



AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM

Rethinking Biography

White Paper

Valérie Rousseau, Allison C. Meier, and Brooke L. Wyatt, *Rethinking Biography*, edited by Valérie Rousseau (New York: American Folk Art Museum, 2026). An initiative supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS).

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Project Director's Foreword

Since 1961, the American Folk Art Museum (AFAM) has stewarded the work of 20th-century self-taught artists, a field in which biography and identity have traditionally played a central role in interpretation. The project *Rethinking Biography* emerged as an opportunity to critically examine museum practices, asking how we research, catalogue, manage, and interpret artworks in certain areas of our expertise, while making our decision-making processes more transparent. Beyond practical implications and responsibilities for curatorial and collections staff, this initiative raised broader intellectual questions about authorship and institutional authority, which we lay out in this white paper. It invited reflection about AFAM's unique mission and collections, of interest for the museum community at large, as we collectively consider how knowledge is produced, documented, and shared.

This project unfolds at a moment of profound change across the museum sector internationally, which achieved more decisiveness during the COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 upheavals. For the first time in over 20 years, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) adopted a revised *Code of Ethics*, with the intention to strengthen the ethical framework that guides museum professionals worldwide in their role of promoting cultural heritage, fostering public trust, and serving society. This document addresses pressing issues facing institutions, including “the rise of digital technologies, the climate crisis, and the ongoing need to address the legacies of colonialism through responsible and ethical museum practice.”¹ In today's museum landscape, institutions have embarked on self-analysis, questioning long-accepted practices and reevaluating how they present their collections and artists. Medical museums, for instance, are restoring humanity to specimens long detached from the lives they once belonged to, while natural history museums are confronting the colonial histories embedded in their collections and displays. Art museums, on their end, are progressively expanding the boundaries of art history to embrace a wider range of artistic practices and lived experiences, leading to new ethical responsibilities for interpretation and documentation.

Within this broader context, *Rethinking Biography* serves as a catalyst for reconsidering how museums document, interpret, and share knowledge about self-taught artists and their work, referring to methods that are grounded in current scholarship and responsive to the particular needs of the Museum's collections. The importance of this project extends beyond scholarship. As museums seek to preserve and make visible histories that have too often been marginalized or erased, specialized institutions such as AFAM play an increasingly vital role in bringing self-taught artists and their unconventional pathways of expression to the forefront of these discussions and into the public eye. As Catherine Morris, Curatorial Chair and Senior Curator for the Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, presents it, museums must take consistent actions “to keep visibility around people, subjects, and objects” that in the past have proved to resist established conventions, “helping to make something as permanent as it can

¹ The International Council of Museums (ICOM), “ICOM adopts its revised Code of Ethics for Museums,” press release, June 25, 2026, <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Press-releases-Code-of-Ethics-1-EN.pdf>

be.”² Alongside women artists, artists of color, disabled artists, and other historically underrepresented cultural agents, self-taught artists challenge established narratives and prompt us to reflect critically on our museum practices, actively reconsidering the categories, language, and interpretive frameworks through which collections are understood.

Rethinking Biography is therefore both timely and forward-looking, animated with a desire to contribute to ongoing conversations about equity, representation, and responsible stewardship within museums. By emphasizing the agency of artists, long-term documentation, transparency, and cumulative knowledge, the project aims to outline framework, guiding principles, and practical recommendations that remain adaptable as scholarship evolves and as museums continue to revisit their social and ethical responsibilities.

Valérie Rousseau, PhD
Curatorial Chair and Senior Curator of 20th-Century & Contemporary Art
American Folk Art Museum (AFAM)
August 31, 2026

² Catherine Morris, “Rethinking Biography,” interview by Valérie Rousseau, New York City, NY, May 15, 2026.

INTRODUCTION

Rethinking Biography: An Artist-Centered Project

Between 2023 and 2026, the American Folk Art Museum (AFAM) developed the *Rethinking Biography* project to strengthen the stewardship of its twentieth- and twenty-first-century art collection. This collection-based initiative involved overlapping tasks and responsibilities shared by the Museum's Curatorial, Collections, and Learning & Engagement teams. This prompted a reassessment of how works historically associated with self-taught art and art brut were acquired, documented, interpreted, exhibited, and contextualized

This initiative was uniquely centered on the artists, their agency, and issues surrounding authorship and positionality. It was structured into two complementary objectives: the first aimed to create new biographies for the 155 artists mapped for the project. The research-intensive undertaking enabled AFAM curators to assemble substantial artist files by bringing together primary-source documentation, correspondence, photographic records, and authoritative secondary references. In doing so, the project sought to develop a dynamic resource addressing the longstanding lack of scholarship surrounding artists who have been historically underrecognized, marginalized, underrepresented, or sidelined.

The second goal involved a review and update of the Museum's catalog records for the same group of 155 artists. This task included the verification of artists' names, life dates, places of creation, artwork titles, dates of creation, materials, and inscriptions. Particular attention was given to the provenance of artwork titles, distinguishing those assigned by the artist from those derived from common usage, transcribed from inscriptions on the object, supplied by catalogers, or applied by collectors. These revisions triggered written justifications to ensure transparency, accountability, and the long-term traceability of cataloging decisions. The revised records are being published incrementally on the Museum's online collections platform.

Taken together, these two strands of work engaged with contemporary cataloging standards and museum practices, confronting inherited biases, omissions, and harmful language embedded within legacy documentation, while reconsidering the epistemological foundations through which museums have historically interpreted and represented artists working outside established academic and institutional frameworks.

This collective effort³, supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), has generated outcomes that extend well beyond the production of new biographies and the revision of collection metadata. It resulted in the development of a suite of institutional resources and workflows, including comprehensive updates of the Museum's cataloging manual, informed by the internal and external conversations and discussions throughout the project; the completion of targeted digitization of critical areas of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century art collection; the consolidation of essential primary and scholarly resources into

³ The team and consultants involved in the *Rethinking Biography* project are acknowledged in the credits at the end of the white paper.

centralized curatorial research folders; the creation of a dedicated section on the Museum's website presenting the project; participation in focused collection management training sessions and scholarly symposia; and a series of interviews and consultations with key Museum staff and external museum professionals. The voices and perspectives of these participants, which form a cornerstone of this white paper, significantly anchored and enriched our comprehension of emerging best practices within the museum sector. Together, these findings obtained during the project establish a sustainable foundation for future research, cataloging, and interpretation, while also contributing to broader discussions about ethical documentation.

Over three interconnected chapters, this white paper first surveys the terminology associated with self-taught art (and art classified under related terms), then examines epistemological issues raised by self-taught artists in the context of their work's institutionalization and art historical recognition, and concludes with a series of practical recommendations for museum professionals regarding documentation, management, and access.

APPENDICES

A. List of Deliverables

- **Published New Biographies**
 - Wrote 155 new biographies
 - Imported into TMS
 - Imported on AFAM's Website's collection pages
- **Metadata Review and Cataloguing:**
 - Created Mapping Spreadsheet
 - Created Metadata Spreadsheets
 - Produced metadata spreadsheets
 - Created a glossary of 12 searchable keywords (Library of Congress subject headings) in the metadata spreadsheets to map the artist pool. Not implemented, but will be added once a plan for implementing controlled access headings for the entire collection is formalized.
 - Metadata Review
 - Outlined a metadata review of 155 artists and over 1,000 artworks.
 - Ongoing Curatorial input on five public-facing fields (Artist, Title, Date, Place/Region, Medium) and inscriptions.
 - Added metadata remarks related to artistic content, artist's statements, and historical references.
 - Flagged artists who required more thorough Curatorial reviews.
 - Constituent Spreadsheet
 - Produced Constituent Spreadsheet.
 - Completed Metadata Constituent Review for 155 artists: artist's names, alternate names, life dates, birth and death locations, and nationalities.
 - TMS Updates
 - Updated entries of metadata spreadsheets into TMS.
 - Cataloging Procedures and Metadata Guidelines
 - Updated of the institutional cataloguing manual *Cataloging Procedures and Metadata Guidelines*.
 - Flagged areas for more thorough Collections, Archives, and Curatorial inputs (best practices, methodologies, workflows, discussions on artist, title, inscription, date, translation, and vocabulary).
- **Photoshoots**
 - Completed photography for 276 objects
 - Maintain pre-existing workflows
 - Digitized and imported 34 portraits of artists
 - Flagged to-do list of photography

- **Consultants and Trainings**
 - Completed interviews with internal staff, including AFAM's Accessibility Statement reviewed by Learning & Engagement
 - Completed interviews with external consultants
 - Guest speaker at the LaM-Lille symposium *Droit au Brut* in December 2025, about ethical, legal, and institutional responsibilities associated to AFAM's area of expertise.
 - Trainings
 - Consult on best practices for metadata and standardization project
 - Workshop Neurodiversity in Museums & Cultural Spaces
 - Continuing education sessions with TMS (Crystal Reports; TMS Configuration; Foundations for Digital Collections; TMS Barcode Manager; Digital Preservation)
- **Curatorial Research Folder: A Robust and Scholarly Resource**
 - Created a Curatorial Research Folder in which there is a folder for each of the IMLS 155 artists. It incorporates primary sources, secondary sources, and supplemental images.
 - Flagged areas of growth (cf. Incorporate "Accessibility Discussion Meetings" in the exhibition template).
- **Webpage: IMLS program scope and results**
- **White Paper**

B. Mapping the IMLS Project: 155 Artists Selected

Aaron, Jesse J.
Aiken, Gayleen
Allanche, Jean-Daniel
Amezcu, Consuelo "Chelo" González
Andolsek, Eugene
Appel, Nicole
Arning, Eddie
Ashby, Steve
Auriti, Marino
Bartlett, Morton
Bascoulard, Marcel
Benavides, Hector Alonzo
Bergrichter, Ariane
Blagdon, Emery
Blauvelt, Pearl
Blizzard, Georgia
Bolden, Hawkins
Borkowski, Mary K.
Bowlin, Loy
Butler, David
Butler Wells, Helen
Byam, John
Castle, James
Chaissac, Gaston
Chand, Nek
Cohen, Shirley
Coleman, Joe
Consalvos, Felipe Jesus
Corbaz, Aloïse
Corbett, Mary Paulina
Courson, Alphonse Eugène
Crépin, Fleury-Joseph
Crystiano, Jesuys
Daley, Leonard
Darger, Henry
Deeds, Jr., James Edward
Dellschau, Charles A.A.
Dominguez, Anthony
Domsic, Janko
Dunahoo, Jessie
Edmondson, William
Evans, Minnie
Fengyi, Guo

Finster, Howard
Fujioka, Yuki
Gabritschevsky, Eugen
García Vivancos, Miguel
Ghizzardi, Pietro
Gibson, Sybil
Gill, Madge
Gironella, Joaquim Vicens
Godie, Lee
Grimes, Ken
Hall, William A.
Hawkins, William L.
Hilu, Nathan
Hirshfield, Morris
Hogancamp, Mark
Holley, Lonnie
Houston Jr., Otis
Howard, Jesse
Humphrey, Paul
Isidor, Marko Isidor Kamenovich
Jones, Frank Albert
Kane, John
Katsuhiro, Terao
King, Susan Te Kahurangi
Klett, August
Krüsi, Hans
Laffoley, Paul
Layton, Elizabeth
Leonov, Pavel
Lesage, Augustin
Light, Joe
Lloyd, James
Lockett, Ronald
Lonné, Raphaël
Mackintosh, Dwight
Marte, Daldo
Martin, Eddie Owens (St. EOM)
Martin, Paulino
Materson, Ray
McCarthy, Justin
McKesson, Malcolm
Miller, Dan
Mitsuo, Yumoto
Monsiel, Edmund
Morgan, Ike E.

Morgan, Sister Gertrude
Moser, Albert
Murray, J. B.
Nelson, Melvin Edward
Newton, B. J.
Nikifor, Epifaniy Drovnyak
Philadelphia Wireman
Pippin, Horace
Podhorsky, John
Portieles, Hector Pascual Gallo
Rabany, Antoine (Barbus Müller)
Rädler, Josef Karl
Rae, Helen
Ramírez, Martín
Ratier, Émile
Reddick, Michael
Rizzoli, Achilles
Robertson, Royal
Rodia, Simon
Rohrig, Daniel E.
Rothloff, Michael
Rowe, Nellie Mae
Ruley, Ellis
Saholt, Richard
Schöpke, Philipp
Schröder-Sonnenstern, Friedrich
Scott, Judith
Serl, Jon
Sheehy, Sandra
Shuji, Takashi
Syllas, Drossos P.
Smith, Kambel
Smith, Lewis
Smith, Mary T.
Smith, Richard C.
Steffen, Charles
Stiles Stern, Marilee
Sudduth, Jimmy Lee
Sullivan, Patrick J.
Talpazan, Ionel
Thomas, James "Son Ford"
Tolliver, Mose
Traylor, Bill
Tschirtner, Oswald
Ukai, Yuichio

Valentine, Monica
Velardi, John (Johnny)
von Bruenchenhein, Eugene
Walker, Inez Nathaniel
Wallis, Alfred
Warmack, Gregory "Mr. Imagination"
Way, Melvin
Wentworth, Perley M.
White, Ronnie
Widener, George
Willeto, Charlie
Wilson, Scottie
Wojciechowsky, Agatha
Wölfli, Adolf
Yamazaki, Nana
Yoakum, Joseph Elmer
Young, Purvis
Zeldis, David
Zemánková, Anna
Zinelli, Carlo
[Artist Unidentified: 2024.2.1]

C. Examples of Biographies

The 155 biographies produced within the context of the *Rethinking Biography* project are available for public access on the American Folk Art Museum Website at [address].

How to cite a biography:

[Author], “[Artist’s Name],” in Rousseau, Valérie, Allison C. Meier, and Brooke L. Wyatt, *Rethinking Biography*, edited by Valérie Rousseau (New York: American Folk Art Museum, 2026). An initiative supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS).

Example 1:

William Edmondson

1874, Nashville, Tennessee—1951, Nashville, Tennessee, United States

The first sculptures that William Edmondson made were tombstones for his family, friends, and neighbors. He used cast-off limestone from demolition sites in Nashville, Tennessee, to carve doves, lambs, angels, and portraits for memorials; he thus filled a need in the segregated South, where access to materials for monuments in African American cemeteries was often limited compared to the lavish marble and granite available for white cemeteries. He soon expanded into sculpture and ornamental garden objects, such as birdbaths, that he sold from his front yard, with a sign reading “Tomb-Stones. For Sale. Garden. Ornaments. Stone Work W M Edmondson.”

Edmondson was born in 1874 in Davidson County, Tennessee, to parents who were formerly enslaved and working as sharecroppers. It wasn’t until the early 1930s, after he lost a hospital janitorial job, that he felt divinely called to create sculptures: “I looked up in the sky, and right there in the noon daylight, He hung a tombstone out for me to make.” He had some experience as a stonemason’s assistant but largely taught himself, first with chisels made from railroad spikes, thus establishing a new livelihood in the midst of the Great Depression. He depicted people in his community, from teachers to preachers; Black celebrities such as boxer Jack Johnson; biblical figures such as the sisters Martha and Mary; seated nudes; and animals such as turtles, rams, and lions. His style was defined by the elegant simplicity of geometric forms, curved surfaces, and purposeful details.

Within years of when Edmondson started making art, the network of collectors he fostered led to international acclaim for what he called “sermons in stone.” In 1937, he became the first Black artist to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and in 1938 he was included in a group show at the Jeu de Paume in Paris. The American Folk Art Museum’s first monographic exhibition in 1965 was on Edmondson. Following his death in 1951, however, his local legacy in Nashville was obscured over the years, and it was only in 2020 that a historical marker went up at the site of his studio and home in his Edgehill neighborhood. Major exhibitions on his work opened in 2021 at the Cheekwood Estate & Gardens in Nashville and in 2023 at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. A number of his tombstones are also still extant in Tennessee cemeteries—reminders of how his art began as a transformation of discarded material into markers to honor his community’s dead.—Allison C. Meier

Example 2:**Aloïse Corbaz****1886, Lausanne, Switzerland—1964, Gimel, Switzerland**

Lushly drawn voluptuous women intertwined with their lovers, sometimes in military uniforms, are depicted over and over again in Aloïse Corbaz's work. The women's hair is wild and tousled, their blue eyes are wide, their skin lightly draped in luxurious gowns if anything at all, as they seem to consume their male partners with their bodies. The vibrant hues of Corbaz's art came from crayon and colored pencil as well as crushed geranium flowers and toothpaste. Decorative ornamentation and bursts of blooms fill every corner of the found paper that she used as her surfaces, giving the work a dramatic power. Corbaz regularly borrowed her subjects from opera, theater, and great historical romances, such as Cleopatra and Mark Antony or Napoléon I and Joséphine. Frequently, her drawings were double-sided or enlarged by stitching together multiple paper sheets with thread or yarn, the whole work becoming florid and expansive.

Born in 1886 in Lausanne, Switzerland, Corbaz had an early passion for becoming an opera singer. However, after working as a governess in the court of the German Emperor Wilhelm II and then returning to Switzerland with the outbreak of World War I, she was diagnosed as schizophrenic and institutionalized in 1918. From 1920 on, she would spend the entirety of her life at La Rosière psychiatric hospital in Gimel, Switzerland, where she created hundreds of drawings with the materials available to her. Although she started her work in secret, she was later encouraged and supported by the hospital staff. She also filled numerous notebooks with her drawings, featuring the same sensual themes, with visual narratives that merge and flow together as bodies connect and embrace, the imagery referencing sources ranging from fictional characters to royal and biblical figures.

Through psychiatrist Jacqueline Porret-Forel, Corbaz's work was brought to the attention of Jean Dubuffet and André Breton, and she became a prominent artist in the growing field of art brut, featured in exhibitions on art and psychopathology in the 1950s. She died in 1964, but her work has continued to beguile viewers with its lavish color and seductive tone, including a large multi-panel work exhibited at the 2024 Venice Biennale.—Allison C. Meier

Example 3:**James Castle****1899, Garden Valley, Idaho—1977, Boise, Idaho**

Although James Castle's art has a cryptic quality with its boxy figures, code-like writing, and off-kilter perspectives, it always comes back to home. Domestic interiors and farmscapes accented with rows of power lines and fences appear in his drawings, and his paper constructions of animals frequently represent the birds and cows that were plentiful in the rural Idaho communities where he spent much of his life. The bundling of some of these works inside handmade cardboard boxes further reflects how Castle regularly incorporated them into his home, hiding them away in the walls. His unconventional materials included stove soot mixed with saliva, sometimes tinted with watercolors of soft blues and greens made from soaked

crepe paper, yet there is a richness of tone and texture. Bedrooms and kitchens are evocatively shadowed, and humble details such as doorknobs and the lattice of wood in a barn are given the meticulous attention of still lifes.

Born deaf in 1899 in Garden Valley, Idaho, Castle started drawing at a young age. He spent time at a school for the deaf but was declared “uneducable” and returned home. With the support of his family, who gave him a desk to work at and then a whole trailer for a studio in 1963 at their house in Boise, Idaho, he spent most of his time on his art. Intensely focused on responding to the life around him, he was additionally inspired by the endless ephemera, in the form of mailers, magazines, and packaging, that arrived at the post office and general store operated at the family farm. Even when offered more formal art materials, he preferred to use what he found, such as in his handmade books made with recycled envelopes bound with string and illustrated with postage-stamp-sized portraits, interior views, and other sketches made with sharpened twigs or apricot pits rather than pencils or pens.

Castle’s art gained public appreciation in the 1950s, after a nephew shared his work with his teachers at the Museum Art School in Portland, Oregon. He had exhibitions at the Boise Gallery of Art (now the Boise Art Museum) in 1963 and 1976, soon before he died in 1977. His former home in Boise is now a historic site and museum, offering space not only to explore his practice but also for residencies for contemporary artists, keeping the site active as a place of creativity.—Allison C. Meier

Example 4:

Dan Miller

b. 1961, Castro Valley, California

Torrents of repeating words overlap, entangle, and become barely legible in Dan Miller’s art. In these compositions, language becomes abstraction through his process of layering text and imagery using felt-tip pen, ballpoint pen, and graphite, often accented with vibrant dashes of paint. Some pieces are monochromatic; others have boldly clashing colors. Among the gestural lines and brushstrokes are words for everyday objects and appliances—such as “socket,” “light bulb,” and “drill”—the names of people and cities, art terms, and mathematical notations.

Miller was born in 1961 in Castro Valley, California, and is on the autism spectrum. At a time when resources for children with neurodivergence were scarce, his family encouraged him to learn to spell and write words. Language became an intense focus of his art, which is inspired by his interests, the world around him, and memories, including recollections of the hardware store owned by his uncle. Since 1992, Miller has created his work at the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, California, a nonprofit that supports a community of artists with disabilities.

After Miller’s work was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, it was featured in the 2008 exhibition *Glossolalia: Languages of Drawing*. Global attention to his art has expanded over the years, and in 2017 it was included in the Venice Biennale. At the Creative Growth Art Center, Miller continues to experiment with his practice, at times working on sprawling panoramic pieces at a monumental scale. He has also added a typewriter to his repertoire,

making smaller works with repeated typed words reminiscent of concrete poetry. Recent exhibitions have highlighted his work in sculptural objects, ceramics, textiles, and prints, all with his distinctive accumulations of words that transform language into visual expression.—Allison C. Meier

D. Credits

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- Sarah Lombardi, Director, and Pauline Mack, Assistant Curator, Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne, Switzerland
- Catherine Morris, Curatorial Chair and Sackler Senior Curator for the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum.

Credits

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https://folkmuseum.org/content/uploads/2026/08/IMLS-Rethinking-Biography_White-Paper.pdf



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