer concluding that Heade's images presented, "Nature as it *is* in the tropics."[8]

These two earlier forms of representation come together and are translated into photography in images of the New Jamaica. In the aftermath of emancipation, banana plantations replaced sugar ones and tourism, facilitated by easier travel and often funded by agricultural interests, became an important nascent industry. The United Fruit Company, which by 1900 owned approximately 12,266 acres in Jamaica, built the Titchfield Hotel in 1897 and bought the Myrtle Bank Hotel in Kingston in 1918. British competitor, Elder, Dempster and Company also owned the Constant Spring Hotel in Kingston and set up the Imperial Direct Line, a cargo and passenger service to Liverpool, hoping to compete with the United Fruit Company's Great White Fleet. Jamaica's new elite—a combination of British colonial administrators, mercantile elite, and British and North

American business interests— deployed the visual vocabulary inherited from imperial picturesque and naturalist paintings, through the new form of photography. Thompson notes that:

[w]here the picturesque New Jamaica differed most dramatically from the imperial picturesque was not in picturing tropical commodities but in being commodities. The photographs presented the island's newest agricultural imports while simultaneously fulfilling the role of tourism's product.[9]

Going to Market participates in that economy of representations of Jamaica. It is one of several Dunkley paintings that seems to reference postcards or other mass media photography drawing on the New Jamaica visual vocabulary. We have the defined background, middle distance and foreground, a path that leads the viewer through them and the "loitering peasant" of picturesque representation. Yet the painting is not reminiscent of Hakewill's *View of Port Maria*. *Going to Market* has a limited palette of black, white, green, reddish brown and mustard yellow, consistent with most of Dunkley's oeuvre, and seems informed by hand-colored photography of the period. The painting's harsh and unnatural rendering of light also suggests photography, perhaps a camera's flash, placing it firmly in New Jamaica territory.

Yet, where most of the painting borrows from New Jamaican tropes there is also a deliberate disruption of that representational strategy. The path that draws the eye up the canvas and into the image is abruptly cut off by a separate field, marked off with a white chalk-like line, and occupied by a cactus plant that seems to burst forth from nowhere. The kinds of vegetation in the rest of the painting, the loose textural forms on the hill, the philodendron-like leaves of the hedge, and the mint-green bush in the bottom right corner, are typical of Dunkley's paintings. They occur in *Frog Among the Rocks* and *Woodland*, for example, but the cactus is an unusual and jarring aberration. Any attempt to integrate it with the rest of the scene is thwarted by the white line that splits the upper half of the painting in two. Where the rest of the image depicts an outdoor landscape, the yellow and blue sky in the top left hand corner suggesting daytime, the cactus is surrounded by a featureless darkness, as though photographed in a studio.

For a long time, I dismissed this small, strange painting. Was it incomplete? Had Dunkley been in the process of painting over the more conventional landscape but never finished the transformation? It was not until I was presenting my dissertation prospectus during a seminar in Latin American history, in which I was the only participant who was not from the Spanish-speaking Americas, that a Mexican colleague pointed out that the cactus reminded him of the *nopal* in the Mexican coat of arms.

The *opuntia* cactus, also known as prickly pear, *tuna* or *nopal*, from the Nahuatl word *nōpalli*, is distinguished by its red fruit. It is indigenous to the Americas and is most common in the central and western regions of Mexico and the arid and drought-prone Western and South-Central U.S. where the leaves and fruit are part of regional cuisine and folklore. While Jamaica hosts an array of ecosystems, including sandy coastal environments where *opuntia* might grow, cacti are not widespread in Jamaica, nor are they part of the way the island has been traditionally pictured. That is to say, cacti are not among the colonial transplants that have come to index tropicality like palms, bananas, mangoes and so on.

They do, however, have place-making status in Central America. The plant's inclusion in the Mexican coat of arms refers to the story of the founding of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Mexica empire built on the site of modern-day Mexico City. The story goes that the Mexica deity, Huitzilopochtli told the then-nomadic Mexica to look for an eagle devouring a snake perched on a prickly pear cactus, and that should be the site of their new city. Though this story positions the *nopal* within Mexican history, it is important to note that the nopal is indigenous to and found throughout the Americas. It is a plant that

has been incorporated into a national myth, but its significance precedes and exceeds the nation state.

Dunkley's representation of the *nopal*, with its naturalist overtones– the incongruent scale, the detailed rendering of its prickly pads and flower-like fruits– invites attention to and investigation of the plant's physiology and significance. If naturalist painting renders the typical through depictions of the specific, one wonders: where is this plant typical? A close look at this small painting—it is only around 20 by 14 inches—also rewards with a stray pad off the lower right of the cactus. It grows from a patch of dark green, almost as dark as the black around it. The green seems to emerge from the black, an underlayer left unpainted so that we might see through. Are there other cacti back there in the darkness? What hole is this cactus growing through? And what is it a hole in?

To think about naturalist painting's deployment in the tropics also brings the whole history of naturalist travel to the New World into the frame. Since as early as 16 years after the British claimed possession of Jamaica in 1655, naturalists ventured to the region. The region here extends beyond the islands of the Caribbean or the British West Indies. After his sojourn in Jamaica, Heade would continue onto Brazil, and in summarizing Nancy Stepan's *Picturing Tropical Nature*, Thompson discusses Latin America and the Caribbean as one region, noting that both areas "held a particular allure for naturalists, as the region was singled out as a locale in which nature reigned supreme and manifested itself in ways completely different from vegetation in temperate zones."[10]

The picturesque elements of the painting also operate through their genre to conjure the space of the tropical Americas. There too, however, the representative strategy precedes and exceeds national boundary and disciplinary subfield. As Thompson points out, the roots of the picturesque reach back through eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain to painters of seventeenth century Italian landscapes: Claude Lorrain (1600–1682), Nicholas Poussin (1594–1665), and Salvator Rosa (1615–1673). The "native man with donkey trope" also has currency throughout the tropical Americas. While browsing eBay using the search term "Jamaica native man with donkey postcard," the website's algorithm, apparently "inspired" by my views, offered a postcard titled, "Vintage 1930's RPPC Postcard Boy with a Donkey Adobe Hut Small Town Mexico" alongside "Local Transportation Through Bamboo Grove Jamaica, British West Indies Postcard." Thereafter, I was bombarded with multiple "native man with donkey" postcards from Mexico. Yet, as Catherine Cocks reminds us in her discussion of the use of "tropical" to refer to places that do not lie between the Tropic of Cancer and Capricorn, "tropical" is not a strictly geographic designation: it refers to places with tropical traits, that is "waving palms, slothful negros, odd tropical fruits, and early venturings on the part of buccaneers from Spain'...". Cocks suggests the term "Southland" to refer to "the global tourist south," which extends across "Florida, Southern California, Mexico and the Caribbean."[11]

My point then is not to suggest that Dunkley was referencing Mexico specifically, though he could have been. (Jamaican newspapers reported on the Mexican Revolution regularly and Cassie Dunkley tells us that Dunkley travelled to "England, Scotland, North and South America and numerous other places" as a sailor.) I focus my discussion on this painting because talking about it demonstrates the kind of analysis that thinking with Dunkley requires. In order to take this strange painting seriously, to refuse to write it off as an error or a bit of whimsy on Dunkley's part, requires thinking across the well-maintained boundary between Latin American and U.S. history and art history. It requires conjuring a frame in which this painting might make sense. And, in this painting that makes such deliberate use of representational strategies long used for place-making, I'm drawn to thinking about what geography it renders.

I argue that it is a black geography. To make this clear, let us look briefly at the geographies generally considered in scholarship on inter-war modernism in

the Americas. Generally American modernists were engaged in a Transatlantic conversation, developing homegrown modernisms in response to the hegemony of European modernism, which they often encountered through travel. This is true if you look north, as Wanda Corn's *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935* does, tracing the Transatlantic tensions and connections that fed the circle of early U.S. modernists who gathered around Alfred Stieglitz. It is also true in Central and South America, where canonical modernists like Mexico's Diego Rivera (1886–1957), Brazil's Tarsila Do Amaral (1886–1973) and Uruguayan Joaquín Torres García (1874–1949) all studied in Europe before returning home to spearhead Mexican Muralism, *Anthropophagia*, and Universal Constructivism respectively. The north and south are also generally discussed separately.

Dunkley, on the other hand, was a part of a generation of West Indians whose lives were shaped by Circum-Caribbean travel. At the crossroads between Central America, the U.S. and Europe since the nineteenth century, seventeen steamship lines passed through the port of Kingston by the turn of the century.[12] Between 1904 and 1914 over 100,000 Jamaicans travelled to or through the isthmian port of Colón, many on their way to work on the U.S.-backed construction of the Panama Canal, but also further afield to Chiriquí and Bocas del Toro in Panama, San Juan del Sur and Bluefields in Nicaragua, Tela in Honduras, and Guatemala, Mexico and New Orleans to the north, or south to Santa Marta in Colombia and cities in Venezuela, Ecuador and Brazil.[13] Sixty thousand Jamaicans went to Cuba between 1919 and 1921, when post-war U.S. investment in Cuban sugar increased prices and attracted migrant labour from across the West Indies[14] (this out of a population of just over 830,000 in 1911).[15] As historian Lara Putnam tells us, it was "a mobile world."[16]

It was also a time of massive political change. Putnam describes the Circum-Caribbean migratory sphere as defined by "working-class men and women who left their islands of birth at the margins of the British Empire at the dawn of the twentieth century to seek work in ports and plantations at the leading edge of a new empire, the informal empire of the United States."[17] This mobile geography, though in many ways peripheral, was key to the rise of black internationalisms from Garvey to Malcolm X. Although these migrant laborers "[f]rom the point of view of one imperial state (the British Empire), one neo-imperial state (the U.S. government), and many republican states (of the Spanish-speaking circum-Caribbean) were utterly marginal", Putnam notes that:

of the forty key "political leaders" from across "Africa and the Diaspora" whom Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood selected as central to "Pan-African History" from 1787 to the present, fully one-fourth were born in the British Caribbean during the [late nineteenth and early twentieth century] and came of age in the heyday of the Circum-Caribbean migratory sphere.[18]

In Jamaica, specifically, Circum-Caribbean returnees were key protagonists of social movements foundational to Jamaican nation formation, including the birth of Rastafari and the 1938 Labour Rebellion, both of which Dunkley's paintings reference.

The awkwardness of this painting then makes sense when we consider Alex A. Moulton and Inge Salo's summary of black geographies scholarship:

grappling with the geographies of blackness is not merely a matter of excavating Black landscapes overlaid by Eurocentric landscape histories, but also of explicating how such landscapes have been conceived of as a "nowhere" or "outside"...[19]

This painting is strange because it is a depiction of the "nowhere" that linked Jamaica with not just Mexico, or even Central America, but the Americas at large. The Circum-Caribbean migratory sphere that appears in Dunkley's oeuvre—in *Going to Market*,

Banana Plantation, *Cuban Scenery*, *Panama Scenery*, *President Roosevelt Gazed at Portland Bight*, in which he appears critical of American interest in Jamaica, and in *Jerboa*, which is believed to reference the divisional insignia of the British Eighth Army's 7th Armoured Division (whose victories were reported on in the *Daily Gleaner* in August 1944)—are coordinates of that black geography. This geography provides the grounds for Dunkley's subaltern modernism, one articulated not from the perspective of a metaphorical cultural vanguard but the literal vanguard of American modernity that is, the men and women who worked the plantations and built the railroads, telegraph lines, and canals that shaped American modernity.

Watch a recording of this presentation here.

1 Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*, Duke University Press: Durham (2006), 2-3.

2 Krista A. Thompson, "Object Lesson 21: Castleton Garden 1908," *Victorian Jamaica*, eds. Tim Barringer, Wayne Modest, Duke University Press: Durham (2018), 115.

3 Catherine Cocks, *Tropical Whites: The Rise of the Tourist South in the Americas*, University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia (2013), 4.

4 Thompson, *Eye for the Tropics*, 30.

5 Thompson, *Eye for the Tropics*, 40 & 42.

6 Ibid, 36, 39 & 38.

7 Thompson, *Eye for the Tropics*, 45.

8 Ibid, 46.

9 Thompson, *Eye for the Tropics*, 58.

10 Thompson, *Eye for the Tropics*, 42.

11 Catherine Cocks, *Tropical Whites*, 2.

12 Olive Senior "On the Edge of the Abyss: John Dunkley as Diasporic Subject," John Dunkley: Neither Day nor Night, Perez Art Museum Miami and DelMonico Books-Prestel: Miami and Munich, London, New York (2017), 72.

13 Ibid, 72.

14 Ibid, 73.

15 Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age*. The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill (2013), 29.

16 Ibid, 23.

17 Ibid, 1.

18 Putnam, *Radical Moves*, 4.

19 Alex A. Moulton and Inge Salo, "Black Geographies and Black Ecologies as Insurgent Ecocriticism," *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 13 (2022): 156–174, 159.

A Global Naïve? Notes on the Brazilian Case

RODRIGO MOURA

Chief Curator, El Museo del Barrio

Sénèque Obin (1893–1977), *Marché Clugny* [Clugny Market], 1966. Oil on Masonite, 24 x 30 in. Gift of Richard and Erna Flagg M1991.145. Photo: Efraim Lev-er.

Thank you to everyone in the American Folk Art Museum for the invitation to be here today and share with you about my interest in the field of Self-Taught Modernism, especially in Brazil, where I did some research and curated exhibitions around the theme, some of which we'll discuss during this talk today.

I would like to start the presentation by sharing a project titled *Popular Painters and Other Visionaries*, that I presented at El Museo del Barrio where I currently serve as Chief Curator. This segment will serve as the opening chapter of this presentation, after which I will delve into specific cases within the Brazilian context.

Popular Painters and Other Visionaries at the Museo del Barrio marked one of my initial exhibition proposals upon joining the museum. It stemmed from a comprehensive exploration of the museum's collection and a deep dive into the knowledge about the holdings of El Museo and mid-20th century art. Originally conceived as a collection-only exhibition slated for 2021, the unforeseen challenges posed by the pandemic prompted us to adapt our approach, resulting in the transformation of the exhibition into an online showcase.

The exhibition was first planned as a collections show, and then it turned into an online exhibition, including virtual ones from museums and private collections. This transition is particularly interesting when considering El Museo's relationship with modern art. In contrast to museums in New York City and elsewhere, El Museo does not boast a canonical collection of modern art. So because it's a museum that doesn't commit to collecting from a specific time period or art movement, it became a museum that collected material in a way that was completely different from other museums. I was especially interested in these holdings and proposed to do the show that turned into this online project.

I will provide a brief overview of the associations proposed in the show: The exhibition featured approximately 30 schooled and self-taught artists who worked in different parts of the Americas in the Caribbean from the 1930s to the 1970s. The exhibition departs from the conventional term "popular painters," to identify artists working on the margins of modernism and the mainstream art world. The narrative thread of the exhibition was woven through popular visual sources. That slide we're seeing now shows the physical manifestation of the exhibition when we brought it back to the brick-and-mortar setting in 2021. Subsequently, a third version emerged, beyond the online version, incorporating works from the collection and loans. These works were organized into thematic sections exploring labor, daily life, festivities, religion, vernacular architecture, and bodily representations. In addition to these themes, artists were presented in monographic sections, Andrés Curruchich, Martín Ramírez, José Bernardo Cardoso Jr., and Felipe Jesus Consalvos.

A common thread throughout the show was the shared experience of diaspora, whether it's African populations in the New World, Latin American and Caribbean communities in the United States, and the displacement of Amerindian populations within their own territories in the Americas. The exhibition served as a reflection of the impact of immigration, exclusion, marginalization, as well as themes of indigeneity, self-determination, and autobiography. Many of these artists and their aesthetic language have been described as "naïve" or "primitive," terms we have rejected as pejorative. Instead, we used "popular painters" as a unifying concept to look at all the artists that were working simultaneously between the 1930s through the late-1960s in the margins of modernism in different parts of the Americas.

In this installation view, moving from left to right, we encounter the works of Horace Pippin (United States), Micius Stephane (Haiti), and Heitor dos Prazeres (Brazil), three artists from the African diaspora in the Americas working in different languages, but dealing with similar interests in their autobiographies and in their lived experiences. In another section of the exhibition, we find works by Afro-Brazilian Rafael Borjes de Oliveira and artists associated with the

Port-au-Prince School of Painting—Jacques-Richard Chéry, Pierre Joseph Valcin, and Rigaud Benoît. Noteworthy is the shared context within which these three Haitian artists operate, rooted in Afro-diasporic religion and spirituality and how they share this with Borjes de Oliveira, who was as Candomblé priest in Salvador, Bahia. So this is a point in common amongst them, as practitioners and artists that very early on in modern history, have started to infuse these spiritual experiences and perspectives into their painting practices.

On the left we have de Oliveira's "Oshosi Hunting," an imagined scene of a hunting, likely a painting he created for his ritual site. On the right, we have different depictions of rituals as well as mystical visions by three Haitian artists.

On the next slide, this is part of the same section of the exhibition where we have the works of Minnie Evans, Louisiane Saint Fleurant, and Consuelo González Amézcua, three female artists working in the United States and the Caribbean in dialogue with a common interest in embellishment and decorative languages to represent empowered female figures in their work.

In the context of my work in Brazil, I served as an adjunct curator of Brazilian art at The Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP). During this tenure, I curated several exhibitions that focused on self-taught Brazilian artists, particularly those active in the 1940s and 50s. Part of my presentation will highlight some of the artists that were featured in the Museum's program, and some others who were part of a whole movement of reconsideration on the part of the current Brazilian scene— a collective reconsideration of artists who played a prominent role among Brazilian modernists from the late 1930s through the 1950s. These artists became disconnected and, in many cases, were marginalized or overlooked in more official art historical narratives.

I will start with José Antonio da Silva, an artist from the rural regions of the State of São Paulo who worked on cotton plantations in the countryside. His story follows a recurring structure of interaction, between the mainstream and so-called self-taught artists, where the artists get "discovered" by a white, male critic from a mainstream structure. In the case of da Silva, he was showing his work in his hometown in an exhibition in 1946, and his paintings caught the attention of critics, such as Lourival Gomes Machados and Paulo Mendes de Almeida, who were serving as jurors to that exhibition and immediately after he starts to show in São Paulo. One year later, he had a show at MASP, and they acquired his work, and in 1949 the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo published his book, *Romance da Minha Vida* [The Novel of My Life], an autobiography written when he was 40 narrating his upbringing and how he became an artist.

But da Silva is a particularly intriguing artist because he was also very involved with the São Paulo Biennial. Both the Museum of Modern Art and the MASP initially demonstrated interest in self-taught artists, with da Silva being an early example. The São Paulo Biennial in 1951 played a pivotal role in promoting and showcasing self-taught artists. It was also an interesting way of negotiating between the so-called fine arts and more Eurocentric artists, or circuits—and these [self-taught] artists. Years later, da Silva became very upset that he was being excluded from such exhibitions and started to produce self-portraits in which he represented himself with these sayings— the text accompanying his figures. Sometimes, he represented the critics or jurors. One notable self-portrait features the statement, "I hate São Paulo Biennials." On the right, a detailed self-portrait shows his mouth covered with the caption: "Look at this mouth. It was the biennial that tied it up." He was also referring to this dance, and how sometimes there's not necessarily a very harmonious relationship between the artists and the institutions, especially in the case of da Silva and the São Paulo Biennial.

Now we can talk about Agostinho Batista de Freitas, son of immigrants from the Madeira Islands, in Portugal. He worked many years as an electrician and lived in the same neighborhood in the outskirts of

São Paulo. There's a very interesting myth of origin in the history of Batista de Freitas.

The images here showcase one of his famous aerial views of San Paolo on the left, while on the right, we have installation views of the exhibition, "Agostinho Batista de Freitas in São Paulo," that I co-curated in 2016 with Fernando Oliva, another curator at MASP. We see there the very beautiful museography that Lina Bo Bardi, one of the creators of MASP, and an exhibition designer, an architect, a writer, and thinker, she designed this exhibition display—this museography—for a Portinari exhibition presented in MASP in 1970, and we recreated it for the Agostinho Batista de Freitas exhibition almost 50 years later.

Agostinho's relationship with MASP unfolds with Lina's husband and a MASP founder, Pietro Maria Bardi. Bardi encountered a young man selling paintings on the street, and he was absolutely fascinated, "Oh, I will grant you access to the rooftop of a very tall building—the Martinelli in downtown São Paulo (which is also an icon of the modernization of the city)—and if you paint a very nice picture, if you succeed, I'll give you a show the museum." This is a very strong metaphor, of how Bardi wanted to "elevate" his work.

And Batista de Freitas succeeded! He had a show in 1953 at MASP. I think several so-called self-taught artists had their shows at the beginning of the museum, as both Bardi and Lina were champions of self-taught artists. They were part of what Pietro Maria Bardi formulated as the notion of a museum without adjectives: no more *modern*, not *fine* arts, for instance. Instead, they were influenced by the idea that different forms of art, and different artists coming from different backgrounds could coexist under this concept of a museum.

In the next slide, we are presented with one of the renowned views that was part of MASP's show in 1953—a later aerial depiction of São Paulo that became closely identified with Freitas's work. What adds an intriguing layer to this narrative is that the painting created in response to the challenge that Bardi proposed to him on the street never entered the collection of the museum. Instead, it became part of Bardi's private collection, and the museum didn't collect the work by Freitas until the exhibition we created in 2016.

Turning to Alfredo Volpi, an artist who was also included in the exhibition *Popular Painters and Other Visionaries* and started to show his work in the 1930s. He was part of a different group, the so-called "labor" or working-class vanguard in São Paulo group, that was comprised of all-immigrant artists. Volpi was born in Lucca, Italy and immigrated to São Paulo very young and lived there his entire life. But he was producing this figurative work until the 1950s and he had a very interesting transition between styles, and his work became more essentialized, more simplified, and more abstract. This ultimately rendered him a sort of sacred cow of geometric abstraction in the context of Brazilian art. This 1955 facade, a prominent piece within Freitas's body of work, stands out for its striking aesthetics. Notably, the narrative elements that characterized some of his earlier pieces seem to vanish. Instead, the work takes on a more modern sensibility, aligning with the evolving discussions and artistic discourse in Brazil during the period following the establishment of the São Paulo Biennial in 1951. This shift reflects the dynamic and transformative nature of artistic dialogue and experimentation within the Brazilian cultural landscape during that time — however Volpi never abandoned his working-class origins and even his more abstract works are still referencing vernacular architecture and religious iconography. In 1957 Volpi had a show at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio where Mario Pedrosa, who was already a very influential critic, and had been for many years a big champion of avant garde in Rio, said that Volpi is "the master of his time."

For the last part of the presentation we will focus on Djanira da Motta e Silva, who signed her paintings only "Djanira," which is why we called her Djanira in the title of the exhibition of her work at MASP, in 2019. We see again installation views, a lot of labor

scenes both from artisanal trades, the rural setting, as well as—this wall on the bottom—her very late period, where we see her representations of the mining industry and the mining laborers, both in iron ore and charcoal in different regions of Brazil. Djanira had a drive to travel, and most of her paintings were the result of her traveling through Brazil and questioning of the Brazilian landscape. Pedrosa wrote twice about Djanira, once in the 1940s, once again in 1958, and on the second time he revisited the work of Djanira he asked, what happened? What is left of her primitivism?

The dynamic between critics and self-taught artists takes center stage once again in the case of Djanira. Djanira had almost no training, taking very few drawing classes in Rio. She was a seamstress and cooked at a boarding house. Residing in Santa Teresa, a vibrant artistic neighborhood in Rio during the Second World War, likely contributed to shaping her artistic sensibilities. Djanira is therefore not only self-taught, but she's self-made.

She also infused a lot of identity tropes in her work. So, we're seeing now [image], just to show how she was very aware of the popular thematic in modern movements in Brazil of the 1920s and 30s, and was somehow pushing forward and making these popular themes the core of her work. Here we see *Central Park, New York* [image] which recalls her brief, but very meaningful, sojourn in New York. Djanira arrived in New York in 1945 with no money at all, but she was following another Brazilian painter, Milton Dacosta as they were in a romantic relationship at the time, and Dacosta had won a travel prize of the Brazilian salons, where Djanira had showed between 1940 and 1945. Dacosta ended up leaving New York to travel to Portugal. It was still very difficult to travel to Europe at that time, so Djanira stayed in New York for almost three years. Maria Martins, the renowned sculptor, was also in New York at the time and proved to be a crucial source of support for Djanira. Djanira faced very difficult circumstances during her stay here, but she produced a number of works and this is a fabulous painting—*Central Park*—created during that time.

She had a show at the New School of Social Research and her archives are at Funarte, the Fundação Nacional de Artes (National Arts Foundation) in Rio, another institution created in the 1940s in Brazil. These include the clipping of her show in *Art Digest*, and also the little leaflet that was produced for that show. This final painting is an example of how she continued to represent labor in a rural Brazilian setting, but also brought it together in the mid- to late- 1950s to a more geometric and constructivist style.

Watch a recording of this presentation here.

Mother-Taught: Embellishing Madalena's Threads

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON

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Rosie Lee Tompkins, also known as Effie Mae Howard (1936–2006) with one of her quilts. Collection Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive

In a photographic portrait of the Brazilian textile artist Madalena Santos Reinbolt (1917–1977), she is pictured alongside a pile of her embroidered creations. She is wearing a busy, patterned garment that resonates with the designs next to her. Her personal adornment, festooned with jewelry around her neck, suggests a close relationship between her own style of dress and the embroideries she created. In this essay, I examine how Santos Reinbolt's needlework emerges from material entanglements of race, class, gender, and employment. particularly with regard to her hands-on training that I refer to as "mother-taught." I also discuss how embellishment as a method of theoretical speculation is necessary when the only historical records we have are compromised, missing, or partial.

For most of her life, Santos Reinbolt was a housecleaner and a cook for white households in metropolitan areas.[1] She used needlework, especially embroidery, as a way to make a living, generating expressive culture works that were distinctly entangled with the labor it took to produce them. Though she had explored a variety of creative practices since she was a young child, including painting, in 1969 she abruptly stopped using paint and started embroidering, often using acrylic wool yarn on burlap to create dazzlingly complex designs. The shift from using a brush to a needle occurred relatively late in her life, when she was 50 years old.

But in fact, this shift in medium was less a rupture than a return, for Santos Reinbolt had grown up steeped in textile handicrafts during her childhood in the 1920s and 1930s on a farm in Bahia, where her mother spun cotton, sewed clothes, and produced lace alongside her work in pottery. (Bahia, in the northeast of Brazil, was the locus of the Afro-Atlantic slave trade and remains a vital center of Black culture.) Santos Reinbolt's "wool pictures," as they are often called, depict vignettes from her agrarian past in which human figures, animals, plants, and structures from the built environment create densely interlocking scenes. Many of her fibrous ravels of thread gesture towards landscapes and communal life, though sometimes, they are difficult to entirely decipher. More rarely, they feature colorful geometric shapes that are reminiscent of the patterns found on everyday rugs, blankets, and clothing—abstracted patterns that set the stage (however disavowed) for the elite, rarified modernist art that hung on the walls in the wealthy urban houses where, starting at age 20, she worked as a live-in maid.

Santos Reinbolt's energetic embroideries, which she continued to refine for approximately six years until her death, have been noted for their connections to African diasporic traditions and Brazilian folkloric "arte popular" (that is, art making by uncredentialed people, usually marginalized for reasons of race, education, and class). Initially treated as "primitive," with all the term's patronizing and exoticizing fascination, her creative impulse as a Black woman to visually transform the world around her was regarded at first as a distraction by her white lesbian employers, US poet Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979) and her lover, Brazilian architect Lota Macedo Soares (1910–1967), and later, as their "discovery." In a letter from 1952, Bishop wrote:

While we were away the cook took up painting—proving that art only flourishes in leisure time, I guess—and has turned out to be a really wonderful primitive, so we shall probably soon start peddling her on 57th St. & making our fortunes [...]. Lota told her to please clean *the garbage pail—she is half-savage and very dirty, although a fine cook—and ten minutes later we found it painted in violent reds and pinks and blacks.*[3]

Bishop's letters, rife with racist condescension about her employee, track her awareness of Santos Reinbolt's creative practice as one of a determined desire to color the objects around her. Bishop's letters also mention painted stones onto which Santos Reinbolt translated organic, mossy patterns into creatures; these early experiments from the 1950s, including works on paper and rocks, are largely now lost, having been discarded as valueless. While some of her later paintings survive, we must guess about their exact

chronology since there is very little by way of a proper archive about her or her work. (Santos Reinbolt had no children to oversee her legacy; she left no diaries or written accounts of her life; and most of the biographical details we have about her are based on interviews conducted in the 1970s by anthropologist Lélia Coelho Frota.[4])

The poet Bishop expresses some surprise in her maid's talent and immediately lays claims of ownership to it: Santos Reinbolt's natural flair is by turns acknowledged, mocked, and speculatively monetized, all while the artist herself is characterized as relentless in her "violent" besmirching of the garbage can, containing trash that she was triply aligned with as their Black, lower class, female—"very dirty", "half-savage"—house servant. As a live-in worker whose private life was constantly surveilled by her employers, Santos Reinbolt and her activities both in and out of the kitchen were supervised, scrutinized, and policed. She did not have the privilege of doing her non-remunerative labor in a sphere separate from her job. Bishop's phrase about Santos Reinbolt making art during a time of "leisure" is a willful (or negligent) misreading of the economics of this type of domestic employment, when there is virtually no downtime. In fact, her artistic pursuits ultimately interfered with her status as a worker, and she was fired because her churning creativity upset the "peace" of the household.[5]

Santos Reinbolt's change in materials in her artistic work—from paint to textiles—occurred some twenty years after she worked for Bishop and Soares. According to the one account we have of it, in Frota's text, her decisive turn to the needle and burlap sack for her creative visions was precipitated in part by health and hygiene concerns: the smell of paint and the constant handwashing it necessitated became too much for her.[6] But she had always embroidered as a task; mending cloth and ornamenting domestic items such as dish towels were part and parcel of her paid work. Unlike the designs she stitched for her bosses, who sketched out what they wanted, Santos Reinbolt's wool pictures were more free-hand and improvisational, and she explained to Frota, she conceptualized her imagery in her mind rather than plotting them out on the fabric in advance. As her method developed over the six years in which she primarily made embroideries, she approached her compositions in a highly complex fashion, keeping at hand over 150 different needles prepared for use with which she created her elaborate pieces mainly comprised of thickets of straight stitches. Owing to her precarious economic circumstances, she frequently utilized what others discarded, embracing scraps, leftovers, and remainders, including deploying cotton waste bags as her support, a choice that guided the size and rectilinear format of her work. Sometimes fuzzy, tufted elements protrude out from the embroideries, lending sensuous texture to their surfaces.

Santos Reinbolt's needlework has been contextualized within studies of Brazilian tapestries; for instance, a foundational text on the subject from 1978 by Geraldo Edson de Andrade features a detail of a piece by her on the cover.[7] Yet within the annals of normative Eurocentric art history, the term "tapestry" is afforded rather more dignity than is embroidery, in part because tapestries are larger and could be associated with masculinized work rather than the small-scale lapwork of women's sewing. Terming her embroideries "yarn paintings," as they have been descsribed, also demonstrates some of the embarrassment that clings to the word embroidery, as this fancier phrase attempts to remove her handicraft from the material, gendered, and social realities of this lowlier genre and secure it for the contested category of "art."

However, it is imperative for an intersectional feminist art history that we *do* not keep adding embroideries to the canon by exception or by acts of renaming (as in the claim "well actually, she is *painting* but with fiber!") but rather to expand or even dismantle completely the category of "fine art," which was a masculinist Renaissance European invention meant to exclude lower classes, non-white, racialized subjects, and women from its vaunted realms. Marxist feminist

Rozsika Parker's (1945–2010) work on the gendering of embroidery remains invaluable to this conversation, and focused mainly on Britain and a handful of other Western/European sites. Parker's groundbreaking book *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984) argues that, far from an innocent or frivolous hobby, decorative needlework has since medieval times carried multifaceted cultural significance regarding divisions of labor, the policing of the private sphere, and the disciplining of unruly women.[8]

Parker furthermore sees the relationship between stitching and femininity as knotted and reciprocal, claiming that, in many regards, the category of "woman" was bound up in economic transformations around the organization of the household in which embroidery played a central, rather than peripheral, role. In Parker's account, embroidery emerges as double-edged: both a mechanism of control for women's energies, but also a place for them to express their frustrations and desires, even to foment a radical politics of resistance. She writes, "because of its history and associations embroidery evokes and inculcates femininity in the embroiderer. But it can also lead women to an awareness of the extraordinary constraints of femininity, providing at times a means of negotiating them, and at other times provoking the desire to escape."[9] Parker's important work discusses the inculcation of (and resistance to) femininity within the so-called private sphere, but this does not fully account for a racialized house servant like Santos Reinbolt who did not have the luxury of a division between public and private, for she lived where she worked with constant monitoring of her activities.

Beyond Britain, in many places around the world, stitching has been coded as a gendered-female form and it continues in the present day to be associated primarily with women's work and/or queer making, whether we are discussing elegant 19th-century Punjabi *phulkaris* ("flower-craft"), Indigenous needlework like the reverse-appliqué Guna *molas* found in Panama that are created by women, the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt founded in the US in the 1980s, or the global early-twenty-first-century trans and feminist embrace of cross-stitch.[10] Thus, while it is important to situate Santos Reinbolt's contributions within the literature on Brazilian textiles, she should not be isolated in her activities or treated as wholly removed from long histories of women in multiple national contexts working with embroidery in their homes and communities.

These are makers who largely do not consider themselves to be participating in a practice of art, and such makers have been heralded by a number of competing terms, including folk, self-taught, and outsider. Because I recognize the important pedagogical role played by mothers, grandmothers, and aunts in transmitting such needlework techniques, I reject the term "self-taught" when discussing these women, for that term erases the profoundly gendered collective teachings passed down within households. Most people who embroider do not in any way teach themselves, but are part of larger multigenerational networks of highly skilled transmission and learning. Thus, I prefer the term *mother-taught* as a way to honor matrilinear training. (A mother need not identify as a woman; RuPaul, for instance, is a drag mother who insists upon the importance of sewing for queer and trans survival.)

What is more, Santos Reinbolt also participated in aesthetic developments around the needle-based handicrafts, like quilting, appliqué, and sewing, created by those who identify as artists. Starting in the late 1960s and continuing today, many self-identified feminist and queer artists have reclaimed textile making from its marginalized status as minor décor; this movement began in just the moment that Santos Reinbolt herself embraced embroidery, though likely for very different reasons. I can only gesture to some of the many figures from around the world whose work provides a rich set of comparisons for Santos Reinbolt's textiles: the large-scale embroideries of Chilean musician and activist Violeta Parra (1917–1967), the *femmage* of Jewish-American artist Miriam Schapiro (1923–2015), the queer stitches of Brazilian Leonilson (1957–1993), the *trapuntos* of Philippines-

born Pacita Abad (1946–2004), the embellished blankets of the Native American artist Marie Watt (1967–), the hand-beaded *drapo Vodou* of Haitian artist Myrlande Constant (1968–), the northern landscapes of Sámi artist Britta Marakatt-Labba (1951–), the dangling-thread pornographic embroideries of Egyptian Ghada Amer (1963–), and the tangled textures of Brazilian Rosana Paulino (1967–). Some of these figures were active when Santos Reinbolt was, in the early 1970s, while others have emerged more recently. All turn to the tactility of thread in their work and to fiber's unique ability to conjure bodies through its insistence on hand-working.

In addition to these artistic practices, textile handmaking in the twentieth century has been mobilized by everyday crafters to pay political witness, particularly in circumstances of collective trauma like war, forced migration, and dispossession.[11] Examples of embroidery as a relatively affordable and accessible form of women's testimony proliferate from an array of cultures, including burlap-backed appliqués (*arpilleras*) sewed in Chile during the brutalities of the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973–90), Hmong story clothes that serve as accounts for Laotian refugees in the aftermath of the US war of aggression against Vietnam, and South African embroideries made by Black women in the wake of apartheid.[12] Another recent example of the use of embroidery as a form of activism is its uptake in the anti-war movement against Russian aggression. In the online exhibition *The Code of Presence: Belarusian Protest Embroideries and Textile Patterns* (2022), curator Sasha Razor comments that, like many contemporary political embroidery projects from a range of regions, Belarusian protest embroidery since the woman-led uprising of 2020 draws its history from the country's heritage and folk traditions of needlework that can provide "safe avenues for women to express their political views in the face of protest eradication, total oppression, and a community recomposed by mass emigration from the country."[13]

In these situations, mother-taught stitching is recruited not only because its materials are expedient, but because of its tactile qualities and its ability to tell otherwise neglected women's stories; embroidery thus functions as an embodied, alternative archive "from below" that can counter official, dominant narratives. With its many small motions and repetitions, needlework has been seen as soothing or calming, but its primary activity is one of repeated *piercing through*—the multiple punctures of embroidery can also be cathartic, angry, and dissident. The accrual of these little pricks and stabs has the potential to signify in several directions (both pacifying and vehement), and it is not insignificant that when you embellish a fabric you reinforce it, literally making it stronger. Often the only parts of old, fragile fabrics to survive over many centuries of wear or use are the areas that have been embroidered—the extra thread serves as reinforcement).

Within this welter of textile activities from diverse locations, I want to insist upon the important affinities that exist between Santos Reinbolt and other African diasporic female makers. Several authors have gestured to the threads that can be drawn between Santos Reinbolt and contemporary artist Paulino.[14] Santos Reinbolt's consistent return to scenes of the natural world and of the intimacies of Black community life have also productively placed her next to painter Maria Auxiliadora (1935–1974), another Black Brazilian mother-taught artist who left the fertile creative circle of her family for employment as a housekeeper (one of the few paths available of steady employment for Black women in Brazil in the mid-twentieth century). Growing up, Auxiliadora, like Santos Reinbolt, had extensive matrilinear training with textiles, and in her paintings, clothing is especially keenly observed. Along with her depictions of scenes from urban life, Auxiliadora also reveled in the bounty of the Brazilian landscape, with images of feeding chickens and the harvesting of crops.

Both gravitated to non-conventional materials in their artistic practices, from Santos Reinbolt's decorating of garbage cans and rocks to Auxiliadora's use of her own hair to build up relief-like surfaces. Both draw on domestic textile techniques, and in so doing they

underscore their own distance from the hierarchies of "fine" or "high" art which have too often excluded the making of Black women. As writer Mirella Santos Maria notes, "Madalena emphasizes, like Maria Auxiliadora, her own memories and those of the Black men and women who constructed and reconstructed 'other' histories of art in Brazil."[15]

Other fertile connections can be posited between Santos Reinbolt and US Black women, including mother-taught quiltmaker Rosie Lee Tompkins (1936–2006, a so-called "outsider" whose work did not originally circulate in the fine art world) and feminist artist Faith Ringgold (1930–), who in 1980 began making "story quilts" with her mom Willi Posey.[16] Tompkins's vibrantly pieced quilts echo the abstractions of Santos Reinbolt; with their nested squares and optical flickering, they call to mind textile traditions from West Africa and serve as a reminder that abstraction was as rooted in functional objects as it was translated onto canvas by white male modern artists.

In terms of more figurative work, mother-taught artist Ringgold, like Santos Reinbolt, portrays scenes of Black life that include depictions of religious gatherings, such as *Church Picnic Story Quilt* (1988), made from printed fabrics and acrylic paint on cotton canvas. Ringgold's piece shows Black children, men, and women in their Sunday finest feasting on an array of dishes spread on blankets, and frolicking in the green grass. In text, Ringgold spells out how this intergenerational party was hosted by the Freedom Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1909. She revisits this history in her story quilt as a way to emphasize an African American past full of Black thriving and care. The artist (who learned to sew from her mother, a fashion designer and seamstress) pays special attention to her character's self-fashioning, lavishing details on the women's hats, men's ties, and the kids in their trousers and knee socks.

In Santos Reinbolt's embroideries, she sometimes includes quite ordinary and recognizable elements—cows, trees, women in dresses, chickens, flowers, churches. Many of her rural scenes depict a lake around which an array of life is clustered. Yet due to their textured compositions and the intense multi-directionality her stitched lines, which zig and zag with unusual liveliness, they also take on otherworldly qualities. Foreground and background meld into each other, and this is not just a matter of Santos Reinbolt's use of scale and her disregard for conventions of perspective, in which most objects take on equivalent size and are of equal importance across the picture plane. She also typically covered every available part of the backing with a swarm of fibers—there are rarely any spots without something of visual interest—as her bold use of coloration guides viewers' eyes restlessly around her surfaces.

Some of the relationships depicted in Santos Reinbolt's embroideries remain mysterious to me as a viewer; I take this to be an intentional choice on her part, one that is in part driven by her choice of material and medium, but also by an aesthetic, and possibly political, decision to render some boundaries porous. It is not always easy to distinguish if a stitched line is demarcating an outline of a figure or suggesting an energetic aura or spirit. Some of her work imparts the sense that humans are blurring into the atmosphere, or that the sky is dissolving into a mountain, or that a creature is unraveling into an adjacent creature.

Hers is not a universe of precise details or mappable specifics—instead, she conjures moods, the hectic abundance of ranch life teeming with cattle and sheep, the rhythmic excitement of a parade, the night blazing with stars. It is a recognition of the aliveness of land and the feeling of constant, pulsing, unexpected growth, as trees spurt upwards towards the sun and things swirl together in perpetual motion. Unlike the crisply individuated renderings of people and the recognizable portraits found in Ringgold's work, Santos Reinbolt is less interested in facial features and instead depicts faces as schematic and simplified. Her use of black, white, and brown threads for bodies means they are usually recognizably racialized. Santos Reinbolt renders heads as solid

masses, punctuated only with cursory eyes and mouths; for instance, she does not mix her many colored strands together to suggest variegations of Blackness. For these landscapes are not mere bucolic portrayals of an idealized childhood; instead of the whitewashing that is widespread in Brazilian ideologies of race, she acknowledges racial difference, and her jagged bodies and sometimes dissonant chromatic choices "suggest a world of contrasts and tensions."[17] At the same time, she is fascinated by the dynamics of crowds, whose movements are rendered via their off-kilter torsos and wavy lines, or the interplay between humans, assortments of animals, and the landscape. Renato Araújo da Silva notices that figures recur across her embroideries but remain unknown, invoking a kind of "religiosity," as her work takes on the "repetitive impenetrability of mantras, oríkìs, or litanies."[18]

Another model for Santos Reinbolt's impenetrability is found in the work of Afro-Caribbean theorist Édouard Glissant, who wrote influentially about opacity—the right of minoritized subjects to remain outside regimes of surveillance and power structures of knowability—as a key strategy for Black survival. In his *Poetics of Relation* (1990), Glissant recruits a textile metaphor, writing that "opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly, one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures."[19] Though Santos Reinbolt generated recognizable iconography that is grounded in her Bahia roots, her distinctive, tightly compacted style of embroidery scrambles her scenes, jumbling subjects with stitches that sometimes refuse to cohere into full legibility and bleed into abstraction. Her webs of threads suggest productive opacities that refuse the viewer access to all of her components, instead allowing us to linger on her textures.

As mother-taught Black women artists like Santos Reinbolt utilize threads, they do so knowing how intertwined their own histories are with the violence of the textile trade and its reliance on slavery. Cotton in particular has a charged history as a plantation crop, and both Tompkins and Santos Reinbolt grew up participating in the labors of its cultivation. For her part, Auxiliadora painted a picture of harvesting cotton (*Colheita de algodão,* 1973). Attempting to describe the Afro-Atlantic slave trade and its lashing-together of Africa and the Americas, Glissant writes: "The Slave Trade came through the cramped doorway of the slave ship, leaving a wake like that of crawling desert caravans. It might be drawn like this: African countries to the East; the lands of America to the West. This creature is in the image of a fibril."[20] Glissant conceptualizes the interconnectivity between Africa and the Americas as a textile fiber. Santos Reinbolt's practices with needle and thread propose that mending as an act of repair might be a powerful procedure that can suture new histories together and expand upon forcibly occluded narratives about tangible connections between African diasporic functional design and modernist abstractions.

Her actions as an employee might have been highly monitored, but her embroideries demonstrate how she maintained for herself the space of imagination and memory. Santos Reinbolt used needlework to conjure scenes that we might not have full access to as contemporary viewers, but about which she has invited us to speculate. This returns me to the idea of *embellished* or *embroidered* stories (in English, these words are near-synonyms). In this conception, embroidery is not an unnecessary decorative surplus, but a means of taking up space, of extending oneself further into the world, and of strengthening the foundation. We can look to Santos Reinbolt's needlework for a model for how we might embellish art histories—not to deceive or generate fiction (to embellish a story is to give it more frills, to dazzle it up, and could even mean exaggerating to the point of falsifying) but as a way of expanding our purview of what is proper to art history.

Such embellished archives are akin to Saidiya Hartman's notion of "critical fabulation" and are at the same time attentive to the material specificities and textile basis of fabric/ation.[21] Thus embroidering

becomes a way of productively speculating, given a lack of evidence or devastating erasures in the historical record. In this embellished sphere, taking seriously Santos Reinbolt's painted rocks, discarded as valueless in their moment and about which we must now conjecture, as well as her embroidered cloths, will lead us to expanded art histories. If we pull at the threads that stretch over these surfaces, we might tell a different, more complex story about feminisms, work, art, and craft.

Watch a recording of this presentation here.

1 This essay is a revised, expanded version of my "Following Madalena's Threads," which appeared in the catalogue to accompany the exhibition curated by Amanda Carneiro and André Mesquita, *Madalena Santos Reinbolt: A Head Full of Planets,* Museu de Arte de São Paulo, 2022–23.

2 Before the 2022 MASP exhibition catalogue in which this essay first appeared and which greatly expanded her literature, critical treatments of Santos Reinbolt's work as it has been categorized as Afro-Brazilian "arte popular" have been found in Eliane Cristina Silva and Delton Aparecido Felipe, "Madalena dos Santos Reinbolt's Tapestries: Identifying Art and Popular Artist." *Conhecer: Debate entre o Público e o Privado* 9, no. 23, 2019, pp. 95–123; and Aline Reis Chiarelli, *Madalena Santos Reinbolt, memória e arte popular: uma questão para a arte afro-brasileira.* Undergraduate Thesis. Universidade de São Paulo, 2021. All translations from the Portuguese are mine.

3 Robert Giroux (ed.), *Elizabeth Bishop: One Art—Letters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), 243.

4 Lélia Coelho Frota, *Mitopoética de 9 artistas brasileiros* (Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1978).

5 Bishop, p. 243.

6 Lélia Coelho Frota, 1978, op. cit., 85.

7 Geraldo Edson de Andrade, *Aspectos da tapeçaria brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1978).

8 Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1984).

9 Ibid, p. 11.

10 For more on *phulkaris,* see Cristin Knight Sethi, "Women's Work: Phulkari, Flora Annie Steel, and Collecting Textiles in British India." In: Mellia Belli Bose (ed.), *Women, Gender, and Art in Early Modern Asia* (New York: Routledge/Ashgate, 2016), 172–98; for more on Guna molas see Mari Lyn Salvador, "Kuna Women's Arts: Molas, Meanings and Markets." In: Eli Barta (ed.), *Crafting Gender: Women and Folk art in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 47-72; for more on the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2017).

11 See Ariel Zeltin Cooke and Marsha McDowell, *Weavings of War: Fabrics of Memory* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2005).

12 For more on Chilean *arpilleras,* see Julia Bryan-Wilson, 2017, op. cit.; for more on Hmong story cloths, see Sally Peterson, "Translating Experience and the Reading of a Story Cloth." *The Journal of American Folklore* 101, no. 399, Jan.-Mar. 1988, 6–22; for more on South African embroidery see Ria Van der Merwe, *Story Cloths as a Counter-Archive: the Mogalakwena Craft Art Development Foundation Embroidery Project.* PhD Dissertation. University of Pretoria, 2015.

13 Sasha Razor, introduction text to the exhibition *The Code of Presence: Belarusian Protest Embroideries and Textile Patterns.* Available at https://apps.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/code-presence. Retrieved May 5, 2022.

14 See Andressa Rodrigues dos Santos and Alessandro de Melo, "Feminismo decolonial e a arte de Madalena dos Santos Reinbolt Rosana Paulino." *Interfaces* 12, no. 1, 2021; and Tom Farias, "Para pintoras de três diferentes gerações, ser artista é um ato político." *Folha de S.Paulo,* Apr. 13, 2021.

15 Mirella Santos Maria, "Thread-Paint-Embroidery: Weaving Other Narratives, Interlacing Resistances." In: Adriano Pedrosa and Fernando Oliva (eds.), *Maria Auxiliadora: Daily Life, Painting and Resistance* (São Paulo: MASP, 2018), p. 64.

16 Ringgold's work is amply documented by an extensive literature, including important writing by her daughter Michele Wallace; the most recent exhibition catalogue is *Faith Ringgold; American People* (New York: The New Museum, 2022).

17 Leandro Muniz, "Biographical Note," *Madalena Santos Reinbolt: A Head Full of Planets,* p. 199.

18 Renato Araújo da Silva, "Madalena Santos Reinbolt: An Undeniable Order of Rhythms and Colors," *Madalena Santos Reinbolt: A Head Full of Planets,* p. 89

19 Édouard Glissant, 1997, op. cit.

20 Édouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation.* Trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

21 See Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* no. 26 vol. 12 (June 2008): 1-14; and Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).

Q&A: Session 3

Angela Miller (moderator): I'll start by asking the three paper givers if you have questions for one another, or anything that you'd like to follow up on. And then, if there are questions from the audience, we can go, but I'll defer to you.

Julia Bryan-Wilson: Can I just jump in and just express my gratitude to Angela for that really thoughtful conjuration of some of the points of intersections between these fascinating panels and offer my thanks to Nicole and Rodrigo, again, for sharing your thoughts. I'm really glad that the three of us were able to have a more hemispheric approach to this contested word "American." And I'm really grateful to the organizers of the conference for not having it all be US-focused. Thank you, Angela, [also] for drawing out the thematic of labor, which is what's really important amongst the three of us.

I noticed that, besides Magdalena Santos Reinbolt, there was only one other woman that was focused on today, that was in Brooke Wyatt's presentation about S. Louis, which was fantastic. Rather than downplay the fact that both of these artists were housekeepers, I actually want to amplify the fact that they were both housekeepers—because I think that their employment, structures their material horizons of possibility [as well as] the conditions in which they were working.

Rodrigo Moura: I can't stop thinking about, also, the term self-taught; it appears in the comment box here. Someone in the comments says: "it's time to put the term self-taught gently in its grave, next to *primitive*, *naive*, and *outsider*," and you made a great point, Julia, when you said, how you refuse the term self-taught in terms of these artists because they have their own training. So [self-taught] is such a biased categorization.

I'm thinking about an artist who was not part of my presentation, Amadeo Lorenzato, who worked in civil construction for decades and whose work is completely informed by that knowledge. Different trades inform different practices, and that's an important notion to develop as we look at the work of these artists.

In terms of my presentation, and Nicole's, and yours [Bryan-Wilson], I think there's this really strong tension between free labor and enslaved labor in the Americas now that really informs how the institutions frame these artists over time, and how the artists really push the institutions in several ways.

So I do have a question for you, Julia: do you know much about Madalena (Santos Reinbolt) showing her work during her lifetime?

Because like everybody in Brazil, I learned about her reading about Lota and [Elizabeth] Bishop. The passage of the letter that you shared is so upsetting and so disturbing, and to your point of how there's no downtime to that labor...I was just curious, because the book you share [of her work] is also slightly after her passing. Just curious about her showing her work during her lifetime.

Bryan-Wilson: To elaborate a little bit more on what we do know about her, which is very little, we have these accounts: very racist and condescending accounts in the letters from Elizabeth Bishop, which are obviously biased in all kinds of ways. And then Santos Reinbolt granted a series of interviews to an anthropologist. So there are also some interviews in her lifetime with an anthropologist who was interested in the question of folkloric art in Brazil. Santos Reinbolt *did* sell her embroideries to friends of her employers, and [later] she was included in the Brazilian pavilion of the 1978 Venice Biennial, because the anthropologist who did the interviews served as a kind of advisor. But in terms of showing in her lifetime—not that I know of.

The way I even encountered her was because she has a couple of pieces in the Afro-Brazil Museum. (Rodrigo, I'm sure you know, those pieces are fascinating). Then MASP, where I work, also had a few pieces. My co-curator Olivia Ardui and I were going to put her in our show Histories of Dance, because there are

these festival scenes. Maybe they're dancing? At the end of the day, we just really couldn't tell if they were dancing or walking or maybe just hanging out and swaying! So the question of opacity [re-emerges]. Which, like I said, I take that as a choice— an intentional choice on the part of this artist to *not* have everything be so readable. I connect that in part to her work conditions, where everything was being surveyed and scrutinized. She's reserving something for herself, which is her imagination.

The current show does have the bibliography as far as we know it, but there's nothing in English yet, except for this book, which has the translated essays, etc. So it's just been she's been really, really [underrepresented]; this is finally the moment for more attention to come to her.

Moura: Yeah, which is fantastic... [and beyond the vast field of Brazilian popular art], I also wanted to see if I could ask Nicole, about trans-Caribbean exchanges around that period that she focused her studies on—around [Dunkley] and Jamaican art in general, if she could share with us a little bit about commonalities, origins, histories that may be common to different countries in the Caribbean?

Nicole Smythe-Johnson: Dunkley is a little bit unusual in terms of the fact that his artwork was saved, and he was canonized. He became part of the national canon with the founding of the National Gallery in Jamaica, which was the first public institution dedicated to art in English speaking Caribbean, and that only emerged in 1974. Remember that Jamaica [became] independent in 1962, along with much of the English-speaking Caribbean.

So in terms of his life, the kinds of travels he was doing that I'm talking about as this circum-Caribbean migratory route—yes, all throughout the Caribbean this [type of travel] was happening. There was constant movement between islands, but also between continental America, in all kinds of directions. Later on, New York became more importantin this and fed into the Harlem Renaissance, or what's called the Harlem Renaissance.

In terms of what we know of [Dunkley's] life...it's really interesting to hear Julia talking about her research and doing research where there's not much archive, that's very much the case with Dunkley. We have these artworks, these paintings, and a few sculptures, but we have very little information about Dunkley: a four-page biography written by his wife shortly after his death when she organized a memorial exhibition for him. [This] is the most complete biography we have.

Dunkley was a barber, and he was believed to work on plantations. His wife talks about him traveling around like a sailor, but the best information that we have, and a lot of his work, actually speaks to working in mass monoculture plantations throughout this Circum-Caribbean area. People who are familiar with the United Fruit Company on all of those developments will have a kind of an idea of what that might have been like.

Yes, he's a man of his time. There are many others who went on similar travels who are similarly sort of undocumented in the historical archive. Like I say, Marcus Garvey is one of those. We have a lot of figures—Malcolm X's mother was of the same generation. We have a lot of figures that we know of that we're doing this same kind of route.

But in terms of his artwork actually being preserved and available to look at, and think about today, to the extent that Dunkley's work is—that's quite rare. And to Julia's point, I also think a lot about Glissant and opacity because [Dunkley's artworks] are quite difficult; they sort of fight with you and tease you. A lot of my attempts to work with Dunkley have been riddled with doubt and having to double back; I'll have multiple readings that don't quite go together.

And I think that is also deliberate on his part. The little that we do know of him—we know that he refused to be part of art classes that were going on at a time, even though he was familiar with the people—he really did not want to be [known]. He brought his painting to the newspaper to be published, but he was not writing

editorials. He did not do interviews. We really hear about him through his wife. And that relationship, and the significance of her role in maintaining his legacy and his artwork is a big part of my research as well—another kind of care work.

That's a long-winded answer to your question, Rodrigo. But I hope it's helpful.

Miller (moderator): Yes. Fascinating. Thank you.

Moura: Very interesting because I think the question of the agency of the artists beyond the work is one that always fascinates me. I think it's very important.

Closing Remarks

JANE KALLIR

President, Kallir Research Institute

Henri Rousseau (1944–1910). *Myself, Portrait-Landscape,* 1890.
Oil on canvas, 146 x 113 cm. Národní Galerie, Prague, O 3221.

The three topics discussed in the symposium—primitivism, exclusion, and modernism—are key to evaluating the contributions of artists working outside the academic mainstream in twentieth century Europe and the Americas. Our speakers have covered a lot of ground. We began by examining some of the self-taught artists promoted by the Museum of Modern Art in the interwar period, and then took a deep dive into the work of artists who were largely excluded from that foundational paradigm. The Yanktonai Dakota painter Oscar Howe strayed from the formulaic "primitivism" taught at the Santa Fe Indian School and therefore was not accepted as "authentic" by cultural gatekeepers. Whereas Euro-American modernism developed through transatlantic cultural exchange, the Jamaican artist John Dunkley was shaped by circum-Caribbean migratory patterns that foregrounded the experiences of the subaltern populations who literally built modern America. Rodrigo Moura noted that Latin American artists often melded popular and vernacular influences in a manner that belies conventional high/low dichotomies. In her discussion of Madalena dos Santos Reinbolt's embroideries, Julia Bryan-Wilson raised the provocative question of whether this work, with its multivalent ties to African diasporic traditions, Brazilian folklore and the broad, gendered history of needlework, should even be considered "art," given the white, upper-class male origins of that concept.[1]

Terminology has always been problematic in this field, if indeed it is a field. In my closing remarks, I will use the generally accepted, if flawed, descriptor "self-taught" when referring to these artists in general, and "primitive" when discussing the time period during which that term was most prevalent.

My own area of specialization is what, in the context of this symposium, we might think of as the "MoMA primitives": the generation of self-taught painters who came to the attention of the art establishment in the 1930s and 40s. In 1940, my grandfather, Otto Kallir, gave Anna Mary Robertson Moses her first solo show at the Galerie St. Etienne, of which I became co-director in 1979. I've always believed that self-taught artists deserve the same degree of respect and careful study as their schooled colleagues. To that end, I tracked down Moses's source materials and drawings (which she'd kept secret) and wrote an in-depth study of her methods and development.[2] I also salvaged John Kane's drawings, which his children had been told to destroy.[3] And I developed a close working relationship with Morris Hirshfield's grandson, Robert Rentzer, who had preserved a number of the artist's full-scale preliminary drawings.[4] My talk will focus on these three artists—Moses, Kane and Hirshfield—as well as Henri Rousseau, whom Alfred Barr and others considered the "archetypal primitive."

Primitivism is central to modernism's origin story. As colonization moved, over the course of the nineteenth century, from conquest and plunder to the trickier tasks of governance and trade, cross-cultural communication increased. At the same time, industrialization was gradually upending the hereditary European aristocracy, creating a new, more capitalistically oriented Western elite.

European modernism started off as a wholehearted rebuke to the bourgeois culture engendered by industrial capitalism. For the most part, the modern artists who emerged in the late nineteenth century were themselves members of and supported by the bourgeoisie, but they wanted to invent a new art, free from what they perceived as the pernicious influence of Western civilization. The desire to restore humans to a "pure state of nature" and the concomitant idealization of the so-called "noble savage" was ingrained in the European mindset, dating back to the eighteenth century.

That's why the modernists' initial valorization of primitivism was indiscriminate, throwing together African and Oceanic sculpture, folk art, children's finger-painting, work by patients in psychiatric hospitals, etcetera, etcetera. Drawing in part on the newly accessible art of non-Western peoples, this catch-all category also included domestic work by those who, often for socioeconomic reasons, had been denied formal schooling in art. Channeled through

Jean Dubuffet, the need to separate "raw" art from that which had been overcooked by civilization persisted into the late twentieth century, even as some of the earlier subcategories of "primitive" art (such as folk and tribal work) were siphoned off into separate fields of study.

Many of today's speakers stressed the relationship between self-taught artists and the early twentieth century avant-garde, but I question whether the art establishment was ever really prepared to accept these artists on an equal footing. In the words of Alfred Barr, Henri Rousseau was distinguished by his "psychological and pictorial innocence, his naïve realism and fantasy, and his independence of tradition."[5] The checklist of qualities required for inclusion in this new category of art was expanded upon by Sidney Janis in *They Taught Themselves*. Isolated from one another and from the artworld, these artists supposedly remained untouched by any "developed painting culture,"[6] and unlike their trained colleagues, or children (who eventually grow up), it was believed that they seldom developed. Their style, Janis observed, "most frequently comes to fruition with the making of [the first] picture."[7] As Richard Meyer notes in his Hirshfield monograph, Janis made a point of identifying self-taught artists according to their non-artistic former professions: "cloak and suit manufacturer" in the case of Hirshfield, "housepainter" for John Kane, and so on. This sort of biographical qualifying became even more pronounced with the advent of Art Brut, which required of its creators such a profound remove from "received culture" that it effectively admitted only extremely marginalized individuals.

From the very beginning, biography tended to eclipse art when it came to discussing self-taught painters. Rousseau was not, in fact, a *Douanier* (customs inspector) but rather worked for the Paris municipal toll service. However, for years he was referred to neither as a painter, nor even by his own name, but merely as "*le Douanier*."

This emphasis on biography no doubt had human-interest appeal. When Kane was admitted to the Carnegie International in 1927—the first American self-taught artist ever to win such recognition—the press flocked to see him in the Pittsburgh slum where he lived. Kane, who'd lost a leg years earlier in a railroad accident, regaled reporters with tales of his days as a "brawnyman," who not only helped build the city's bridges and roads but could hold his own in the boxing ring. The most noteworthy human-interest story was probably that of Anna Mary Robertson Moses, commonly referred to as "Grandma" Moses. Identified as a "housewife" in *They Taught Themselves* and a "farmwife" in the title of her first solo show, Moses later authored a bestselling autobiography and became a darling of the postwar media.

Yet beneath such evident success stories, it's often possible to detect an undercurrent of hostility. The more famous Grandma Moses became, the more she was disowned by the artworld establishment. Kane was attacked by the trained painters who'd failed to win favor with Carnegie's jury, and a Pittsburgh newspaper tried to expose him as a fraud. Even as Rousseau gained the support of the nascent French avant-garde, he remained a laughingstock at the Salon des Independents, where crowds greeted his annual appearances as an entertaining sideshow. Foreshadowing the later criticisms of Hirshfield's rendering of feet, one journalist rebuked Rousseau for painting hands without thumbs.

As in Pittsburgh, so too in New York, American artists were furious that the Museum of Modern Art was largely ignoring them. In the first decade of its existence, the museum's view of modernism was decidedly Eurocentric. Barr thought "modern primitives" could be used to introduce U.S. audiences to the broader tenets of modernism, because the primitives were both more "international in character" than their schooled American colleagues and more democratic, in that they "all express the straightforward, innocent and convincing vision of the common man."[8] As we have seen, MoMA's early dalliance with self-taught artists came to an abrupt end after the 1943 Hirshfield exhibition.

"Last year it was stories about the talking horse," sneered critic Peyton Boswell, "this year it's Morris Hirshfield."[9] Defined by their folksy biographies and purported naiveté, Hirshfield and his self-taught peers had arguably been typecast as fools. Wilhelm Uhde, whom Brooke Wyatt discussed in connection with Seraphine Louis, stressed the artless simplicity of his self-styled "Sacred Heart" group. Uhde's 1911 Rousseau monograph is full of anecdotes illustrating the painter's gullibility and ignorance.[10] It was often noted that Rousseau admired all the "wrong" artists: Adolphe Bouguereau, Jean-Léon Gérome, and other stale academics whom the avant-garde loathed. Hirshfield, according to Janis, also had unacceptably retrograde taste in art.[11] Janis further intimated that self-taught artists didn't necessarily know what they were doing. "A great disparity exists between what they believe and what they actually have accomplished," he wrote. "Although convinced they have made a photographic reproduction of the world of reality, they have actually transmuted it to a new, pictorial reality."[12] Self-taught artists were, in effect, accidental modernists.

Moreover, it's apparent that these early twentieth-century self-taught painters didn't particularly *like* modern art. Rousseau thought Cézanne couldn't draw and that Matisse's work was "horribly ugly."[13] Hirshfield was appalled to learn that Mondrian's famous painting, *Broadway Boogie Woogie,* had been acquired by the Museum of Modern Art. "They paid money for that?" he exclaimed.[14] Moses was somewhat more polite. Asked what she thought of abstract art, she opined that it might be "good for a rug or a piece of linoleum."[15]

The fact that there is a resemblance between the work of the modern primitives and mainstream modernism doesn't mean there was a deeper connection between the two. To some extent, primitives were selected based on unintentional visual similarities, and trained painters weren't above appropriating those innovations. As the philosopher and critic Arthur C. Danto noted, "There is no greater illusion in art than the view that the similarity of objects entails similarity of vision."[16] Danto codified the concept of the art world as a commingling of artists, curators, art historians, dealers, collectors, and critics who collectively determine what constitutes art. These cognoscenti created institutional structures that became every bit as entrenched as the nineteenth century academies against which the early modernists rebelled. Schooled artists were part of the art world, but self-taught artists, by definition, were not. They were seldom permitted to shape the discourse surrounding their own work, but as Esther Adler observed earlier, they often had interlocutors who spoke for them.

It can be difficult to recover the voices of early twentieth century self-taught artists, because the myth of naiveté occluded their creative processes and intentions. The gradual excavation of these artists' actual histories began with Rousseau and continued with monographic studies of Moses, Horace Pippin, Kane and, last but not least, Meyer's pioneering work on Hirshfield. These studies show that, contrary to earlier preconceptions, most self-taught artists weren't uninfluenced, and their styles usually did evolve over time. Many of them learned just the way their trained colleagues do: by copying.

Popular prints and illustrations were the most common influences. Although these source images were often highly detailed, artists like Rousseau and Moses traced only the outlines, resulting in a flatness that is more stereotypically "modern." It's been theorized that Rousseau may have inspired the Cubists' so-called invention of collage in 1912. Similarly, Janis points out parallels between Hirshfield's "unconscious" incorporation of preexisting imagery in his first paintings, *Beach Girl* and *Angora Cat,* and the use of collage by Salvador Dalí and Max Ernst.[17]

In fact, the use of printed sources by self-taught artists dates back to the days when such images were first disseminated. But only when these stratagems migrated into the work of mainstream modernists was

the transmutation of printed materials heralded as a major innovation; in the hands of self-taught artists, copying was long considered a shameful secret.

Rousseau was ridiculed for describing himself as "one of our best realist painters" and for suggesting that he could "finish" Cézanne's work.[18] However, Rousseau's quick oil sketches were in many respects as sophisticated as the work of the Impressionists. By "finishing" his compositions, he imparted a precision that genuinely was more realistic. We see this sort of "every leaf" realism also in the work of Hirshfield, whose appreciation of decorative detail was honed during his years as a clothing designer.

Rather than belittling self-taught artists for their supposedly naïve conceptions of reality, it might be wise to take them at their word. Photography and post-Renaissance Western painting do not, after all, offer the only correct readings of reality. Single-point perspective demands an either/or choice between foreground and background, dictating that distant objects be rendered less distinctly. But why should a picture not include *everything* the artist knows to be there, rather than just what can be seen from a particular vantage point? Finding conventional perspective too constraining, Moses and Kane both combined multiple views in their landscapes.

Positioning the "primitive" as what Barr called "a tributary of one of the main streams of modern taste"[19] does little to help us understand these artists on their own terms. His famous chart leaves Rousseau on the sidelines. Unlike mainstream modernists, self-taught artists lack any overarching stylistic or intellectual cohesion. They constitute an all-purpose "other," a genre that exists, as such, only in juxtaposition to modernism.

Today's speakers have demonstrated that the boundaries between the "primitive" and the "modern" were often porous. But does that mean the two are really one and the same? How widely can the definition of modernism be stretched and still retain any significance? How useful are those subordinate "isms," which were constructed to bolster a white, Eurocentric cultural model? What would a more inclusive alternative paradigm look like? What, if any, would be the selection criteria? Are all artworks equally important, equally engaging, equally rewarding of repeated viewing? What about quality, which lately has become a vexed concept? I leave you with these questions.

Watch a recording of the closing remarks here.

1 Julia Bryant Wilson has made it clear that she considers Madalena Santos Reinbolt an artist, but the exclusions implicit in any defining terminology remain problematic.

2 Jane Kallir, *Grandma Moses: The Artist Behind the Myth* (New York: 1982).

3 "John Kane: Modern America's First Folk Painter," Galerie St. Etienne, New York, April 17-May 25, 1984; Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, February 2-March 31, 1985. The Galerie St. Etienne was the exclusive representative of the Kane estate from 1984 on. I later arranged for his drawings to be donated to the American Folk Art Museum.

4 See "Folk Artists at Work: Morris Hirshfield, John Kane and Grandma Moses," Galerie St. Etienne, New York, November 15, 1988–January 14, 1989.

5 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "Foreword," in Sidney Janis, *They Taught Themselves* (New York: 1942) p. xix.

6 Janis, p 7.

7 Ibid., p 8.

8 "Bulletin," Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1941.

9 Richard Meyer, *Master of the Two Left Feet: Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered* (Cambridge MA: 220), endnote 180.

10 Wilhelm Uhde, Henri Rousseau (Paris: 1911).

11 Janis, p. 19.

12 Ibid. p. 9.

13 Claire Frèches-Thory, "From Sarcasm to Canonisation: Critical Fortune," in Frances Morris and Christopher Green, eds., *Henri Rousseau: Jungles in Paris* (New York: 2005), p. 179.

14 Meyer, endnote 225.

15 Kallir, p. 21, note 62.

16 Jane Kallir, "At a Crossroads: The Audrey B. Heckler Collection in Historical Context," in *The Hidden Art: 20th & 21st Century Self-Taught Artists from the Audrey B. Heckler Collection* (New York: 2017), endnote 20.

17 Janis, p. 20.

18 John House, "Henri Rousseau as an Academic," in Morris and Green, eds., endnote 1.

19 Barr, in Janis, p. xix.

Contributors

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