

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

SYMPOSIUM

FRIDAY JANUARY 27, 11:00 AM-5:00 PM ET



AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM  
2 LINCOLN SQUARE, NEW YORK, NY

AMERICAN  
FOLK ART  
MUSEUM

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**11:00 AM WELCOME & INTRODUCTION**

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**JASON T. BUSCH**

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

**RICHARD MEYER**

Robert and Ruth Halperin Professor in Art History, Stanford University  
*Keynote*  
*Change Partners and Dance: Morris Hirshfield's Modernism*

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**11:30 AM SESSION 1: "MODERN PRIMITIVES"**

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Presented as a series of exhibition case studies, this session investigates the exhibition and reception of self-taught art in the interwar period, illuminating non teleological histories of modernism that were foreshadowed in MoMA's pluralistic—yet often primitivizing—program. This session considers self-taught artists such as Morris Hirshfield as significant players in art history, not just inspirations for the avant-garde.

Introduced and moderated by **Esther Adler** (Museum of Modern Art), followed by a brief discussion with speakers and Q & A.

**JENNIFER MARSHALL**

University of Minnesota

*William Edmondson at MoMA, 1937*

**BROOKE WYATT**

American Folk Art Museum/University of Pittsburgh

*"Compensating for the Lacunae of Modern Art":  
S raphine Louis and French Self-Taught Painters  
in Modernist Discourse*

**SUSAN DAVIDSON**

Independent Curator

*The Master of The Two Left Feet Steps Out  
in Manhattan*

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**1:00 PM BREAK**

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1:15 PM

**SESSION 2: THE INSIDE/OUTSIDE CONUNDRUM**

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This session illuminates how categories of self-taught, folk and Native arts have been defined in the negative, upholding dominant discourses and reenforcing the boundaries of elite White spaces. Speakers provide a historical overview of how the American art world assimilated and marketed the work of underrepresented practitioners at various moments, while centering their readings on the artists' perspective and creative agency.

Introduced and moderated by **Valérie Rousseau** (American Folk Art Museum), followed by a brief discussion with speakers and Q & A

**LYNNE COOKE**

National Gallery of Art

*Autodidact: "only a matter of degree"?*

**BILL ANTHES**

Pitzer College

*Painting Against Primitivism: Oscar Howe's  
Modern Dakota Art*

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2:30 PM

**BREAK**

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Opening the discussion to a global context, the final session traces the multiple, intertwined histories of modernism which evolved and overlapped in mid-century North America and beyond. Speakers will highlight contributions by self-taught artists and other cultural producers who have been traditionally left out of mainstream institutions, but reflect an expansive vision of art that challenges traditional hierarchies and discourses about the interwar period.

Introduced and moderated by **Angela Miller** (Washington University in St. Louis), followed by a brief discussion with speakers and Q & A.

**NICOLE SMYTHE-JOHNSON**

Independent Curator

*In search of a Subaltern Modernism: Rethinking John Dunkley*

**RODRIGO MOURA**

El Museo del Barrio

*A Global Naïve? Notes on the Brazilian Case*

**JULIA BRYAN-WILSON**

Columbia University/Museu de Arte de São Paulo

*Embellishment as Method*

**JANE KALLIR**

President, Kallir Research Institute

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## SPEAKER ABSTRACTS

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### KEYNOTE

#### RICHARD MEYER

##### ***Change Partners and Dance: Morris Hirshfield's Modernism***

Artworks and the stories we tell about them benefit from engaging in new partnerships. Received knowledges change when we juxtapose them with obscured or half-forgotten stories of art. The retrieval of outsider or underknown works enables a broader, if messier, sense of the visual past to emerge. 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.

### SESSION 1: "MODERN PRIMITIVES"

#### JENNIFER MARSHALL

##### ***William Edmondson at MoMA, 1937***

In the fall of 1937, the Museum of Modern Art displayed twelve works of directly carved limestone sculpture in one of its temporary galleries at Rockefeller Center. *Sculpture by William Edmondson* thus became MoMA's first solo show anchored by a self-taught artist: unsurpassed until 1942, with its three separate exhibits for Henri Rousseau, Josephine Joy, and Joe Milone. *Sculpture by William Edmondson* was also MoMA's first single-artist show dedicated to a Black American: unsurpassed until *Paintings by Jacob Lawrence* in 1944. Using a cultural geography and critical race theory lens, this talk will offer a critical history of MoMA's Edmondson exhibition. By tracing the multiple interracial and transregional networks that made the show possible, a new map of interwar modernism emerges: one that may ironically decenter Alfred Barr's MoMA and its preference for genealogical histories of formalism.

#### BROOKE WYATT

##### ***"Compensating for the Lacunae of Modern Art": Séraphine Louis and French Self-Taught Painters in Modernist Discourse***

Séraphine Louis (1864-1942) was the only woman included in the 1938 MoMA exhibition *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America*, a pivotal moment in the artist's reception history. Throughout the show's run, which began in Paris under the title *Popular Masters of Reality* (1937), Louis was interned in the psychiatric hospital where she had been confined since 1932. Staged on the eve of war in Europe, *Masters* both reflected and advanced discursive categories of folk and "naïve" art that evolved during the interwar period. The exhibition would also prove formative in defining the ongoing relationship between avant-garde artists and their self-taught contemporaries in the wartime and postwar years, which saw the continued institutionalization of modernism through the founding of dedicated museums and the expansion of global biennials. The product of a sustained and innovative studio practice, Louis's œuvre has received uneven critical treatment,

often defined by an overreliance on mythicized biography. Her role in *Masters*, as well as the show's French origins, have yet to be fully unpacked for the insights both provide about the essential contributions of self-taught artists to what we now study as modern and contemporary art.

## SUSAN DAVIDSON

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

A Jewish immigrant tailor and slipper manufacturer who took up painting at the age of 65, Morris Hirshfield became, against all odds, an internationally renowned painter in the 1940s. His wildly stylized pictures of animals, landscapes, and often nude female figures were discovered by Sidney Janis, who would become a prominent art dealer, and embraced by leading members of the avant-garde including Marcel Duchamp, Peggy Guggenheim, and Piet Mondrian. Yet, the self-taught artist was dismissed by popular critics as an unschooled amateur and mocked as the "Master of the Two Left Feet" for his tendency to display the female body in that unorthodox fashion. From deep "in the wilds of Brooklyn" Hirshfield would become an important creative force in the Manhattan artworld. His work was featured in the landmark *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition (1942), the only self-taught painter among the likes of Max Ernst, René Magritte, and Yves Tanguy. The following year, his then complete oeuvre, produced in the four years in which he had been painting, was fêted in a solo presentation at the Museum of Modern Art (1943). Hirshfield died in July 1946 at age of 74, prompting Guggenheim to organize a memorial exhibition of those works executed since his controversial MoMA outing at her Art of This Century museum/gallery in 1947. Ms. Davidson will discuss Hirshfield's oeuvre within the historically specific events in which it emerged and its subsequent passing into obscurity until the current American Folk Art Museum's exhibition "Morris Hirshfield: Rediscovered."

## SESSION 2: THE INSIDE/OUTSIDE CONUNDRUM

### LYNNE COOKE

#### ***Autodidact: "only a matter of degree"?***

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.

## **BILL ANTHES**

### ***Painting Against Primitivism: Oscar Howe's Modern Dakota Art***

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 Šakówin (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."

## **SESSION 3: "REMAPPING MODERNISMS"**

### **NICOLE SMYTHE-JOHNSON**

#### ***In search of a Subaltern Modernism: Rethinking John Dunkley***

This paper positions Jamaican self-taught artist John Dunkley (1891-1947) within the context of a hemispheric American interwar modernism. Thinking Latin American and U.S. interwar modernisms together, the paper argues that though these traditions are often held separate they are both defined by elite attempts to assert homegrown modernisms through depictions of, or reference to local subaltern populations and their cultural production. These homegrown modernisms were generally articulated in response to European modernism, encountered in Trans-Atlantic travel, a common rite of passage for American elites.

Dunkley's practice allows us to think about modernism from a different perspective. As part of a generation of English-speaking Caribbean migrants who travelled throughout Central, South and North America (an area we might think of as a circum-Caribbean circuit) in search of work, Dunkley's perspective as an artist and thinker developed on the literal vanguard of American modernity, building and maintaining the telegraph lines, railroads and plantations that made modernity possible in the Americas. While his artwork emerges from these experiences of inter-American, rather than Trans-Atlantic travel, his remarkably consistent visual vocabulary drew on the elite form of photography, reversing the modernist pattern of elite appropriation of subaltern cultural production. Through these two modernist strategies, though articulated from a social perspective generally overlooked in scholarship on modernism, his work posits a subaltern modernism characterised by alienation from, rather than collusion with the nation-building and modernising activities that increasingly circumscribed his life and potential.

## **RODRIGO MOURA**

### ***A Global Naïve? Notes on the Brazilian Case***

Departing from *Popular Painters and Other Visionaries*, an exhibition presented by El Museo del Barrio both virtually and in person in 2020/2021, this talk will examine the symbiotic relationships between artists labeled under problematic terms such as “primitive” and “naïf” art and the processes of artistic modernization in different parts of Latin America during the mid-20th century, with a special focus on Brazil and artists such as Alfredo Volpi, Djanira da Motta e Silva, Heitor dos Prazeres, José Antonio da Silva and Silvia Leon de Chalreo. By infusing their painterly idioms with popular and vernacular visual codes and knowledges, these (very often but not always) self-taught artists helped to form an alternative to Eurocentric avant-gardes. By challenging notions of high/low repertoires, their works pressured institutions such as newly created art museums in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo to expand the modern canon and created dialogues with art thinkers such as critic Mario Pedrosa and exhibition maker/architect Lina Bo Bardi.

## **JULIA BRYAN-WILSON**

### ***Embellishment as Method***

Drawing upon the paintings and embroideries of uncredentialed artist Madalena Santos Reinbolt—who was employed as a housecleaner and cook in the 1950s-1970s in Brazil while also refining her artistic practice—this talk explores ideas about décor and ornamentation to argue for expanded art histories. It situates Santos Reinbolt's drive to augment the world around her using color and thread within larger modernist narratives about embellishment in mid-century.



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## SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

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**ESTHER ADLER** is Curator in the Department of Drawings and Prints at The Museum of Modern Art. Most recently she organized *Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw*, which was shown at MoMA from November 21, 2021–March 19, 2022. Past projects include *Betye Saar: The Legends of Black Girl's Window* (with Christophe Cherix, 2019), *Charles White: A Retrospective* (with Sarah Kelly Oehler, 2018) and *Dorothea Rockburne: Drawing Which Makes Itself* (2013).

**BILL ANTHES** is the author of the books *Native Moderns: American Indian Painting, 1940–1960* (2006), and *Edgar Heap of Birds* (2015), both published by Duke University Press. He is co-editor, with Kathleen Ash-Milby, of the catalog for the exhibition *Dakota Modern: The Art of Oscar Howe*. He teaches at Pitzer College in Claremont, California.

**JULIA BRYAN-WILSON** is Professor of Art History and LGBTQ+ Studies at Columbia University and Curator-at-Large at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo. Her books include the award-winning *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, and a forthcoming study of Louise Nevelson.

**JASON T. BUSCH** is the Becky and Bob Alexander Director & CEO of the American Folk Art Museum (AFAM) in New York. Prior to AFAM, Busch served as assistant curator of decorative arts at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford; associate curator of architecture, design, decorative arts, craft, and sculpture at the Minneapolis Institute of Art; chief curator and curator of decorative arts and design at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh; deputy director for curatorial affairs and museum programs at the Saint Louis Art Museum; division director for decorative arts at Sotheby's, New York; and director of the Jason Jacques Gallery, New York. He has curated several large exhibitions and collection installations and authored the associated publications, including *Currents of Change: Art and Life Along the Mississippi River, 1850–1861* (2004); *Carnegie Museum of Art: Decorative Arts and Design Collection* (2009); and *Inventing the Modern World: Decorative Arts at World's Fairs, 1851–1939* (2012).

**LYNNE COOKE** is Senior Curator for Special Projects in Modern Art at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. From 2012–2014 she was Andrew W. Mellon Professor at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art. Prior to that she served as chief curator and deputy director of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid from 2008 to 2012 and as curator at Dia Art Foundation from 1991 to 2008. In 1991, Cooke co-curated the Carnegie International, and has helmed numerous major shows since, including the 10th Biennale of Sydney (1996), *Rosemarie Trockel: Cosmos* (2012) and *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, 2018. Her latest exhibition project, *Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction*, exploring intersections, alignments and affiliations between abstract artists and textile makers and designers over the past century, is scheduled for Fall 2023. She has also contributed texts to numerous exhibition catalogues and art journals.

Curator and art historian **SUSAN DAVIDSON** is an authority in the fields of Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, and Pop Art, with an expertise in the art of Robert Rauschenberg. Davidson is also an accomplished museum professional with over thirty-year's experience at two distinguished institutions: The Menil Collection, Houston, and at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. In 2018, Davidson established her eponymous firm that produces curatorial projects for international museums and galleries, works with artist's foundations on building legacy, and provides collection management services for private collectors. She has served as a curatorial advisor to AFAM's *Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered* and authored a catalogue of works for the artist's monograph.

**JANE KALLIR**, President of the Kallir Research Institute in New York City, is a recognized authority on American self-taught artists of the early 20th century. She administers the catalogue raisonné of Anna Mary Robertson ("Grandma") Moses and has written extensively on the artist, as well as on John Kane and Morris Hirshfield. Kallir has also curated exhibitions for many major museums, including the American Folk Art Museum in New York, the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., the Belvedere and Wien Museums in Vienna, Austria, the Museo del Vittoriano in Rome, Italy, and the Setagaya Museum in Tokyo, Japan.

**JENNIFER JANE MARSHALL** is Professor and Chair in Art History at the University of Minnesota. She is the author of *Machine Art, 1934* (University of Chicago Press). An examination of the Museum of Modern Art's landmark exhibition of industrial design—staged to promote American mass production as a universal, if abstract good—the book was the recipient of the Dedalus Foundation's Robert Motherwell Book Award in 2013. Dr. Marshall's research and expertise in early 20th century American material culture has been featured in *Hyperallergic*, *The Washington Post*, and *BackStory*, a podcast produced by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. She has been an NEH recipient, a fellow at the UMN Institute for Advanced Studies, and a UMN McKnight Land-Grant Professor. She currently holds the Samuel Russell Chair in the Humanities. Dr. Marshall's second book project, *William Edmondson: Life & Work*, is a monographic exploration of art history and biography as they relate to the career of the Depression-era sculptor.

**RICHARD MEYER** is Robert and Ruth Halperin Professor in Art History at Stanford University, where he teaches courses in twentieth-century American art, the history of photography, arts censorship and the first amendment, curatorial practice, and gender and sexuality studies. He is author of *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* and *What Was Contemporary Art?* (MIT Press) as well as coeditor, with Catherine Lord, of *Art and Queer Culture*, and coauthor, with Peggy Phelan, of *Contact Warhol: Photography without End*. Meyer served as guest curator of *Warhol's Jews: Ten Portraits Reconsidered at the Jewish Museum* in New York and the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco and of *Naked Hollywood: Weegee in Los Angeles* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

**ANGELA MILLER** teaches at Washington University in St. Louis and publishes on the cultural history of 19th and 20th century arts in the U.S. Her books include the prize-winning *Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* and *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* (lead author). Her forthcoming book with Nick Mauss is *Body Language: The Queer Staged Photographs of George Platt Lynes and PaJaMa* (UC Press, 2023). She is completing a study of the queer artists in the circle of Lincoln Kirstein.

**RODRIGO MOURA** is a writer, editor and curator. He worked in Brazilian institutions such as Museu de Arte de São Paulo and Instituto Inhotim. He currently lives in New York, where he serves as a chief curator at El Museo del Barrio.

**VALÉRIE ROUSSEAU** is Curatorial Chair for Exhibitions & Senior Curator at the American Folk Art Museum, where she overviewed the exhibitions *Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered* (2022), *Photo|Brut: Collection Bruno Decharme & Compagnie* (2021), *Art Brut in America: The Incursion of Jean Dubuffet* (2015), *When the Curtain Never Comes Down* (2015), *Willem van Genk: Mind Traffic* (2014), as well as projects on psychiatrist Francesc Tosquelles and art brut literature. She authored the FILAF-winning publication *Bill Traylor* (2018), "The Fate of Self-Taught Art" (*The Brooklyn Rail*, 2018), and "Visionary Architectures" (*Alternative Guide to the Universe*, Hayward Gallery, 2013). In 2022, she attended the seminar "Showing/Searching: art brut and its archival impulse" of the Bibliothèque Kandinsky Summer University at Centre Pompidou, Paris. In 2019, she was the recipient of the Curatorial Fellowship for American Curators, "Étant Donnés Contemporary Art" of the FACE Foundation, on the concomitance of psychiatric and artistic avant-gardes.

**NICOLE SMYTHE-JOHNSON** is a writer and independent curator from Kingston, Jamaica. She is currently a PhD candidate in the department of art and art history at the University of Texas at Austin. Most recently, she was on the curatorial team for the 2022 Kingston Biennial and she worked on *John Dunkley: Neither Day nor Night* at the Perez Art Museum in Miami and the Folk Art Museum in New York, which formed the basis of her doctoral research. She was also editor of *Caribbean Quarterly*, the University of the West Indies' flagship journal of culture and has written for a number of magazines and journals including *Terremoto*, *Flash Art* and the Small Axe project's *sx visualities*.

**BROOKE WYATT** is Luce Assistant Curator at the American Folk Art Museum where she is working on a series of exhibitions drawn from the Museum's collection of folk and self-taught art. She practiced as a clinical therapist in community mental health settings and worked as an art teacher before beginning her PhD in the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh. Brooke's doctoral dissertation, titled "Séraphine Louis and French Self-Taught Art in Transatlantic Modernist Discourse," explores the material and representational strategies of the French artist Séraphine Louis, foregrounding how histories of race, gender, class, and disability have shaped the reception and exhibition of Louis's work across Europe and the Americas from the late 1920s to the present day.

**Thank you for attending**

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

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at Stanford University.

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Terra Foundation for American Art.



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Cover: HERMANN LANDSHOFF (1905, Munich, Germany-1986, New York, NY); André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst [standing behind Morris Hirshfield's *Nude at the Window (Hot Night in July)*], and Leonora Carrington (seated) at Peggy Guggenheim's townhouse; Fall 1942; New York, NY; gelatin silver print; 60 × 60 in.; © bpk. Digital image: bpk-Bildagentur/Münchner Stadtmuseum/Hermann Landshoff/Art Resource, New York.

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