



AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM

Rethinking Biography

White Paper

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Project Director's Foreword

Since 1961, the American Folk Art Museum (AFAM) has stewarded the work of twentieth-century self-taught artists whose biographies have traditionally played a central role in interpretation. The project *Rethinking Biography* emerged as an opportunity to critically examine museum practices by asking how we can research, catalog, manage, and interpret artworks in certain areas of our expertise and make 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 against the backdrop of profound transformations in the international museum sector, which became particularly pronounced from 2020 on in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice uprisings in the United States following the murder of George Floyd, which prompted widespread institutional self-reflection. For the first time in over twenty years, the International Council of Museums has revised its *Code of Ethics*, with the intention of strengthening 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, and natural history museums are confronting the colonial histories embedded in their collections and displays. Art museums are progressively expanding the boundaries of art history to embrace a wider range of art 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, explains, museums must take consistent actions “to keep visibility around

¹ International Council of Museums, “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>.

people, subjects, and objects” that in the past have proved to resist established conventions, “helping to make something as permanent as it can 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 artists’ agency, long-term documentation, transparency, and cumulative knowledge, the project aims to outline frameworks, guiding principles, and practical recommendations that remain adaptable as scholarship evolves and as museums continue to revisit their social and ethical responsibilities.

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American Folk Art Museum
August 31, 2026

² Catherine Morris, oral interview by Valérie Rousseau for *Rethinking Biography*, 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. It 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 objective involved a review and update of the Museum's catalog records for the same group of 155 artists. This task entailed 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, and reconsidering the epistemological foundations through which museums have historically interpreted and represented artists working outside established academic and institutional frameworks.

This collective effort, 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.³ It has resulted in the development of a suite of institutional resources and workflows, including comprehensive updates of the Museum's cataloging manual, informed by internal and external conversations and discussions

³ AFAM's team and outside consultants associated with the *Rethinking Biography* project are acknowledged in the credits section of the white paper.

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 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, anchored and enriched our comprehension of emerging best practices within the museum sector. Together, the findings of the project establish a sustainable foundation for future research, cataloging, and interpretation, and contribute 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.

CHAPTER 1. DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

The American Folk Art Museum (AFAM) champions artists whose work is shaped by personal experience rather than academic art training. This emphasis has guided the Museum since its inaugural exhibition in 1962; its collections now encompass four centuries of work and include artists from nearly every continent.⁴

The definitions and terminology used to identify artists in this context have evolved significantly over time and continue to do so today. Historically used terms have been subject to reevaluation to assess their potential for causing harm, perpetuating reductionism, or reinforcing marginalization. A primary focus of *Rethinking Biography* was to reevaluate this language in relation to acquisition and interpretation. Consistent with the project's emphasis on artistic agency, it was paramount that the art itself remain at the forefront of our examination, even when the artist's biography occupied a central position within the practice.

Terms such as “folk art,” “modern primitive,” “art brut,” “outsider art,” and “self-taught art” have historically been applied to a wide range of artists with a diversity of backgrounds, styles, techniques, and training, but also of race, gender, place of origin, class, mental health, and other perceived deviations from the societal norms. Notably, these qualifiers, along with other art-historical terms, have rarely been adopted by the artists themselves, who have generally not been involved in these discussions. Instead, they have been used predominantly by individuals engaged in collecting, curating, marketing, or critically analyzing these artists. Although these terms were intended to convey a sense of artistic recognition, the lived experiences of these artists often do not neatly align with their narrow definitions.

This chapter provides a concise overview of several definitions, characterizing them as intellectual constructs that emerged within specific historical circumstances. The terminology is critically reevaluated in relation to the artists represented in AFAM's collection and programs, without seeking to formalize a glossary applicable to the present day. This survey aligns with our commitment to a responsible updating of the language employed by AFAM for the art it collects, in conjunction with ongoing dialogues and scholarship, and facilitates broader conversations regarding inclusivity in the arts.

1.1. Normality and Exclusion

It is noteworthy that language that excludes individuals from what is deemed “normal” is a fundamental aspect of the areas of study and collecting encompassed by *Rethinking Biography*. Critiques of normality and related terms, such as “neurotypicality,” originating from disability studies and from other disciplines, such as queer theory and gender studies, were incorporated into the conceptual framework of this project. People of color, women, and those experiencing economic insecurity, as well as those with incarceration histories, lacking academic credentials, or living with disabilities or mental illnesses, have

⁴ See “Collection,” American Folk Art Museum, website, 2026. <https://folkartmuseum.org/about/>.

historically had restricted opportunities to access the conventional and most widely recognized pathway to fine art. Similarly, individuals residing in rural areas have not enjoyed equal access to major cultural centers.

AFAM's reconsideration of terms applied to artists includes those that perpetuate stereotypes about their experiences. Terms such as "eccentric" to describe an individual's behavior or portraying them as being "withdrawn" or "outcast" from societal norms are commonly encountered in written accounts of these artists. While not explicitly derogatory, these terms are problematic in numerous ways, particularly because they serve as broad generalizations that embrace a diverse range of distinct experiences, including homelessness and unconventional scientific and spiritual pursuits that deviate from established institutions. Consequently, they fail to adequately capture these artists' nuanced perspectives.

1.2. Folk Art⁵

Building upon the momentum of the "folk art" collecting movement that emerged in the early twentieth century, AFAM's earliest holdings of historical American objects have constituted the foundation of its collection since its establishment in 1961. These objects, commonly referred to as folk art, include weathervanes, wildfowl decoys, embroidery, ceramics, metalwork, and trade signs, and they lie at the heart of the organization's mission. Reflecting a wide spectrum of media and techniques, from quilting and furniture making to woodcarving and portraiture, they are frequently associated with vernacular training methods such as apprenticeships, the transmission of family knowledge, and other forms of community-based training. These objects, many of which originate outside of academic and urban networks, are perceived as representing shared community-based heritage, beliefs, or trade practices.⁶ They sometimes fulfill a primary utilitarian purpose in everyday life, a factor that can distinguish them from "fine art."

Patriotism is frequently an inherent component of the usage of the term "folk art" in the United States. Collectors, dealers, curators, and artists have employed "folk art" to celebrate the ingenuity of American creative production, tracing its origins to the preindustrial era. The concept emerged as a symbolic category, celebrated for its perceived authenticity, independence, and other qualities considered to be distinctly American. Among cultural circles, this positioning sought to elevate the United States as a cultural leader, comparable to established European nations.

⁵ This section draws up from Emelie Gevalt, "State of the Art Collection: Historical Folk Art," American Folk Art Museum, New York City, NY, June 7, 2021; Emelie Gevalt and Caroline Culp, wall text, *Folk Nation: Crafting Patriotism in the United States*, American Folk Art Museum, New York City, NY, October 9, 2026–February 28, 2027; each of these texts were shaped by, in particular, Elizabeth Stillinger, *A Kind of Archaeology: Collecting American Folk Art, 1876–1976* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).

⁶ Stacy C. Hollander, wall text, *Folk Art Revealed*, American Folk Art Museum, New York City, NY, November 16, 2004–August 23, 2009. We may note that portraiture, in particular, originates from academic and urban ideals but takes new forms in vernacular contexts. <https://folkartmuseum.org/exhibitions/folk-art-revealed/>.

Notably, the newfound appreciation for folk art emerged during a tumultuous era of rapid urban development and industrialization. This surge in interest was fueled by a yearning for an idealized simplicity that was perceived to characterize preindustrial life. In Europe, a parallel sentiment was manifested, for instance, in the late-nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement in the realm of fine and decorative arts. These trends established a strong connection between nationalism and vernacular culture. The contemporary usage of the term “craft” is inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement, particularly in its application to practitioners who possess academic training but engage in traditional methods that deviate from mainstream, commercial, industrial practices.⁷

By the 1920s and 1930s in the United States, the term “folk art” began to replace earlier, more patronizing terms such as “provincial” and “naïve.” This usage emphasized the unique forms of American-born craftsmanship that were supposedly uninfluenced by academic trends originating from Europe. Often, traditional Indigenous artforms that predate colonization and have endured beyond it have been set apart from the “folk art” market category, as have the traditional creative productions of immigrants from non-Western countries. Such homogenizing concepts have been challenged in recent decades, with a push for a more inclusive and representative framing of the “folk art” category that encompasses a broader picture of American experiences.⁸

1.3. Modern Primitive⁹

The term “modern primitive,” no longer employed, emerged in the 1930s and 1940s to categorize a group of paintings created by untrained artists in the United States, many of whom were included in AFAM’s collection. Alfred H. Barr Jr., the founding director of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, from 1929 to 1943, championed their works through exhibitions such as *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America* in 1938. In 1942, the American gallery owner Sidney Janis published *They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters of the 20th Century*, which included American artists, such as Morris Hirshfield, Anna Mary Robertson “Grandma” Moses, Horace Pippin, and Patrick J. Sullivan.

The individualism expressed by the “modern primitive” artists and the perceived egalitarianism of their creations resonated with an American audience. Their experimentation and disregard for conventional artistic norms also appealed to the Surrealists’ taste and to mainstream art collectors, resulting in Hirshfield receiving a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1943.¹⁰ This interest was shaped in

⁷ Gevalt and Culp, *Folk Nation*.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The ideas put forth in this section were drawn from Valérie Rousseau, “State of The Art Collection: 20th and 21st Century Self-Taught Art and Art Brut,” American Folk Art Museum, New York City, NY, September 13, 2021.

¹⁰ See Valérie Rousseau and Suzie Oppenheimer, wall text, *Self-Made: A Century of Inventing Artists*, American Folk Art Museum, New York City, NY, April 10 –September 13, 2026, and American Folk Art Museum, “Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered Now on View at the American Folk Art Museum,” press release, April 20, 2022, <https://folkartmuseum.org/news/press-release-morris-hirshfield-rediscovered/>.

part by the popularity of self-taught artists, often characterized as “naïve,” in Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including André Bauchant, Camille Bombois, and Henri Rousseau. These artists embraced the realism promoted by academic art, despite not having participated in its systems. To emphasize their lack of formal training, narratives frequently highlighted their “non-artistic careers.” For instance, the press release accompanying the exhibition *Modern Primitives: Artists of the People*, which opened at MoMA in 1941, presented Bombois as a “French laborer and circus strongman,” Patrick J. Sullivan as an “American house painter and steel mill worker,” and Alfred Wallis as a “fisherman of Cornwall.”¹¹

The term “primitive” has been employed to characterize art that deviates from European traditions, such as work originating from Africa and Oceania. Modern artists such as Pablo Picasso and Paul Gauguin drew inspiration from the presumed purity of this work, disregarding its deeper cultural, functional, or spiritual significance. In this context, “primitivism” serves as a Eurocentric term that reinforces a colonial perspective on artistic expression.

1.4. Art Brut and Jean Dubuffet¹²

The term “Art brut,” literally translated as “raw art,” was coined by French painter Jean Dubuffet in 1945 to describe artists who operate outside of conventional cultural channels and peer systems. Although it frequently refers to art created by patients in psychiatric institutions, it also encompasses a diverse range of creators with nontraditional artistic backgrounds. Unlike “folk art,” which adheres to communal and vernacular traditions, art brut is rooted in individual expression. A distinguishing characteristic of art brut, compared to “modern primitive,” lies in its aesthetic, as fewer artists conformed to the realism promoted by academic art or utilized materials typically associated with the art profession (e.g., canvas, paint in tubes, frames, brushes).

Dubuffet sought to identify art liberated from the constraints of academic tradition and its intellectual conformity, as well as from the objectives of popular recognition and financial gain. Like many avant-garde modernists, he was inspired by the German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn’s 1922 book *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* (Artistry of the Mentally Ill), a seminal publication that investigated creativity and mental illness in 150 works of art collected from psychiatric hospitals across Europe.¹³ In 1945, Dubuffet began to amass a collection that grew to over five thousand works created by individuals who were somehow insulated from artistic conventions—*l’homme du commun* (“the common man”), people

¹¹ *Modern Primitives: Artists of the People*, Museum of Modern Art, New York City, NY, October 21, 1941–April 30, 1944. See Museum of Modern Art, website, 2026, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1703>.

¹² The ideas put forth in this section were drawn from Rousseau, “State of The Art Collection.” On art brut and Jean Dubuffet, see also Michel Thévoz, *Art Brut* (New York: Rizzoli, 1976); Lucienne Peiry, *L’Art Brut* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999); *Art Brut in America: The Incursion of Jean Dubuffet*, American Folk Art Museum, New York City, NY, October 13, 2015–January 10, 2016; Céline Delavaux, *L’art brut, un fantasme de peintre* (Paris: Flammarion, 2018).

¹³ “Hans Prinzhorn’s Artistry of the Mentally Ill (1922),” The Public Domain Review, website, 2026, <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/hans-prinzhorn-s-artistry-of-the-mentally-ill-1922/>.

with mental illness undergoing psychiatric care, spiritualists, and incarcerated or marginalized individuals. In 1948, he cofounded the Compagnie de l'Art Brut, with André Breton, to support the scholarship of what he perceived as an underappreciated artistic area that “manifests the function of invention.”¹⁴¹⁵ Rather than creating “art brut” as a category, he advocated for it as an evolving notion that can inherently challenge accepted beliefs about what art is and who artists are.

Since 1971, Dubuffet's collection has been housed in the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland. Among the artists he promoted, many are also included in AFAM's collection, such as Aloïse Corbaz, Fleury-Joseph Crépin, Eugen Gabritschewsky, Madge Gill, Émile Ratier, Adolf Wölfli, and Carlo Zinelli. Today, although aligned with Dubuffet's criteria, the notion of art brut has expanded to encompass international examples that reflect a global history of individual practices, including those of the Mexican artist Martín Ramírez, the Japanese artist Yuichiro Ukai, and the American artists Eugene von Bruenchenhein, Judith Scott, and Joseph E. Yoakum.

1.5. Outsider Art and Roger Cardinal

In his 1972 book *Outsider Art*, the British art historian Roger Cardinal introduced the term as an English equivalent of “art brut.”¹⁶ The twenty-nine artists he featured had crossover with the artists championed by Dubuffet, including Aloïse Corbaz and Adolf Wölfli.¹⁷ The publication gained significant popularity in the United States, reaching a new wave of collectors who were drawn to Cardinal's fresh perspective on artists working on the fringes of artistic conventions, free from the customary rules of artmaking. In his 1994 essay “Toward an Outsider Aesthetic,” Cardinal described this art as “creative work produced by persons operating spontaneously and with no consideration for artistic rules or conventions, as taught and recognized in schools and academies, or derived from mainstream cultural knowledge.”¹⁸ Throughout his essays, Cardinal highlighted numerous artists represented in AFAM's collections, including Simon Rodia, Madge Gill, Augustin Lesage, Scottie Wilson, Carlo Zinelli, and Anna Zemánková.

More expansive than the term “art brut”—which remains connected to Dubuffet's collection and legacy—“outsider art” quickly expanded beyond its original definition to encompass any self-taught artists who work independently of conventional fine art

¹⁴ “Discover Art Brut,” Collection de l'Art Brut, website, 2026, <https://artbrut.ch/en/discover-art-brut>.

¹⁵ “Historique,” Collection de l'Art Brut, website, 2026, <https://artbrut.ch/fr/historique>.

¹⁶ Cardinal said that the title was a publisher's decision, as he would have preferred to use the French term. “Outsider art” was used solely in the publication title; “art brut” appears throughout the essays. For additional details, see Valérie Rousseau, “Outsider,” in *LaM Œuvres*, ed. Christophe Boulanger and Corinne Barbant (Lille: LaM-Lille métropole, musée d'art moderne, d'art contemporain et d'art brut, 2014), and Charles Darwent, “Roger Cardinal Obituary,” *The Guardian*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/nov/26/roger-cardinal-obituary>.

¹⁷ Roger Cardinal, *Outsider Art* (New York: Praeger, 1973), <https://archive.org/details/outsiderart0000card/page/n5/mode/2up>.

¹⁸ Roger Cardinal, “Toward an Outsider Aesthetic,” in *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, ed. Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 20–43.

systems. Unlike folk art, which is communal in nature, outsider artists create their own self-directed practices without models or community-based traditions. Whereas art brut emphasizes the raw aesthetic of the art, outsider art focuses on the societal status of the creator; both terms, however, often refer to individuality and inventiveness. Leslie Umberger, Senior Curator of Folk and Self-Taught Art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and Renwick Gallery, writes that outsider art is “a term that describes the artist, not the art—a euphemism for the identity politics of race, class, and social agency.”¹⁹ Indeed, labeling artists as “outsiders” can obscure the social and political factors that determine who is categorized as such in the first place and thus subjected to unequal representation in the art world and art history. Although the term may appear to function as a neutral classification, it can actually reflect assumptions about an artist’s race, class, and social agency. It may appear to celebrate artists who deviate from normative trajectories and operate beyond conventional art-world structures, but it can also define them primarily through their exclusion from those structures.

The term “outsider” is implicitly positioned against that of “insider,” leading to the perception of outsider art as exclusionary, a notion that Cardinal acknowledged and addressed. In 2009, he noted that although outsider art discourse often fixates on the “aberrant biographies” of its creators, there “is a better way of handling the issue of definition: namely, by underlining the anticonventional nature of the art making itself, its idiosyncrasy, its often unworldly distance from artistic norms, as well as from commonplace experience.”²⁰

Outsider art, like art brut, was initially associated with white artists of European descent, who, although they were transgressing artistic boundaries, were working from a relatively homogeneous background. However, as the canon gained popularity from the 1980s through publications, art fairs, exhibitions, and associations, and as it encompassed a broader pool of artists, the art-world establishment began to express some resistance to characterizing artists such as Guo Fengyi, Susan Te Kahurangi King, and David Butler as outsider artists. An understanding of an artist’s culture, whether Chinese, New Zealander, or African American, illuminates the communities they emerged from and their traditions and beliefs. These experiences are often “inside” rather than “outside” of a culture, even if that context is not immediately apparent to observers.

The variability inherent in the term “outsider” disrupts the structures of art history, including its schools, categories, and principles. Similarly, related collections are subjective and based on the collector or dealer behind them. Nevertheless, in its fluidity, the term reflects the fluctuating boundaries of the art it describes.²¹

¹⁹ Leslie Umberger, “A Changing Tide: Self-Taught Artists Shift the Narrative,” in *We Are Made of Stories: Self-Taught Artists in the Robson Family Collection*, ed. Leslie Umberger (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum in association with Princeton University Press, 2022), 229.

²⁰ Roger Cardinal, “Outsider Art and the Autistic Creator,” *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 364, no. 1522 (May 27, 2009), 1459–66, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40485920>.

²¹ Rousseau, “Outsider.”

1.6. Neurodiversity, Disability, and the Art Studio²²

Numerous artists collected by Dubuffet under the label of “art brut” exhibit crossovers to contemporary definitions of neurodiversity and disability. The discourse and definition of neurodiversity and disability have undergone transformations throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries due to shifting care approaches, evolving institutional frameworks, and legislation that has facilitated equal access and protection against discrimination. Although AFAM does not apply these terms broadly, it is crucial to examine their historical context in relation to the artists in the collection. This analysis provides insights into the artists’ agency and the circumstances surrounding the creation, collection, and exhibition of their work.

After decades in which large-scale asylums constituted the prevailing model of mental healthcare, the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s marked a period of psychiatric reform commonly termed “deinstitutionalization.” The introduction of chlorpromazine (marketed as Thorazine)—the first antipsychotic medication—in the United States in 1954 contributed to the declining use of invasive and often harmful interventions, including lobotomies, early unmodified electroconvulsive therapy, and insulin shock therapies. Over the subsequent years, the number of hospital patients in the United States plummeted. Simultaneously, there was a reckoning with state mental hospitals on both financial and ethical grounds. The Mental Health Study Act of 1955 mandated “an objective, thorough, and nationwide analysis and reevaluation of the human and economic challenges associated with mental illness.”²³ Investigations into the closed-world systems of mental health institutions were published, including Erving Goffman’s *Asylums: Essays on the Condition of the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (1961). Consequently, community-based mental health services emerged as the envisioned future of care.

During the 1970s, growing criticism of coercive and abusive psychiatric practices, including early, unmodified electroconvulsive therapy, contributed to the emergence of patient advocacy networks and influential texts such as *On Our Own: Patient Controlled Alternatives to the Mental Health System* (1978) by Judi Chamberlin, co-founder of the Mental Patients’ Liberation Front. Patients also fought against the categorization of their lifestyle or identity as an illness. Notably, in 1973, the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder.²⁴

In addition to the formation of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) in 1979, organizations such as the Living Museum of Creedmoor Psychiatric Center and the Healing

²² Many ideas put forth in this section were drawn from Joana Masó, Carles Guerra, Valérie Rousseau, and Edward Dioguardi, wall text, *Francesc Tosquelles: Avant-Garde Psychiatry and the Birth of Art Brut*, American Folk Art Museum, New York City, NY, April 12, 2024–August 18, 2024, <https://folkmuseum.org/exhibitions/tosquelles/>.

²³ “National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH),” National Institutes of Health, January 21, 2025, <https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/nih-almanac/national-institute-mental-health-nimh>.

²⁴ Jack Drescher, “Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality,” *Behavioral Science* 5, no. 4 (2015): 565–75, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4695779/>.

Arts Initiative (HAI), established in New York City in 1970, incorporated art practice into treatment. A significant number of HAI's workshop participants have been included over the years in AFAM's collection, including Melvin Way and Lady Shalimar Montague.²⁵ Similarly, artists affiliated with the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, California, founded in 1974 to serve individuals with developmental, intellectual, and physical disabilities, have gained global recognition. Among them are Dan Miller, who joined the organization in 1992, and Judith Scott, who arrived in 1985 after being institutionalized for most of her life. These organizations, along with numerous other workshops, creative studios, and art therapy programs that support exhibitions, collecting activities, and professional opportunities for artists with disabilities, were established across the United States, Europe, Asia, and South America.

As personal autonomy in treatment gained prominence, mental healthcare underwent a shift toward a more biochemically focused approach. Notably, in 1988, fluoxetine (Prozac) hit the American market as the first selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI). This development contributed to increasing awareness of the prevalence of mental illness, with NAMI reporting that one in five American adults experiences mental health conditions annually. This heightened awareness has played a significant role in its destigmatization.²⁶

Furthermore, in 1990, the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA) was enacted, prohibiting discrimination based on disability. Subsequently, the *ADA Amendments Act* of 2008 expanded the definition of "disability" under this civil rights law.²⁷ The ADA now defines an individual with disabilities as someone who "has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities"; "has a history or record of such an impairment (such as cancer that is in remission)"; or "is perceived by others as having such an impairment (such as a person who has scars from a severe burn)."²⁸

The term "neurodiversity" was introduced in 1998 by the sociologist and disability activist Judy Singer in a publication on disability, human rights, and society. Singer emphasized the significance of the "autistic spectrum" in advocacy for and anticipation of a politics of neurological diversity, commonly referred to as "neurodiversity." She underscored that the "neurologically different" constitute a new addition to the established political categories of class, gender, and race, thereby enhancing the insights derived from the social model of disability.

²⁵ American Folk Art Museum, "American Folk Art Museum Acquires Healing Arts Initiative's Archive," press release, March 9, 2022, <https://folkmuseum.org/news/healing-arts-initiative/>.

²⁶ "Mental Health by the Numbers," National Alliance of Mental Illness, 2025, <https://www.nami.org/mental-health-by-the-numbers/>.

²⁷ "A Brief History of Civil Rights in the United States: ADA Amendments Act of 2008," Howard University School of Law, website, August 19, 2026, <https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/disabled/adaamendments>.

²⁸ "Introduction to the Americans with Disabilities Act," ADA.gov. U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, website, 2026, <https://www.ada.gov/topics/intro-to-ada/>.

Singer's work, along with subsequent writings such as Steve Silberman's *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*, heralded new aspects of the disability rights movement that commenced with the acknowledgment of the autism spectrum as a novel form of invisible disability. This recognition shed new light on individuals previously stigmatized as "eccentric" or social "outcasts," thereby aiding in the resistance against exclusion and mistreatment and leading to the creation of collective platforms that provided such individuals with a public voice.

Examination of artists in AFAM's collection—including those whose work predates these changes and ADA protections, as well as that of later artists—demonstrates how greater accessibility to opportunity has empowered their practices.

1.7. Self-Taught Art²⁹

The term "self-taught" is typically applied to artists who independently develop their art practices by using materials from their daily lives or their surrounding environments. This concept emerged as a distinct branch of the art world lexicon in the United States during the 1970s. Herbert Waide Hemphill, one of the six founders of the American Folk Art Museum, played a pivotal role in its development. He traveled across the country, actively collecting artwork directly from living artists, as evidenced by the numerous examples showcased in the 1970 exhibition *Twentieth-Century Folk Art*.³⁰ Presented during the context of the counterculture era, characterized by the women's liberation and the civil rights movements, the exhibition took place at a moment of recognition and celebration of national diversity, advancing the democratization of artistic expression. Interpretation of the works on view diverged from how folk art had been described and collected in the past. Initially associated with the term "folk art," self-taught art was often positioned as its contemporary successor. In this context, self-taught artists' narratives were distinguished through a focus on the singular expressions of individual artists rather than representations of enduring craft traditions. Although the term "self-taught art" shares some characteristics with the terms "outsider art" and "art brut," it rarely singles out artists whose experiences are associated with psychiatric conditions or social marginalization. Typically, it is used to refer to American artists, active during the latter half of the twentieth century, whose artistic development was shaped by the modern world rather than its historical traditions.

A pivotal event in promoting the emergence of a new phase of self-taught art collecting and exhibition was *Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980*, which opened in 1982 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The exhibition showcased over 325 works by twenty African American self-taught artists—many of them now represented in AFAM's collection, including Jesse J. Aaron, Steve Ashby, David Butler, Sam Doyle, William Edmondson, James "Son Ford" Thomas, Mose Tolliver, Bill Traylor, and Joseph E. Yoakum. Given that art brut had focused predominantly on European artists, this exhibition and the

²⁹ Rousseau, "State of The Art Collection."

³⁰ *Twentieth-Century Folk Art*, American Folk Art Museum, New York City, NY, September 9–November 29, 1970.

scholarly interest surrounding its artists would significantly enrich the representation of African American artists in museum collections such as AFAM's. Especially significant was the inclusion of works created in the tradition of yard shows originating in the American South. With its ultimate impact extending across lines of race and artistic approach, *Black Folk Art in America* paved the way for the formalization of a new collecting area, ranging from the investigations of artists who created art environments—such as Emery Blagdon, Howard Finster, Eddie Owens Martin, Simon Rodia, and Mary T. Smith—to the celebration of newly discovered singular creators—such as Consuelo “Chelo” González Amézcuca, Clementine Hunter, Justin McCarthy, Paul Laffoley, Jon Serl, Ray Materson, and John (Johnny) Velardi.

Today, what does it mean to be labeled as a “self-taught artist”? The term refers to an artist who has acquired knowledge or skills through non-academic initiatives rather than through formal instruction, teaching, and training. As institutions increasingly promote the expansion of artistic boundaries, this conceptual category acknowledges that art schools are not the sole venues for learning. Historical works categorized as folk art often speak to longstanding communal practices that demonstrate the rich creative traditions fostered outside the fine art academy. Contemporary community spaces such as workshops for artists with disabilities can serve as vibrant platforms for collaborative projects. The artists in AFAM's collection have operated outside the boundaries of galleries, museums, or academic spaces, but their work nonetheless draws from various “sites of learning.”

Therefore, referring to self-taught artists as uneducated is inaccurate. Describing them as mere “amateurs” or framing them as isolated geniuses overlooks their extensive networks, influences, and relationships. Many were in fact “taught” or influenced by family and community members. For instance, Ronald Lockett, an artist whose work has been exhibited at AFAM, received guidance from his older cousin, the artist Thornton Dial. Purvis Young learned to paint from his uncle, Irvin Young, a sign painter.

Self-directed experimentation with materials constitutes another form of artistic study. Numerous self-taught artists transitioned to art following other careers and employed earlier professional expertise—not traditionally associated with fine art study—as part of their art practices. For example, Morris Hirshfield drew upon his years of experience in the garment industry to create distinctive depictions of body shapes; his paintings exhibit a form of pointillism that closely resembles fabric. Simon Rodia worked in construction before creating his colossal Watts Towers environment in Los Angeles. As we will explore in chapter 2 of this white paper, the unconventional life circumstances of many self-taught artists may have contributed to a deficit of information about such informal learning experiences. With this in mind, it was crucial, during the *Rethinking Biography* project, to avoid making assumptions about the lived experience of artists who have been labeled as self-taught. Instead, the focus was placed on the artists' practices and achievements, looking beyond what has sometimes been presumed to be limitations in their training.

Definitions and terminology will always have inherent limitations regarding capturing an individual artist's unique experience. Despite imperfections, over the past century they have undergone meaningful evolution, shifting public perspectives and deepening

understanding of historically overlooked artists. Through its collections and broad range of programming—from advancing original scholarship to acquiring works from underrepresented disciplines such as performance, literature, and photography—AFAM continues to expand the boundaries of self-taught art, embracing opportunities for inclusion and growth rather than restriction or exclusion.³¹

³¹ In terms of expansive narratives of self-taught art and artmaking, see the following exhibitions at AFAM: *When the Curtain Never Comes Down*, March 26–July 5, 2015; *Vestiges & Verse: Notes from the Newfangled Epic*, January 21–May 27, 2018; and *PHOTO | BRUT: Collection Bruno Decharme & Compagnie*, January 24–June 6, 2021.

CHAPTER 2. EPISTEMOLOGY: SELF-TAUGHT ARTISTS AND THE BIOGRAPHY

As laid out in the introduction, the *Rethinking Biography* project encompassed two primary tasks: the creation of new biographies for 155 artists historically associated with self-taught art and art brut represented in AFAM's collection, and the metadata review of associated artworks.³² This entailed verifying and updating the tombstone information for approximately 1,000 entries, with a specific focus on five public-facing fields: artist, title, date of production, location of creation, and medium or media employed.

In this chapter, we provide perspectives on the intellectual processes behind these two endeavors by identifying a set of epistemological questions that are particularly pertinent to this art field. The questions involve considerations about the artist's sites of learning, the challenges of documentation and value of primary sources, the exploration of unconventional art vocabularies and trajectories, ethical imperatives and concerns related to medical and criminal histories, the expansion of artistic boundaries, and emphasis on biographies in developing interpretation. How we dealt with these characteristics shaped how we approached the project and its goals for sustainable outcomes.

Biographical narrative has always been a core aspect of the history of self-taught art; however, the direct participation of the artist in this process has not always been prioritized. When Jean Dubuffet authored or oversaw biographies for his *Publications de L'Art Brut* (first launched in 1964), he did not seek to give living artists a direct voice. Although he did place significant emphasis on primary sources such as correspondence and interviews with doctors, the exclusion of first-person perspectives may have contributed to endowing the makers' origin stories with a certain mythological quality. In addition, issues of medical confidentiality surrounding works produced by psychiatric patients—circumstances that apply to many artists collected by Dubuffet—have complicated efforts to reconstruct their individual life stories.³³

Along these lines, Savine Faupin and Christophe Boulanger—respectively Chief Curator and Associate Curator of Lille Métropole Musée d'art moderne, d'art contemporain et d'art brut (LaM)—shared their experience related to the acquisition of a major gift of art brut by the L'Aracine collection in 1999 and the incorporation of these works into LaM's modern and contemporary art collections. Describing this process, they noted, "We have continually contemplated the most appropriate and ethically sound methods of presenting the names and biographical information of the creators. We have also sought to scrutinize the power dynamics inherent to the artists represented in our database. Do the forms of exclusion that it may perpetuate not necessitate a reconsideration of our relationship to biography, elevating it to an ethical concern in its own right?"³⁴

³² The criteria informing this selection are discussed in Chapter 3.1, "Mapping the *Rethinking Biography* Project."

³³ On this subject, see Savine Faupin and Christophe Boulanger, "L'artiste au centre du récit. Entretien avec Valérie Rousseau," in *L'Art Brut au LaM*, ed. Christian Boulanger, Sébastien Faucon, and Savine Faupin (Paris: Gallimard, 2026), 200–03.

³⁴ Ibid.

Since self-taught art came to prominence, numerous biographies have been written about individuals who were not necessarily in a position to be heard or to speak for themselves. Such artists' profiles underwent modifications, adaptations, translations, and republishing, ultimately resulting in resources of potentially inconsistent reliability. Faced with a historically accumulated body of information, we were compelled to closely reexamine data accuracy within the context of *Rethinking Biography*, including the extent to which past scholarship might encompass misrepresentations, attempts at normalization, and the promotion of reductive forms of categorization.

2.1. Ethical Imperatives

“We aim not to speak for others but, rather, to create spaces to magnify their experiences so they will be known.”³⁵

Museum professionals responsible for describing self-taught artists and their work for both cataloging and interpretive purposes frequently rely on biographical information and historical context, particularly as these relate to the conditions, lived experiences, and social realities that shape art production. Although biography can provide essential context for understanding self-taught art, its use also raises significant ethical concerns regarding whose narratives are recounted, how they are structured, and who has the authority to construct those stories. *Rethinking Biography* aims to situate the use of biography within a broader framework that recognizes description and interpretation as consequential acts of representation rather than as neutral documentation. Within this context, it operates at the confluence of several interconnected imperatives:

- Histories of exclusion and discrimination
- Institutional power dynamics
- Ethical and liberatory inclusion practices
- Agency and representation of diverse worldviews
- Access to public cultural spaces
- Accountability for positionalities and localities
- Repair

Museum practices are inseparable from legacies of structural racism, sexism, classism, and ableism. These dynamics engender systems of privilege, distinct lived experiences, and specific forms of inequality. Responsible research, cataloging, and interpretation will have a lasting impact only if they acknowledge and account for these problematic legacies and the power relationships that favor certain groups while marginalizing others. Artists may be excluded and disenfranchised on such grounds, or narratives may become distorted. The project's theoretical framework draws on theories of intersectionality,³⁶ which suggest that various forms of discrimination and oppression—such as sexism, racism, classism, and ableism—interact simultaneously. This approach facilitates the understanding of how

³⁵ Jessica A. Cooley and Ann M. Fox, “Crip Curation as Care: A Manifesto,” *Theater* 52, no. 2 (2022): 11.

³⁶ This concept has descended in lineages of Black feminist thought. See Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

multiple identity markers—including gender, race or ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, age, and disability—intersect to shape individuals’ experiences. It shows that people can’t be comprehended solely through isolated identity factors, as their combined traits produce multifaceted, lived experiences.

Studying the work of self-taught artists asks us to confront the intertwined histories of spaces of marginalization such as psychiatric institutionalization and incarceration. In *Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition* (2020), Ben Moshe posits that psychiatric institutions and prisons exist on a continuum; he highlights their shared logics of surveillance, control, and social exclusion and distinguishes their specific forms of confinement. He also demonstrates how psychiatric diagnoses, institutionalization, and judicial systems have historically pathologized marginalized individuals rather than addressing structural inequalities. These dynamics persist today, disproportionately impacting people of color, through processes ranging from segregated education and the school-to-prison pipeline to incarceration. As Therí A. Pickens argues, the segregation of disability mirrors racial segregation in its function of rendering marginalized bodies invisible within public life.³⁷

Prime among these imperatives is the need to contextualize contemporary movements advocating for the recognition of neurodiversity in the arts in relation to the fields of disability arts and disability studies, as well as movements for deinstitutionalization and decarceration. Who narrates these artists’ stories? Crucially, this contextualization necessitates considering self-taught artists as the experts on their life and work, by shifting from “serving” to “engaging in community.”

In this regard, practices aligned with “person-centered thinking” provide valuable insights; the creative art center Creativity Explored in San Francisco, for instance, supports the notion “that each artist has the capacity to understand their life and self-actualize their needs, especially when making art in our studios.”³⁸ Cristina Agostinelli, Curatorial Attaché and Head of Programming at the Musée national d’art moderne—Centre Pompidou, cited an example related to the exhibition *Art Brut: Collection Decharme* (Grand Palais, Paris, 2025): “The artists and their families were invited to the opening reception,” she recalled. “In response to a question regarding the installation of his work, an artist stated that he found it satisfactory, but added after a pause that the work was better displayed at his residence. This response deserves reflection, both in terms of the artists’ reception of their work—whose presumed detachment is too frequently evoked—and in relation to our professional practices. Yet this [installation instructions] is a question that we pose to ourselves almost automatically for any other artist, even if we do not consistently act upon it.”³⁹

³⁷ Therí A. Pickens, “Blue Blackness, Black Blueness: Making Sense of Blackness and Disability,” *African American Review* 50, no. 2 (2017): 93–103.

³⁸ Ann Kappes (ed.), *Art is Art: Collaborating with Neurodiverse Artists at Creativity Explored* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2023).

³⁹ Cristina Agostinelli, written interview by Valérie Rousseau for *Rethinking Biography*, Paris, France, April 15, 2026.

In this respect, self-taught artists can function as catalysts for institutional self-examination. More systematic consideration should be given to their involvement across the larger spectrum of museum methodologies. Agostinelli argued that “this would not necessarily require major institutional changes, but rather a shift in perspective. We think that we are acting on behalf of the artists, that we are protecting them. Yet can such participation ever be fully realized without applying a form of ‘institutional psychotherapy’ to the museum itself? It is precisely through the involvement of all stakeholders that we avoid embodying forms of absolute authority.”⁴⁰

Given that self-taught artists are “exposing” dominant systems from which they are excluded, “microhistory,” as theorized in the 1970s by the historians Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, offers an alternative framework. Microhistory involves reducing the scope of observation to examine “ordinary” individuals, specific events, or small communities. It aims at illuminating the broader structures of society through the analysis of its details and “anomalies”—a suggested characterization that refers to artists challenging the status quo and engaging in a reevaluation of power, norms, and culture. Through this lens and drawing on the work of Philippe Artières, the curators at LaM-Lille have sought to situate the art brut creators from the museum’s collection within a more accurate microhistorical context.⁴¹

The guiding principles provided by the disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, asserting the political implications of all analysis and evaluation, offer structure for *Rethinking Biography*. In the accompanying catalog for her exhibition of Judith Scott’s work at the Brooklyn Museum, Catherine Morris explores the intersection of feminist theory and disability studies, referring to Garland-Thomson’s four tenets:⁴²

- “Representation structures reality,” emphasizing the potential impact and relevance of museum work.
- “Margins define the center,” advocating for the value and contribution of practices often perceived as peripheral, isolated, or insignificant.
- “Gender [or disability] is a way of signifying relationships of power.”
- “Human identity is multiple and unstable,” therefore subject to change.

These vectors succinctly summarize the pressing issues that this project endeavors to address.

2.2. Sites of Learning and Chain of Recognition

Three related characteristics shape the artistic journeys of self-taught artists, distinguishing them from a conventional career trajectory:

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Among other contributions, see those by the writer Pierre Dhainaut and the medical historian Florence Choquard.

⁴² Catherine Morris, “Judith Scott and the Politics of Biography,” in *Judith Scott: Bound & Unbound*, ed. Catherine Morris and Matthew Higgs (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, with DelMonico Books, 2014), 15.

- Intersections between the creators' artistic expression and their daily routines
- Practices rooted to and informed by various non-academic "sites of learning"
- Works developed outside conventional systems, impacting artistic recognition and preservation

In contrast to the professional trajectory of academically trained artists, self-taught artists typically engage in projects that are integrated into their daily routines. Such projects may include paintings created in an individual's home after retirement or during recovery from illness, extensive bodies of work that are discovered posthumously, large-scale art environments developed over a lifetime, or drawings by mental patients that are preserved in medical records. From an external perspective, this approach tends to blur the boundaries between art and life.

Although these creators "lack" formal training, their practices are grounded in and influenced by diverse "sites of learning," including prior professional expertise, personal experiences, and community-based traditions. For artists in communal structures such as Creative Growth in California or Gugging's House of Artists in Austria, these sites signify a "transformation of 'disability' from stigma and a medical correction to a source of knowledge."⁴³ In contrast to a professional artist's pathway, these distinctive contexts of emergence lead to interpretations that place greater emphasis on biographical information and other sets of credentials and relations. These may include an artist's innovative approach, resourcefulness, skills acquired from a previous career, and other forms of learning—ancestral knowledge, self-teaching, and material-based learning—that are often undervalued, disregarded, or understudied. For instance, Ronald Lockett made a conscious decision to forgo formal art education, recognizing its lack of value for his artistic pursuits.⁴⁴

Bodies of work that were created in correctional facilities—such as the early oeuvre of Inez Nathaniel Walker—also require special methodological consideration. In her groundbreaking curatorial project *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, Nicole R. Fleetwood identified a framework of "carceral aesthetics" for approaching "the production of art under the conditions of unfreedom."⁴⁵ Fleetwood named the "lack of materials, spatial constraints, surveillance, and the punitive regulation of time"⁴⁶ as some of the limitations that incarceration imposes on artmaking: "Immobility, invisibility, stigmatization, lack of access, and premature death govern the lives of the imprisoned and their expressive capacities."⁴⁷ Places of creation, as recorded during the *Rethinking*

⁴³ Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, "Disability," in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, ed. Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin (New York and London: New York University Press, 2015), 9.

⁴⁴ Aleesa Alexander, "Ronald Lockett's *The Enemy Amongst Us* and the Artistic Lineage of Bessemer, Alabama," *The Met*, July 3, 2018, <https://www.metmuseum.org/fr/perspectives/ronald-lockett-enemy-amongst-us-birmingham-bessemer-alabama>. See also Bernard L. Herman and Valérie Rousseau, wall texts, *Fever Within: The Art of Ronald Lockett and Once Something Has Lived It Can Never Really Die*, American Folk Art Museum, New York City, NY, June 21–September 18, 2016.

⁴⁵ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 25.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

Biography project, offer a valuable context for constructing interpretations. For instance, the materiality of Ray Materson's tiny textile works crafted from the unraveled threads of discarded garments underscores the prison milieu. Commissions from fellow inmates may also have elicited thematic exploration. "Being an embroidery artist in the midst of the coarse, violent, macho world of prison seemed absurd, but I came to firmly believe that this was my true vocation, my calling," Materson wrote in his 2002 memoir *Sins and Needles: A Story of Spiritual Mending*.⁴⁸

Self-taught artists, who deviate from conventional systems such as art schools, galleries, museums, and networks, distinguish themselves from their professional peers in terms of their artistic status. This factor significantly impacts various stages of the recognition chain, including external exposure, preservation, and institutional validation. As Austin Losada, Assistant Curator at AFAM, noted in an interview, "Many artists have either chosen not to participate in or have been structurally excluded from the academic and commercial systems that determine who is included in art history or achieve market success. These artists often work outside traditional museum acquisition channels and critical review structures. Some actively resist these systems; others face geographic or social barriers that make participation difficult or impossible. Consequently, their careers frequently lack the documentation, provenance records, and institutional relationships that typically accompany artists working within established art-world infrastructures. This absence makes cataloguing efforts particularly challenging and complicates ongoing collection management efforts."⁴⁹ At the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, for instance, Sarah Lombardi, Director, and Pauline Mack, Assistant Curator, acknowledged that the majority of the works in their collection are by deceased artists about whom there is very limited biographical and contextual information.⁵⁰ In addition, family members, unfamiliar with the art world, may have discarded an artist's body of work after their passing. Visibility issues can be also compounded when self-taught artists are not properly credited, notably when formally trained artists appropriate their aesthetic or creative process.

Additional considerations associated with these sites of emergence—less common in the case of trained artists—are issues of condition and related conservation matters. Works by self-taught artists frequently create challenges of longevity and long-term preservation, ranging from the precariousness of the places they are kept to the absence of a collector-based system or their material fragility (e.g., made of found objects). Christina Agostinelli posits that "vulnerability is a defining characteristic of art brut. From the outset, these works appear to demand a certain restraint; they convey a fragility that extends not only to their materials and techniques, but also to their innermost nature."⁵¹ Consequently, Agostinelli suggests that "when feasible, direct consultation with the artists about conservation is preferable. If not possible, it is advisable to seek out conservators

⁴⁸ Ray Materson and Melanie Materson, *Sins and Needles: A Story of Spiritual Mending* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2002).

⁴⁹ Austin Losada, written interview by Valérie Rousseau for *Rethinking Biography*, New York City, NY, March 4, 2026.

⁵⁰ Sarah Lombardi and Pauline Mack, written interview by Valérie Rousseau for *Rethinking Biography*, Lausanne, Switzerland, April 18, 2026.

⁵¹ Agostinelli, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

specializing in the artist's works."⁵² In addressing pressing conservation concerns related to a sculpture by André Robillard selected for an exhibition, the Centre Pompidou conducted an investigation into the materiality of the work and the artist's idiosyncratic techniques to determine the most appropriate intervention modalities. "The conservator enhanced the work's structural integrity while preserving its spirit and method. The information obtained during the process significantly enriched the object folder. We concluded that, while restoration ensures the preservation of the work, its exhibition should be restricted, considering that vibrations can compromise its stability. Ultimately . . . the work's inherent instability is, in essence, the source of its enduring existence."⁵³

Historically, self-taught artists' unique journeys have resulted in instances of exploitation. Among those operating outside conventional art-world circles, a "lack of preparation" for selling works is prevalent. Commercial art-market values may not have been established, revenues may remain undisclosed, and works may have been acquired without formal legal protocols or a clearly defined pricing structure. Works may have been preserved or purchased at an undervalued price by an individual seeking to safeguard them from destruction, who resells them later at a substantial profit. Furthermore, acquisition histories have often been too inadequately documented to trace accountability. Over the past three decades, there has been a significant increase in numbers of advisors, art dealers, and art studio managers who have actively supported self-taught artists and their relatives, helping to mitigate negative outcomes.

Works created by patients in psychiatric facilities and preserved by medical professionals in institutional archives as "research documents" pose additional challenges and scrutiny, due to the lack of legal agency—being institutionalized often meant losing civil rights. For context, in France Dr. Benjamin Pailhas (1862–1936) was one of the pioneering physicians who recognized the artistic potential of institutionalized individuals. From 1887 onward, he embarked on a collecting journey, amassing 864 works, including drawings, letters, tools, embroideries, and notebooks, from twenty-eight artist-patients. Today, this collection stands among the few public medical archives housed on the very site where the creators were once hospitalized.

In other cases, contentious outcomes have resulted in restitutions and fundamental debates about ownership. Medical professionals may have mistakenly retained their patients' artworks in their personal study collections and subsequently sold them without the artists' consent or the knowledge of their families. This is exemplified by the prominent legal case of the Mexican-born artist Martín Ramírez, who was confined at the DeWitt State Hospital in California from 1948 until his death in 1963.⁵⁴

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ To learn about Martín Ramírez and the legal battles surrounding his estate and artwork, see Víctor M. Espinosa, *Martín Ramírez: Framing His Life and Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015); Jon Kalish, "Ramírez Heirs Seek to Reclaim Artist's Lost Work," NPR, website, October 28, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/2008/10/28/96004813/ramirez-heirs-seek-to-reclaim-artists-lost-work>; Mike Boehm, "Artist's drawings spark ownership battle," *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 2008.

Historically, it has not been uncommon for hospital staff to accept gifts of art from patients, assume the role of custodians for abandoned works, or retain them with the intention of conducting research. For instance, Dr. Maxime Dubuisson, who served at the psychiatric hospital of Saint-Alban-sur-Limagnole, France, compiled drawings and writings by patients into albums as early as 1914.⁵⁵ This psychiatric legacy, which was passed on to his grandson, the prominent psychiatrist Lucien Bonnafé, is presently under the custodianship of the Lille Métropole Musée d'art moderne, d'art contemporain et d'art brut.

During World War II, Saint-Alban pioneered avant-garde psychiatric practices that came to be known as institutional psychotherapy, based on nonhierarchical and collective interactions among patients, medical staff, on-site workers, and neighboring rural communities. This context fostered a more open administrative structure that enabled artist-patients to share their works more broadly. For instance, Auguste Forestier (1887–1958) displayed his sculptures in the hospital courtyard, engaged in trade or sales with the local community, and gave works as presents to the hospital staff and their children. His creations not only contributed to the hospital's economy during a period of severe rationing but also served as a therapeutic tool fostering social interactions. The high demand for his sculptures prompted the hospital to establish a framework for facilitating the sale of artworks outside the institution's walls, and Jean Dubuffet emerged as one of Forestier's most ardent collectors. The modest profits generated were distributed equitably between the artist and a patient-led cooperative known as the Club Paul-Balvet.⁵⁶

The ownership of artworks produced in psychiatric hospitals often languishes in a legal gray area and remains a subject of ongoing debate. Meanwhile, the regulations governing their distribution, possession, and anonymization to protect patient privacy have undergone important changes, shaped by legislation in individual countries.⁵⁷

2.3. Primary Sources

Privileging primary sources does not mean accepting them uncritically. Testimonies are themselves historical documents, shaped by the conditions under which they were produced. Questions of consent, institutional confinement, editorial intervention, and unfavorable power relations all affect how artists' voices are shaped and shared. Was an individual living in a psychiatric hospital when their words were recorded? Who conducted the interview, and for what audience? Was the artist still alive when their work entered

⁵⁵ Today known as the Centre hospitalier François-Tosquelles.

⁵⁶ The Club Paul-Balvet at the Saint-Alban psychiatric hospital was a patient-led cooperative structure in which patients, doctors, and workers alike convened, deliberated on administrative responsibilities, and proposed creative activities for the hospital community.

⁵⁷ For an overview of questions of authorship, legal framework, and intellectual property rights over the creation of artist-patients, see Mathilde Pavis, "Owning (up to) the 'Art of the Insane': Re-Claiming Personhood through Copyright Law," *World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology International Journal of Health and Medical Engineering* 12, no. 8, 2018, <https://publications.waset.org/abstracts/82630/owning-up-to-the-art-of-the-insane-re-claiming-personhood-through-copyright-law>.

the market or museum collections? Did they benefit from recognition during their lifetime? These questions are essential for understanding both the content and the circumstances of primary documentation.

The often-marginalized position of self-taught artists relative to the formal art world has profoundly shaped not only how their works have been collected and interpreted but also whose voices have been preserved in the historical record. Although these creators did not live completely apart from broader social and cultural networks or relationships, they generally did not participate in the institutional discourses of museums, academia, or the art market. Instead, their practices were frequently promoted by others who became intermediaries between the creators and the institutions that collected, exhibited, and studied their work. Among these intermediaries have been psychiatrists, first-time discoverers, curators, dealers, and collectors, many of them artists themselves, such as Charles Shannon, Jean Dubuffet, Jim Nutt, David Byrne, and KAWS.

Such mediators played—and continue to play—an indispensable role in bringing self-taught art into public view. Yet their accounts often became the dominant narratives through which artists were understood, sometimes eclipsing the artists' own voices. It is not uncommon to see that biographies were constructed largely through third-party accounts, reinforcing asymmetries of authority that continue to influence scholarship today. Positive but less common examples have shown that long-term collaborative relationships allow creators to shape how their work enters museums, collections, and exhibitions.

Recent museum practices have sought to redress this imbalance by privileging primary sources wherever possible. This means preserving an artist's personal archive—in Henry Darger's case, for instance, his writings, correspondence, personal library, source materials, and photographic documentation are preserved at AFAM—and recognizing the artworks themselves as primary documents. As Faupin and Boulanger explain, "We are committed to treating the works themselves as primary sources, following the approach pioneered by the psychiatrists Lise Maurer and Dr. Jacqueline Porret-Forel."⁵⁸ This commitment has also included reproducing the artists' own words whenever possible, as in the cases of Adolf Wölfli, who wrote his autobiography upon his admission to the psychiatric hospital, and Augustin Lesage, who described his creative process in an account published in *La Revue métapsychique* in 1928.

The exhibition *Madalena Santos Reinbolt: A Head Full of Planets*, organized by the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), offers a rich example. For its presentation at AFAM in 2025, we deliberately laid out in our label texts the challenge behind limited primary materials and biographical information about the artist, while celebrating previous and ongoing scholarship. Dylan Blau Edelstein, the Curatorial Fellow affiliated with this project, noted that "these questions are compounded when the artist's background—marked by race, class, and gender marginalization—shapes both the gaps in the archive and the stakes of

⁵⁸ Faupin and Boulanger, "L'artiste au centre."

interpreting both her work and that very archive.”⁵⁹ Our most substantial reference on Santos Reinbolt was an essay by the art critic and anthropologist Lélia Coelho Frota, composed from fragments of interviews with the artist.⁶⁰ Beyond that, we had access to sparse sources: a few letters from one of Santos Reinbolt’s employers, the American poet Elizabeth Bishop; a brief biographical account referencing testimony by Monica Morse; a handful of photographs; and the artist’s own ninety-plus known works. The curators André Mesquita and Amanda Carneiro, who organized the presentation at MASP in 2022–23, viewed the artworks as “primary sources” of knowledge on Santos Reinbolt. Blau Edelstein added that these sources are “rich with affect and memory, containing elements of the artist’s vision and outlook. They should be analyzed carefully to understand her perspectives and imagination. Their materiality, too, might tell us something about her creative conditions and choices, as do the signatures and prices she often wrote on the back of the paintings. It is difficult, however, to extract concrete biographical facts from these works. Given that [Santos Reinbolt] has no identified descendants, it is principally white collectors who are reaping the rewards of this valorization. In this context, recovering elements of her life story that might complement the artworks struck me as an act of historical justice.”⁶¹

The exhibition process led the curators to engage critically with the full range of available sources. We also actively sought out new references rather than taking Coelho Frota’s essay at face value. For instance, Blau Edelstein found the cemetery in which Santos Reinbolt was interred and, based on burial records, determined corrected years of birth and death. He also interviewed people who had known Santos Reinbolt personally, at different stages of her life. These accounts provided opportunities to shine a light on the relationship between the works and the artist’s process, personality, and life circumstances and to complement the chronology of her art production. Such findings grounded her work in a more specific life story.

The context of primary-source documentation is particularly significant when artists belonged to socially marginalized communities. Interviews may reflect unequal relationships between the interviewer and interviewee, shaping not only what was said but also how it was edited. IMLS Research Associate Allison C. Meier has observed, for example, that interviews with African American self-taught artists have sometimes preserved vernacular speech and hesitations in ways that would rarely be applied to white artists, reinforcing asymmetries of representation. Likewise, artists themselves may have strategically adapted their public personas to meet the expectations of collectors,

⁵⁹ Dylan Blau Edelstein, research report on Madalena Santos Reinbolt for *Rethinking Biography*, American Folk Art Museum, New York City, NY, May 9, 2025.

⁶⁰ Lélia Coelho Frota, *Mitopoética de 9 artistas brasileiros: vida, verdade e obra* (Rio de Janeiro: Edição Funarte, 1978).

⁶¹ In his research report, Blau Edelstein added, “At AFAM we displayed two of the very few photographs of the artist: one showing her in domestic attire, gazing away from the camera; another in which she is dressed up and posed beside her art. On the one hand, these photographs can be a source of information for viewers: we can learn something, for instance, about her religious beliefs based on the necklaces she wore, which are laden with symbolism. In a label, however, we felt it was crucial not to treat them as neutral, but rather invited viewers to ask: Who took these photos? For what purpose? What image of the artist were they constructing? Which image would the artist have preferred?”

scholars, and journalists. Statements about divine inspiration, rural identity, or artistic innocence should therefore be understood not simply as transparent expressions of selfhood but also as performances shaped by particular social encounters.

Earlier scholarship has likewise tended to privilege the extraordinary circumstances of artists' lives over the details of their art practices. Biographical narratives emphasizing marginality, eccentricity, or personal mythology have often overshadowed formal, material, and conceptual analyses of the works themselves. As Meier suggests, "Artists working outside the mainstream are often taken more at face value than other artists, as if they would not be considering humor or playing with perceptions as part of how they are engaging with collectors who may have a different social status than them. Consider for instance Jimmy Lee Sudduth with his blues harmonica cleverly attracting customers at art fairs to his paintings. Sensational elements could have been promoted by the artists themselves, like Howard Finster who with his blue suit and banjo became an unlikely celebrity, or Melvin Edward Nelson making pigments from supposed UFO landing sites."⁶² Although some creators actively cultivated distinctive public identities, others have been defined by narratives imposed upon them. A critical methodology therefore requires careful attention to the language artists used to describe themselves, distinguishing between identities that they themselves embraced and categories retrospectively assigned by others. To this point, Meier said of her research for the project that "if they were working outside of conventional systems because of marginalization, access, or disability, I concentrated on how they represented their own origins and work."

When direct documentation is limited or unavailable, responsible scholarship requires the careful use of secondary sources. Correspondence with family members, rights holders, collectors, art dealers, scholars, and art studio directors can provide essential information and can facilitate the review, clarification, and refinement of artists' biographies. During the *Rethinking Biography* project, Austin Losada contacted such informants "to develop a more holistic and authoritative understanding of the lives and work of several artists."⁶³ Christina Agostinelli recognized the value of her discussions with rights holders, observing that they "generally constitute a reliable and invaluable source of information and provide an essential point of connection to the creators. Their testimony is indispensable to the development and dissemination of knowledge about the works and those who created them."⁶⁴

The ethical study of self-taught art requires acknowledging the power structures through which artists' voices have been mediated, expanding the range of sources consulted, and treating artworks, archival documents, oral histories, and collaborative research as complementary forms of evidence. Rather than seeking a single authoritative narrative, this approach recognizes artists' biographies as evolving, polyphonic histories whose interpretation depends upon transparency, contextualization, and shared authority.

⁶² Allison C. Meier, research report on biography for *Rethinking Biography*, American Folk Art Museum, New York City, NY, July 8, 2025.

⁶³ Losada, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

⁶⁴ Agostinelli, interview for *Rethinking Biography*."

2.4. Race, Systems of Belief, and Unfamiliar Forms of Knowledge

While developing the biographies for this project, Allison C. Meier ran into recurring interpretive challenges related to race, systems of belief, and unfamiliar forms of knowledge. Biographical writing has often relied on simplified narratives that privilege familiar religious frameworks, flatten complex identities, or impose explanatory structures that may not reflect artists' own understandings of their practices. Aligned with recent scholarship, *Rethinking Biography* sought to complicate these narratives by situating artists within their historical, cultural, and social contexts.

For instance, Meier asserted that the idea of a divine calling or spiritual revelation is a prevalent trope in the domain of self-taught art. Whereas individuals approaching these epiphanies from a Christian perspective are accorded a certain degree of awe or even belief, those affiliated with non-mainstream religions such as spiritualism are subjected to more condescension or sensationalism. In drafting artists' biographies, Meier sought to emphasize that spiritualism was a widely recognized religion during the nineteenth century and continues to thrive today, with membership and services comparable to those of any other church. Although its practices of mediumship and the notion that the deceased are omnipresent and poised to establish connections may appear esoteric, they constitute merely another form of faith. Meier wished to delineate clearly whether an artist was genuinely engaged in a spiritualist faith as an integral part of their artistic expression or whether they were employing techniques such as automatic writing or séances as personal practices.

Meier's observations underscore the importance of distinguishing among an artist's religious commitments, personal spiritual practices, and the interpretive frameworks later imposed upon their work. In this regard, J. B. Murray's work further complicates distinctions among art, spirituality, and devotional practice. His use of text, references to the Holy Spirit and holy water, and integration of spiritual experience into his creative process raise important questions about whether these objects should be understood primarily as artworks, as components of an ongoing spiritual practice, or as both simultaneously. Like the meanings embedded within the works themselves, only the artist—and perhaps those closest to him—could fully account for the intentions behind their creation. In such circumstances, rather than imposing interpretive certainty, we have an opportunity to acknowledge ambiguity.

Throughout our research on self-taught artists for *Rethinking Biography*, the projection of spiritual meaning onto self-taught artists—particularly African American artists—emerged as a pattern. Although some artists explicitly situated their creative work as inseparable from their faith, as J. B. Murray did, or articulated a prophetic mission, as Royal Robertson did, spiritual interpretations have too often been generalized without sufficient evidence. As Meier noted, "Certain myths or misconceptions proved irresistible in their sensationalism. This is exemplified by James 'Son Ford' Thomas, who utilized human teeth in his sculptures and also engaged in the profession of gravedigger. Drawing upon the artist's own statements, I recalled that Thomas had indicated in interviews that the teeth were provided to him by a dentist. It appeared also that he did not intend for the teeth to

serve as hoodoo elements, although he acknowledged in his interviews being aware of it without explicitly working in response to its significance.”

Similar concerns arise in the scholarship surrounding Indigenous artists, although they are often underrepresented in self-taught art collections. The literature on Diné (Navajo) artist Charlie Willetto, for example, frequently associates his work with stories of skinwalkers, yet much of this narrative appears to have developed posthumously rather than documenting his own stated intentions.⁶⁵ More broadly, Indigenous systems of belief have often been framed as mythology, whereas Judeo-Christian narratives are afforded the status of religion. Such unequal treatment reveals longstanding interpretive biases that warrant critical reassessment.

Questions of cultural heritage likewise require careful consideration. Claims of Indigenous ancestry, for example, have at times reflected family lore rather than genealogically verified histories.⁶⁶ Unfounded affiliations are widely considered unethical, as Indigenous identity is grounded in community connection and lineage rather than individual assertion. How, then, should such self-identifications by self-taught artists be addressed when they constitute an integral aspect of their social position and artistic identity? Jesse J. Aaron, for instance, described himself as having both enslaved African American and Seminole ancestry. Without conclusive historical verification, such claims remain relevant to his biography but need to be approached critically and with reservations.

The inclusion of race within artists’ biographies likewise benefits from careful contextualization rather than routine categorization. In the biographies created for *Rethinking Biography*, racial identity has been noted only when artists explicitly understood it as central to their art practice or lived experiences.⁶⁷ Nellie Mae Rowe, for example, clearly described her art as an act of empowerment as a Black woman living in the American South.⁶⁸

Interpreting unfamiliar visual vocabularies presents an additional challenge. Reflecting on Frank Albert Jones, who created his body of work while incarcerated, Lynne Adele observed, “Often, when an artist’s visual vocabulary is difficult to decode, or when the artist appears to be working outside the confines of a tradition, he or she is referred to as an ‘isolate’ or ‘outsider’ artist. But these terms deny the importance of the artist’s connection to ethnic or regional oral and visual traditions, including idiosyncratic

⁶⁵ On Charlie Willetto, see Shonto Begay, “Charlie Willetto,” in *The Hidden Art: Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Self-Taught Artists from the Audrey B. Heckler Collection*, ed. Valérie Rousseau (New York: Rizzoli, 2017), and Charlie Willetto et al., *Collective Willetto: The Visionary Carvings of a Navajo Artist* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2002), <https://archive.org/details/collectivewillet0000will/>.

⁶⁶ On these questions, see Darryl Leroux, *Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2019), and Circe Sturm, *Becoming Indian: The Story of a Cherokee Sampler* (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2011).

⁶⁷ To further contextualize this decision, see Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).

⁶⁸ See Katherine Jentleson, *Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe* (New York: DelMonico Books, 2021).

languages emerging from different relationships to life (disabilities, mental illness)."⁶⁹ Adele's observation points out the tendency to define such artistic languages as evidence of seclusion rather than illuminating the complex networks of influence that inform artistic production or recognizing them as emerging from distinct cultural traditions and lived experiences.

2.5. The Private and the Public: Medical and Criminal Histories

References to disability, mental illness, criminal histories, and personal struggles have historically been rare within mainstream art museums' interpretive and exhibition frameworks, particularly until the past decade. By contrast, such references have long been commonplace in biographies of self-taught artists. Not only has this practice contributed to the mythologization of artists, but it also raises ethical questions of accountability that often exceed the epistemic authority of museum professionals. How, then, should private data, such as diagnostic information and criminal charges, be addressed and obtained without an artist's consent or for which no substantiation exists?

As we will explore in chapter 3 of this white paper, AFAM's Learning & Engagement team develops programs with focused attention to diversity across race, gender, neurodiversity, disability, and national origin. Approaching interpretation through this framework "impacts choices in introducing these specific artists. ... Not sharing [certain] parts of an artist's biography, especially when they do influence the work, can make it seem like the Museum is positioning the disabilities or neurodivergence as either unimportant or even potentially negative."⁷⁰ These considerations suggest that museums should treat sensitive biographical information neither as inherently private nor as interpretive evidence available for uncritical disclosure. AFAM's approach points toward a model of interpretation in which biographical context is acknowledged as potentially constitutive of an artist's practice, while disclosure remains governed by consent and evidentiary rigor.

Several artists included in *Rethinking Biography* have experienced treatment or institutionalization for mental health conditions or incarceration. Allison C. Meier shared observations leading to her decisions to include or exclude such biographical background information, considering how such choices might reflect societal perceptions of stigmatization associated with these spaces. Notably, for artists who emerged in the early twentieth century, Meier emphasized the importance of not accepting diagnoses at face value, as they may not align with contemporary evaluation and treatment standards. In the case of Martín Ramírez's diagnosis of schizophrenia, it would be an oversight to omit the fact that Ramírez did not speak English and that the examination was conducted without an interpreter. "In the context of medical diagnoses, unless explicitly expressed in the artist's work or the specific illness or disability holds relevance to the artistic expression, it is generally not appropriate to make it the central focus of the biography,"

⁶⁹ Lynne Adele, "Drawings from the Devil House: The Vision of Frank Jones," *American Art* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 66.

⁷⁰ Rachel Rosen, Natalie Beall, and Nicole Haroutunian, written interview by Valérie Rousseau for *Rethinking Biography*, New York City, NY, February 18, 2026. The team report is presented in Chapter 3.3.4, "Recommendations on Audiences and Accessibility."

Meier wrote. “If a diagnosis is not explicitly stated as part of an official artist biography or similar documentation, it is advisable to omit it from the biography. For instance, Jessie Dunahoo, who was born deaf and later lost his sight, incorporated tactile creation as the core of his artistic practice. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to exclude this aspect from his biography.”⁷¹

Similar principles guided our approach to discussing illness in the biographies for this project. “For instance, since Ronald Lockett directly addressed his HIV diagnosis in his art, this information was kept in his biography,” Meier stated. “However, it was not relevant to include, for example, the cause of Charles Steffen’s death, which was throat cancer. In my research, I did not discern that this event had any significant impact on his artistic expression. Traditionally, Anna Zemánková’s biography has contained a variety of conflicting information regarding her leg amputation, depression, or potential unhappiness in her marriage and aging status. For such an accomplished artist, delving into these sensationalized details for the sake of their tragic allure seemed to diminish the overall impact of [her artistic legacy].”⁷²

Criminal histories require similar reconsideration when we reflect on how they are presented in artist biographies. Meier added, “I encountered my own reservations regarding the extent to which to discuss artists who have caused harm to others, such as Ike E. Morgan, who was charged with murdering his grandmother, or Adolf Wölfli, who was committed to a psychiatric hospital for alleged child molestation. If these details are omitted from their biographies, are we erasing their victims from their narratives and sanitizing their actions to make their art more palatable? Should these details be acknowledged under any circumstances? Do these actions have any influence on their art? However, if these actions have led them to confinement, such as a prison or mental institution, where their art was created, it may be necessary to address these aspects, but at what level of detail to avoid detracting from their art and instead integrating them into a dialogue about their work? . . . On the other hand,” Meier concluded, “I believe omitting the fact that Marcel Basculard was murdered, while refraining from speculating on whether it was related to his choice of women’s clothing, would be an oversight and overlook the fact that many individuals who express gender fluidity still face violence. However, the situation becomes more intricate when considering other forms of criminal activity. In my view, it is crucial to acknowledge that an artist like Michael Reddick created his work while incarcerated. He has openly stated that it served as an outlet during his solitary confinement. Nevertheless, I do not believe it is essential to provide a detailed explanation for his imprisonment.”⁷³

Each artist’s circumstances call for an individual response, informed by a critical review of the literature available on this person. Shorter biographies, for instance, may not allow for the nuanced treatment of complex issues without adequate contextualization.

⁷¹ Meier, research report for *Rethinking Biography*.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

Meanwhile, unfounded condemnations and sensationalized facts can be harmful and ethically problematic.

2.6. Art and Artist First

Rethinking Biography presents a person-centric intellectual framework that carefully examines the artists' perspectives and aesthetic decisions. In writing the short biographies for the project, we aimed to give an "impression of the artist as an artist." Biographical information, such as upbringing, life choices, and non-artistic activities, was included primarily to the extent that it relates to the artworks.

This approach is particularly challenging in the case of artists whose work was revealed posthumously; where limited contextual evidence may privilege generalized biographical accounts and second-hand recollections. This is especially pertinent to Judith Scott, who was deaf and nonverbal and had Down syndrome. Catherine Morris, Curatorial Chair and Senior Curator for the Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, writes that "the vacuum of uncertainty concerning the intention of the artist is readily filled with Scott's story, which fosters projections and metaphorical readings that easily distract from what she created. . . . Scott did not title or sign her works. She left no notes, sketches, or recorded ideas revealing the thinking behind her making. She gave no interviews. She never noted favorite pieces, nor did she single out any with particular significance, such as a work, that might represent a breakthrough in her creative process. She didn't acknowledge the influence of artists or of art history. The artist's unknown and unknowable intentions complicate curatorial decisions in fascinating ways."⁷⁴

In cases like this, it is advisable to concentrate on the aspects of the works that are evidence-based and hold significance for the artist, such as material choices, decision-making processes, and the artist's strategies. For instance, Tom di Maria noted that "at night, Judith Scott put everything under the table, hidden, behavior often seen in people who have been institutionalized. Same table, five days a week, ate lunch there. Worked one [sculpture] at a time. Indicated completion with body language. Sometimes small works that seemed finished went on top or inside of other works."⁷⁵ Such neutral observations, privileged for *Rethinking Biography*, allow the artist's agency to surface.

⁷⁴ Catherine Morris, "Biography is Complicated," Art21, website, October 30, 2018, <https://art21.org/read/biography-is-complicated/>. To this point, the 2025 seminar "Balancing History: The Artist, The Patient and The Clinician" at Museum Dr. Guislain in Belgium addressed the press's tendency to sensationalize the lives of neurodivergent artists; see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbtF-VZaeEg>.

⁷⁵ Tom di Maria, in "Virtual Insights: Judith Scott," American Folk Art Museum, New York City, NY, September 16, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/459403485>. Judith Scott didn't give an explanation for her concealing of objects within bundles. An interview with Scott's twin sister, Joyce, who became her legal guardian, sheds some light on a lived experience that may have informed her habit: "The records indicate the violence of the asylum's repeated attempts at disciplining Scott—the taking away of her crayons . . . , the repeated evaluations that she was a 'bad child,' the pulling out of all of her teeth, the numerous applications of antipsychotic drugs . . . as well as the disturbing absence for over 20 years of any records regarding Scott." In Soyoung Yoon, "Judith Scott's *What is Property?*: an inquiry into principles of dependency, propriety, and self-possession of an 'outsider' artist," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 26, nos. 2–3, 241–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2016.1272839>.

Horace Pippin's case also illustrates how physical conditions and external factors of class and status can overshadow artworks as central sources of evidence. Scholarship on Pippin's oeuvre has significantly developed in the past decade, shedding light on a major artist who was long marginalized by art historians and museum professionals.⁷⁶ As Celeste-Marie Bernier noted, "A widespread penchant for inaccurate biographical summaries has excluded analytical examinations of [Pippin's] choice of subject matter, formal techniques, and aesthetic concerns. As paradoxically both excessively familiar and barely excavated terrain, Pippin's aesthetic consciousness has remained a source of ongoing mythologization, especially with regard to the physical barriers presented by his disability, compounded by assumptions about his allegedly impoverished and lower-class status."⁷⁷ In the exhibition *Self-Made: A Century of Inventing Artists*, which emphasized artistic agency, the interpretation of Pippin's *Outpost Raid: Champagne Sector* drew on his diary account of memory's role in the creative process. In the diary, he documented his experiences of World War I while serving in the all-Black 369th Infantry Regiment.

Selective biographical material can enhance rather than detract from an artwork, particularly when the work in question is part of a larger environment (e.g., Hawkins Bolden), integrated into spiritual belief systems (e.g., Madge Gill), collected in ways that deviated from the artist's intentions (e.g., David Butler), or responded to the moment they were made (e.g., William Edmondson, who began carving tombstones for his Black community that lacked access to them).

Referring to the several roles of biography in *Madalena Santos Reinbolt: A Head Full of Planets*, Dylan Blau Edelstein recalled that "while our curation centered the artworks themselves, it contextualized Santos Reinbolt for an American audience unfamiliar with Brazil's history and helped illuminate her life's intersections with broader patterns, including histories of migration, Afro-Brazilian religious practices, and the fraught art-historical classifications of popular versus modern. We chose to include in our wall texts stories about individual works—gleaned from interviews—as a way of inviting viewers into Santos Reinbolt's creative world. Though this risked constraining interpretation, it provided insight into how she herself understood her art."⁷⁸

This approach prioritizes certain aspects over others that may be important to curators, exhibition historians, and museum professionals. It also entails considering the artists to be the experts on their lives and works—a shift in perspective from mediators and art professionals speaking from a sole position of authority. This translates into an engagement with the artists' perceptions of themselves and their desired representation through what they made. It presents the art itself as an integral part of their biography rather than as a mere aside.

⁷⁶ Anna Monahan, *Horace Pippin, American Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press: 2020).

⁷⁷ Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Suffering and Sunset: World War I in the Art and Life of Horace Pippin* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 16.

⁷⁸ Blau Edelstein, research report for *Rethinking Biography*.

With each of these points in mind, *Rethinking Biography* adopted a carefully considered approach to biographical data. As mentioned above, artists included in collections categorized as folk art, outsider art, self-taught art, and art brut have historically been described in ways that emphasize their personal struggles and unconventional pathways to artistic expression. This perspective frequently focuses on diagnoses, deviance, or disabilities and disregards medical confidentiality, often to the detriment of the oeuvre. As a striking example, Austin Losada pointed to a student project—created for a seminar led by the folklorist Bernard Herman—that compiled gallery biographies of self-taught artists but redacted personal details. Stripped of this information, the biographies were clearly deficient.⁷⁹ This exercise revealed how inadequate these texts were in conveying the nature of the artists’ creative work. It supported Herman’s ideas “about the ‘connoisseurship of dysfunction,’ a concept that skewers one of the obstacles in the reception of self-taught artists: an overemphasis—sometimes to the point of fetishization—of the various states of disability, poverty, or mental illness that so often marginalize them.”⁸⁰

When biography is prioritized over the work, it becomes paramount and is filled with ableist assumptions about the work. Meanwhile, di Maria asserts that “disability can’t be separated or removed from the person’s biography. It is only falsely removed from supposedly non-disabled artists.”⁸¹ Losada acknowledged the delicate balance between “creative practice and biographical context, making an effort to push back against reductive frameworks. . . . AFAM might be said to practice a ‘connoisseurship of capacity,’ highlighting a comprehensive range of artistic achievement rather than perpetuating the longstanding focus on dysfunction in the reception of self-taught art.”⁸²

2.7. A System for All?

Data recorded by museum professionals about artists and their work ultimately find their way to museum galleries and publications. Exhibition labels list the artist’s name, life dates, dates of creation, and the materials used to make an object. This key identifying information is accompanied by a short text, reflecting either on the work or on its maker in relation to the exhibition theme.

Museum cataloging and interpretive methods most easily apply to artists whose training and life experiences follow conventional standards about how artists learn their skills, get credentials from art schools, network with art communities by participating in exhibitions, have their work bought and sold through systems of art galleries and art collectors, and belong to groups of artists who investigate related ideas or ways of working. Artists familiar with the way the art world operates will sign, date, and title their works. These

⁷⁹ Losada, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

⁸⁰ Katherine Jentleson, “Bernard L. Herman,” *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 11, no. 2 (November 2025), <https://journalpanorama.org/bernard-l-herman/>.

⁸¹ Di Maria, in “Virtual Insights: Judith Scott.”

⁸² Losada, interview for *Rethinking Biography*. On the definition of disability as the continuum between debility and capacity, see Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

practices give museums some degree of certainty that the information collected is accurate and comes directly from the artists or their representatives.

Such systems didn't originate with creators practicing outside established art world channels. Applying inadequate models to a set of works and makers who are, in reality, "different" from mainstream artists can obliterate meaningful data, limit the scope of interpretation, and lead to expectations based on able bodies and dominant profiles (e.g., white male, Western). For instance, today, increasing numbers of contemporary artists who identify within "crip," "sick," and disabled art communities are voicing these limitations.⁸³ The overall criticism is a flattening of the data so that the works will fit inadequate art mainstream grids. As curator Leslie Umberger recalled, "From the earliest days when 'outsider' makers moved into the spotlight, dominant presentation models favored fanfare, with reductive, partially factual biographies that played up marginalizing factors and avoided or minimized the complex, culturally grounded frameworks that truly honor bodies of work."⁸⁴

Just as human minds are varied, so, too, are the ways people exist in relation to the world around them, including how they become artists and how creativity is manifested. Institutions are, by definition, conservative. Historically, certain art gatekeepers have disregarded the contributions of self-taught artists, applying the same skepticism to their work as they did to that of women and people of color. Paradoxically, critics were often quick to attribute the creation of this exclusionary tale to niche museums, art dealers, and collectors, even though their actions were meant to "counteract" and remedy systemic exclusions. To this point, Jean Dubuffet established a museum dedicated to art brut in order to celebrate the very traits that rendered self-taught artists invisible and worthless to the art world. Integrating their work into an existent, comprehensive art collection with no track record of interest for such materials would have constituted, from his standpoint, a form of "burial." In 1945, it was necessary to position art brut as a category apart to mark a turn and to shed light on works presenting—in Dubuffet's words—formal inventiveness, unconventional use of materials, and a creative mindset detached from the desire for artistic recognition and affiliation with an art movement.

The Collection de l'Art Brut has extensively documented "the historical context of Dubuffet's collecting initiatives and the principles that guided his undertaking: the preservation, and inclusion within the field of art of productions that had hitherto not been regarded as such and that departed from the principles of what he termed cultural

⁸³ See the artist Leah Clements, who lives with a chronic illness and insomnia-related sleep phenomena, including sleep paralysis. Her work conveys the psychological, emotional, and physical realities of navigating the world with a chronic condition by directly addressing questions of access and scope of meaning-making. Her film *Apophenia* centers embodied experiences of illness and disability and the politics of health and access, in which the character deploys a mask. Reflecting on Clements's work, the novelist Daisy Lafarge recalls that the verb *to mask* is "used in the contexts of neurodivergence and disability to name the burden of conforming to ableist social expectations. . . . Masking is heterogeneous, complicated, and routinely disrupts any simplistic approach to access and inclusion." See Daisy Lafarge, "On Illness and Disability in Contemporary Art," *Frieze*, July 3, 2026, <https://www.frieze.com/article/daisy-lafarge-260>.

⁸⁴ Umberger, "A Changing Tide," 160.

art.”⁸⁵ Therefore, *Rethinking Biography* reframes Dubuffet’s provocative reasoning, shedding light on the specificities of these artists’ trajectories and their vulnerability within conventional systems.

2.8. Area of Expertise and Boundary Challenges

Within the context of a museum landscape increasingly receptive to the inclusion of works by self-taught artists, we asked professionals with expertise in this field, from various types of institutions, to reflect critically on the nature of their knowledge. How can we remain attentive, within the museum space, to the persistence of dominant art-historical narratives, systemic inequities, processes of normalization, and the limitations of binary or reductive interpretive frameworks, such as particularism versus universalism and contextual versus work-centric approaches? Does the responsibility of curators taking care of works by self-taught artists differ from that of curators working in other fields with respect to acquisition, cataloging, exhibition, and interpretation? Should museum practice develop additional layers of reflection and ethical consideration for engaging with these works?

In considering these questions, a broad consensus emerged that the inclusion of self-taught artists in wide-ranging museum collections and programming continues to be constrained by institutional structures that were not originally designed for their works. In addition, there needs to be an accounting for the diversity of self-taught artists, whose work does not form a cohesive group of practices. Referring to a similar set of circumstances, Catherine Morris recalls that “beginning in the early twentieth century, museums started collecting photography and imposing all of these rules and regulations on them, effectively trying to fit what is an infinitely reproducible medium into some kind of market structure.”⁸⁶ Katherine Jentleson, Senior Curator of American Art and Curator of Folk and Self-Taught Art at the High Museum of Art, likewise reflected on the persistence of institutional orthodoxies and the tensions they can generate across museum departments: “Our expertise sometimes clashes with other departments, such as Decorative Arts, that have been around for many decades, for which hard professional standards apply. In our field, we are creating these systems and methodologies, as well as transparency around ethical considerations, including what labels we use. But I also feel that we might be uniquely positioned to also embrace that no system is perfect, that there will always be these special cases. I don’t think that we have to fully replicate these methodologies for folk and self-taught art.”⁸⁷

These observations underscore a central tension identified throughout these discussions: although the development of shared standards and ethical frameworks is essential to the growing recognition of self-taught art within museums, the frameworks must remain sufficiently flexible to accommodate art practices that resist conventional classificatory systems and institutional norms.

⁸⁵ Lombardi and Mack, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

⁸⁶ Morris, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

⁸⁷ Katherine Jentleson, oral interview by Valérie Rousseau for *Rethinking Biography*, New York City, NY, April 21, 2026.

The exceptionalities of self-taught practices, like the increasingly contested notion of artistic training, are challenging the foundational assumptions of institutions—both museum and art-historical—from within. “That is why we love [self-taught artists],” noted Katherine Jentleson. “Our chief curator, from a decorative arts background, learned with me to not approach things from this idea of connoisseurship all the time. Curators have the responsibility to steward a collection of excellence and need the tools of connoisseurship to evaluate objects and their appropriateness for their institutions, but the idea of ‘is this the best?’ doesn’t hold with self-taught artists.”⁸⁸ The High Museum’s collecting strategy, Jentleson added, aims to ensure that “self-taught art and trained American artists grow together” by acquiring work that “interacts with the whole collection.” Rather than treating self-taught art as a collateral category, this approach integrates these works into a broader institutional narrative, reinforcing a coherent collecting identity centered on art production in the southeastern United States for the Atlanta-based museum.

Niche museums tend to operate with greater autonomy when it comes to acquisition goals, as they can ground their decisions in criteria specific to the fields of folk and self-taught art. They may privilege exemplary works, significant contributions to expanding the field, areas that remain underrepresented, and the creation of representative ensembles. The Collection de l’Art Brut (CAB) in Lausanne—today the repository of more than seventy thousand works—offers a good example of this independent approach. As Sarah Lombardi and Pauline Mack explained, “Particular attention is given to the broader context in which the artist created the body of work under consideration. Our approach takes into account a range of factors—being self-taught, formal inventiveness, unconventional use of materials or techniques—not as rigid criteria but as means of recognizing the specificities of an art practice that develops on the margins of the mainstream art world.”⁸⁹

Although the cataloging and associated scholarly research at CAB are not different from those in other museum contexts, when CAB exhibits works from the collection in its galleries, they are accompanied by a biographical text on the artist and, when available, a photographic portrait. This approach has also historically informed CAB’s loan policy, as it began lending works fifteen years ago to nonspecialized institutions such as museums of modern and contemporary art. Loans are granted on condition that the works be exhibited with the biographical texts prepared for the occasion. The brief text, bilingual in French and English, consists of two paragraphs. The first paragraph brings together factual information about the artist’s life and the overall context of creation. Lombardi and Mack reported, “A 2022 visitor survey⁹⁰ revealed that more than 55 percent of respondents would like more information on this subject. . . . Information about the artist’s private life—including family and marital matters—and their physical or mental health is limited, particularly when there is no direct relation to the context of creation. The second paragraph provides a general description of the artist’s body of work.” If the artist is alive

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Lombardi and Mack, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

⁹⁰ Olivier Moeschler, *En quête de marge. Les publics de l’Art Brut* (Lausanne: Collection de l’Art Brut, 2023).

and their physical and mental condition permits, CAB invites them to review and approve the contents. If the artist is deceased, the museum makes every effort to identify family members in order to obtain additional information. Such communications remain uncommon in most museums.

In conversations with AFAM, Cristina Agostinelli reflected on the impact of Bruno Decharme's art brut donation to the Centre Pompidou in 2021, which enriched the institution's holdings with more than one thousand works by 242 artists of different nationalities. Although some similar works had entered the museum holdings as early as 1945— such as those from the Daniel Cordier donation, those incorporated into the remaking of André Breton's studio wall, and works by Slavko Kopač and Yüksel Arslan—the massive 2021 donation was “a decisive turning point in the museum's history that offers a new perspective on artistic creation.”⁹¹ The approach adopted toward the newly arrived Decharme donation was intended to be equitable and consistent: “All works are subject to the same treatment, regardless of their status or the departments through which they pass. The same criteria govern accessioning, conservation, display, and interpretation. . . . From the very first installation in the gallery devoted to the Donation Decharme, the object labels followed the museum's editorial guidelines: a text structured in balanced proportions between the artist's biography, their art practice in general, and the work on display in particular—a methodology that I have continued to apply, especially because I was immediately struck by the limited information about the work itself in comparison with the biographical detail typically found on art brut creators.”⁹² However, this standardization effort has sometimes been understood in the art brut milieu as a form of “assimilation,” Agostinelli continued, “or even as a problematic homogenization, rather than an emancipatory gesture.”⁹³ Why, she asked, have these artists been studied with relatively little attention given to the characteristics of individual works and their cultural affiliations, methods, and techniques? She observed that this practice doesn't align with the style of Dubuffet, who initiated a phenomenological reading of the works in several early essays published in *Publications de la Compagnie de l'Art Brut*. She added, “Formal, semiological, and symbolic analysis constitutes a fundamental and integral dimension of every work of art. Taking these aspects into account also makes it possible to situate these works within the context of art history and within the museum framework.”⁹⁴

In her interview with AFAM, Morris noted that the Brooklyn Museum's approach to acquiring, cataloging, exhibiting, and interpreting the work of artists without formal academic training does not differ from its standard museum practices: “The first political implication is to treat everybody the same. We do it exactly as we would do for anybody with a conventional career. . . . However, this is potentially fraught because of the realities of the ways that objects come to us. . . . What you described is a structure that allows for a kind of basic unity of the kind of information or context that you want to build. Artists

⁹¹ Agostinelli, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

always push on us in ways that are unexpected.”⁹⁵ At the Brooklyn Museum, each acquisition must align with the objectives of the museum’s Collection Development Plan. As Morris explained, this system was initiated “to build the history of feminism that has largely defined feminist art, including second- and third-wave feminism, and to broaden the categories of younger artists who are responsive to feminism.”⁹⁶ Reflecting on her major retrospective *Judith Scott—Bound and Unbound* (2014), Morris argued that “thinking about artists with disabilities is an intersectional issue for feminism, which was at the core of our exhibition on Judith Scott, an artist who gave me the gift of expanding a notion of how to think about feminism in relationship to artists who virtually had no interest in it but whose careers, in my opinion, were nonetheless shaped by it. A large institution like the Brooklyn Museum presents a different set of overlapping priorities, but also a larger historical mandate.”⁹⁷

When artistic boundaries within a museum are expanded, new ethical questions arise, particularly regarding artists whose work has been discovered posthumously.⁹⁸ Would they have consented to this exhibition? Have they authorized someone to represent them? Have they ever vehemently opposed an exhibition or the sale of their works? Morris stated that “depending on the context of an exhibition, and for almost any project, it is crucial to consider. It should become an open conversation regarding the exhibition you are making and the wall label you are writing.”⁹⁹ She also raised concerns about equity when works by self-taught artists are commercialized. Is the artist compensated, and if not, who is? In her view, transparency is paramount in this process, reminding practitioners in this field that we work with “artists who have limited or no access to legal support. Someone establishes a market for them and begins selling their works at a market rate. . . . They often lack any recourse to the system.”¹⁰⁰

Along these lines, questions regarding art “translocation”¹⁰¹ and “extractivism” started to surface during the last decade in connection with the works of self-taught artists, with the intent to illuminate methods of acquisition. As presented by the art historian Bénédicte Savoy, art translocation encompasses the physical displacement of artworks from one location to another throughout history, often in connection with warfare, colonial looting, or political power shifts. Efforts toward restitution of works aim to make such historical events visible and reinscribe within them the voices of those who have been marginalized. Lombardi and Mack explained that the “Collection de l’Art Brut will need to take a position and respond to these critiques, notably by addressing the specific historical context of Jean Dubuffet’s collecting practices and the principles underpinning his motivations. It will also have to confront problematic acquisitions of works originating from psychiatric hospitals,

⁹⁵ Morris, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ *Rethinking Biography* seeks not to resolve these questions exhaustively but to advance the conversation by articulating their complexity and considering divergent outcomes and perspectives.

⁹⁹ Morris, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Bénédicte Savoy, *1815, le temps du retour. Restituer l’art en Europe après l’Empire napoléonien* (Paris: La Découverte, 2026).

when no consideration was given to the artist's consent or when the artist's role as a legitimate interlocutor was denied. Today, the Collection de l'Art Brut operates differently, particularly regarding the artist's autonomy during acquisition processes and for matters pertaining to copyright and reproduction rights."¹⁰²

Despite these ongoing debates, we can argue that the integration of self-taught artists into museum collections and art-historical narratives in recent years represents a lasting institutional shift rather than a temporary trend. "I don't see the pendulum swinging in terms of institutions trying to claw back to a white male, traditional-practice-centric narrative of art history," Jentleson stated. "I see this movement as being kind of permanent and self-taught artists integrated into it. The exhibitions that are happening now are not the ones we saw in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, which of course preserved the legacy of artists who would have fallen into complete obscurity, and they laid the groundwork." She emphasized the current responsibility of specialized institutions to "set a standard of rigor and seriousness," drawing on their expertise and networks while fostering "a multiplicity of perspectives around these artists," including the participation of diverse curators, scholars, and contemporary artists throughout the exhibition-making process.

Although interest in self-taught art has historically been cyclical, repeated institutional commitments during recent decades do suggest a more durable transformation rather than a reversal of course. To this point, Jentleson underscored the importance of sustained collection-building over exhibitions, which are transitory. Museums have also started to bring long-overlooked holdings of historically marginalized artists—women, artists of color, self-taught artists—into public view. "I think it is sticking," observed Jentleson, who sees this recurrent collecting activity as gradually reshaping the canon. "Having a William Edmondson on view in the Art Institute of Chicago's reinstalled Sculpture Gallery will affect hundreds of thousands of students every year."¹⁰³

One important challenge ahead of the reopening of the Centre Pompidou in 2030 is to envision new dialogues between art brut artists and the museum's broader collections. Given the institution's longstanding commitment to a multicultural and interdisciplinary approach, this opportunity provides a particularly fertile context for engaging with the complexity and diversity of art brut. This is in addition to the role that continues to be played by the Art Brut Research Program, a permanent platform promoting scholarship that was established de facto with the Bruno Decharme donation. It "enables us to remain vigilant and critical in the face of attempts at standardization,"¹⁰⁴ observed Agostinelli.

¹⁰² Lombardi and Mack, interview for *Thinking Biography*.

¹⁰³ Jentleson, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

¹⁰⁴ Agostinelli, interview for *Rethinking Biography*. Among the projects developed by this program was the 2022 Kandinsky Library Summer School on art brut. Agostinelli noted, "It was an exceptionally instructive event. The participation of numerous museum professionals, specialists, and researchers fostered an extraordinarily fruitful exchange of knowledge. It also established relationships and collaborations intended to endure over time: Valérie Rousseau [United States], Rena Kano [Japan], and Christina Penna [Brazil] are among those who enabled me to appreciate the geographical and intellectual breadth of art brut. The Program is now working on the ambitious project of creating an online art brut portal to provide access to the exceptional works of the Decharme donation."

This strategy closely parallels that of the Feminist Center at the Brooklyn Museum. Installing dedicated research centers within large art museums, rather than establishing niche departments, fosters sustained institutional expertise and cross-disciplinary exchanges. In this respect, long-term research infrastructures are likely to have a more enduring impact than do large-scale temporary exhibitions alone.

Morris attested to the transformative experience brought by the exhibition *Judith Scott—Bound and Unbound* at the Brooklyn Museum. This project provided an opportunity to explore questions “that were all givens in our field—my way of thinking, my training, the moment in which I lived, beginning with the simplest action of how do you display this work? How do you display works for which there are virtually no records and no indication about its orientation, about preferences for sight lines. That was the beginning of the questioning of everything. White Columns Director and Chief Curator Matthew Higgs and I kept circling back these questions: what does Judith Scott give us in terms of information? How do you work with what you do have? Judith Scott’s objects have largely been interpreted as abstract. Some people have seen references to bodies, but I still feel the objects that she made were largely abstractions that were more about the activity of their making than they were about the reception of the final product. Organized chronologically, the [display] became a formal exercise about how her work developed over time, how she became more confident in the making of her objects—you can see the evolution of a kind of elaborateness of the making. The works become more complex, more dimensional; the reuse of certain materials and fibers—in different or similar ways—is a result of what was available to her [on site at Creative Growth], but she may as well have liked to use them.”¹⁰⁵

This collaborative discussion among colleagues about the growing presence of self-taught artists in museums offered AFAM a moment to pause and reflect on its roles and responsibilities. How can we effectively foster novel forms of curatorial knowledge and trigger institutional introspection? As these artworks are integrated into permanent collections and become the subject of ongoing research and learning initiatives, museums are being encouraged to reevaluate established methodologies, challenge conventional taxonomies, and adopt more flexible and context-sensitive approaches such as those considered throughout *Rethinking Biography*.

¹⁰⁵ Catherine Morris noted that the 2022–23 Nellie Mae Rowe exhibition called for a markedly different curatorial approach and mode of conversation. Its chronological display traced a visual language closely bound to personal experience and biographical context. See Morris, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1. Mapping the *Rethinking Biography* Project

AFAM's art collections comprise more than 7,500 works spanning four centuries and representing nearly every continent. Since the Museum's founding in 1961, its areas of specialization have been defined and expanded, in part, in response to the exclusion of certain artists and artworks from mainstream institutions. For this project, 155 artists were identified within AFAM's twentieth- and twenty-first-century collections. The selection process was guided by the following set of criteria, designed to provide a framework while underlining the prevalence of systemic issues of authority and inequity for self-taught artists:

- Artists who self-identify as neurodivergent, using either that term or other related language.
- Artists whose work was collected by the Museum and entered its collections because of historical connections with self-taught art, art brut, or adjacent fields, with a special focus on artists associated with unspoken, veiled, or overt references to neurodiversity, mental illness, disability, and marginality.
- Artists whose practice developed within artist studios such as Creative Growth Art Center and Healing Arts Initiative, which advance the inclusion of people with disabilities and/or mental health conditions in contemporary art and strengthen community.
- Artists whose life histories have intersected with or been impacted by systems of psychiatry and mental health, institutionalization, incarceration, and other societal power structures.

These criteria may reflect an artist's context of creation, such as relationships between an aesthetic practice and the site where a work was concealed or publicly displayed. Although they often speak to the circumstances of an artist's life and their effects on a work's specificities, as discussed in Chapter 2, they also reveal the historically contingent art-historical frameworks through which a work has been categorized. By extension, they may foreground the very conditions through which artists have been overlooked by mainstream institutions. In this context, identifying key themes across the experiences of self-taught artists helps expose exclusionary practices, rigid hierarchies, and systemic structures of power, authority, and inequity operating within particular times and places.

3.2. Biography Guidelines

In the initial stages of *Rethinking Biography*, as we prepared to write 155 concise¹⁰⁶ artist biographies, we developed a template and a set of editorial guidelines. These were designed to ensure consistency of style and equitable treatment across a broad pool of artists represented in AFAM's twentieth- and twenty-first-century collections with diverse

¹⁰⁶ The biographies published in *Rethinking Biography* are typically composed of approximately three to four hundred words.

positionalities and unequal institutional recognition. Indeed, the pool includes both living and historical creators working with various media, such as painting, photography, sculpture, art environments, ceramics, drawing, collage, and textiles. Their lives represent a spectrum of experiences in terms of race, sexuality, gender identity, and nationality. Extensive scholarship exists on some of the artists; information about others is still being uncovered.

Biographical narratives, we realized, tend to compress multiple perspectives into coherent stories, often at the expense of complexity. Conceived as a framework anchored by ethical principles and responsibilities, this model aimed to steer clear of a reductive or normative presentation structured around dichotomous criteria (inside/outside, norm/margin, accepted/rejected). We organized this proposed template around seven guiding principles.

a. Biographical information

Introduce biographical information primarily in relation to the artworks, including the dates of creation, place of creation, materials used (and their sourcing), objectively observable characteristics of the artist's work or artist-stated subject matter, and evidence of decision making and deliberate choices (such as selecting a particular medium or process over another).

b. Sites of learning

Biographies of formally trained artists emphasize art education to highlight lineage, traditions, and influences. For self-taught artists, it is advisable to expand the concept of education to encompass diverse learning environments, such as community, family, work, and everyday life, as well as spiritualism and ancestral knowledge. It is crucial to acknowledge and consider diverse worldviews, ways of knowing, and ways of communicating knowledge.

c. Reception

Exhibition and publication history is crucial in comprehending an artist's reception and processes of recognition. For self-taught artists, it is essential to consider not only the inclusion of "significant exhibitions," but also the manner in which their work was incorporated into collections—private and public. This includes examining the discoverers, intermediaries, and public figures who facilitated the artist's work entering the art market and museum collections.

d. Primary sources

The most significant weight was allocated to "primary sources," which encompass the artists and their creations. This includes:

- Any reliable primary-source information regarding an artist's life and work that originates directly from the artist (direct quotes and other forms of communication attributed to the artist, written works, recordings such as videos or photographic documentation of the creative process, etc.).
- Artworks, which serve as primary documents and firsthand accounts of the self, akin to diaries, and may outline an artist's intended legacy. From the artworks themselves, we asked, what insights can be gained regarding the artist's motivations and priorities?
- Broad verbal descriptions of artworks, encompassing materials, scale, subject matter (objectively observable and/or described by the artist), and other relevant details.
- Descriptions of the artist's making process and site-specific practice, including the locations where works were created, the reasons behind their creation, and whether they were motivated by a specific purpose or function beyond artmaking.

e. Approach and style

- Utilize the active voice whenever possible.
- Consider employing present tense to describe overarching interventions and aspects of the artist's process, where appropriate.
- It is acceptable to pose questions that may not have definitive answers.
- Discuss contextual information that requires consideration.
- Refrain from sensationalizing, overgeneralizing, exaggerating, or distorting information.
- Biographies are preferably signed, dated, and fully referenced. Such temporal and intellectual markers establish scholarly accountability while fostering the cumulative nature of research by facilitating subsequent revisions and updates, particularly regarding terminology and vocabulary. They provide context for the vocabulary used and ensure the accuracy of the sources used at the time the text is created. Regarded as "living documents," biographies are adapted and updated over time, as new information becomes available and new discussions emerge about the work.¹⁰⁷
- Biographical texts should not supersede object labels, which are crafted for specific artworks in conjunction with a particular curatorial concept. The writing or editing of object labels presents an opportunity for the curatorial team to assess prevailing scholarly research on an artist and mitigate the spread of inaccurate information or outdated interpretations.

¹⁰⁷ Unlike extensively researched artists such as Henri Matisse and Marcel Duchamp, self-taught artists remain comparatively underrepresented in scholarship, owing in part to their later inclusion within mainstream circuits of exhibitions, criticism, institutions, collections, and the art market. To document our research process and ensure accountability, we retained in our curatorial research files versions of these biographies with their corresponding footnotes and bibliographic references.

f. Questions to consider

About the artist:

- Formulate questions to address consent, agency, self-determination, and self-representation.
- Challenge issues of transparency by indicating the context for quotations and speech or comments attributed to the artist. For instance, who is speaking on behalf of the artist? Who asked the questions? What were the conditions under which the interview was conducted? Were the artists aware of the questions? Is this information from a case record or psychiatric evaluation? Was the person under confinement at the time? What potential power dynamics were at play? Were there commercial incentives?
- Does the artist have a website or someone representing their estate?
- Was the artist alive during the sale of their work? To what extent did they participate in this process? Did the artist (or their descendants) receive compensation?
- Did the artist reject or accept a status of being disabled or having a disability?
- Was the artist alive, present, or involved during the exhibition of their work?
- Was there artistic recognition during or after the artist's lifetime?
- What are the artist's language and cultural affiliations?
- In the absence of substantial information regarding the artist, such as in the case of the sculptures attributed to the "Philadelphia Wireman," an attempt can be made to focus on the process-oriented aspects of the work. Do our assumptions about the work trivialize the artist's intentions? Would the artist be likely to agree with our display of the works?

About the artwork:

- What types of titles do this artist's work have? Are they given by the artist, or are they descriptive titles given by others?
- Have these bodies of work been separated or dispersed? Was there a displacement, movement, or disruption of a workspace or art environment?
- Are there elements of the artist's exhibition history that have shaped the work's interpretation in ways that could be reconsidered?
- Are there assumptions that can be challenged—for instance, discussing the found materials that an artist used and examining how deliberate they were in using them?

g. Divisions of the biography

The biographies written for this project follow the below structure: The first paragraph delineates the distinctive characteristics of the artist's vocabulary, emphasizing discernible characteristics of their works, their own contextual statements, and the deliberate choices they made (materials, aesthetics, themes). It serves as an introduction to the artist's work, providing contextual information regarding its visual appearance, materials, overarching themes, and other pertinent details.

The second paragraph delves into an artist's biographical information, including birthdate, place of birth, childhood interests in the arts, career trajectory, and the circumstances that led them to become an artist. Biographical elements are introduced insofar as they align with the work and help situate places and processes of creation. These elements encompass practical environments, social interactions, institutional structures (such as the intellectual, historical, and material frameworks of a psychiatric hospital), the artist's professional expertise, the traditions they were exposed to, and the communities they were connected to.

The third paragraph focuses on critical reception and networks of recognition. It provides information on how these works gained public attention, whether it was through an individual mediator, a collector, an exhibition, or posthumously. In this regard, it may include the extent of the artist's influence in this attention. For instance, it seems important to note that David Butler had no interest in commercializing his work, which was instead handled by others; such details about the artist's intention can shape our perception of a work in a collection. Similarly, for artists whose works are discussed or seen publicly only posthumously, we might refrain from excessive speculation about their meanings but, instead, question dominant narratives. An example is Morton Bartlett: his highly detailed dolls have been subject to extensive theorizing about what they meant to him, even though one of his friends has clarified that they were originally intended as toys rather than expressions of a longing for a family—an interpretation proposed by many.

3.3. Self-Taught Artists Advancing Museum Practices

How can museums advance the long-term recognition of self-taught artists and foster greater inclusivity? How might they cultivate cumulative scholarship that progressively expands and deepens understanding of these artists? How can such knowledge be translated into meaningful forms of public engagement and disseminated in ways that reflect museums' commitments to accessibility and engagement? As this art field remains a relatively recent subject of curatorial specialization, new research, archival discoveries, and interpretive findings are not always published or readily accessible to scholars beyond the institutions within which they originate. The art professionals interviewed for *Rethinking Biography* identified access to scholarship as a critical area for improvement. As Katherine Jentleson observed, there is an "inability to get past a certain superficial layer of understanding about artists that [has] replicated over time."¹⁰⁸ She further emphasized "the need for maintained resources for other people." The transfer of knowledge across researchers and institutions has remained a challenge.

This IMLS initiative provided an opportunity to address these challenges, notably through the development of more robust curatorial research folders that brings together primary and secondary sources, correspondence, images, and references relevant to the Museum's holdings and to each artist selected for the project. This internal curatorial resource is intended to centralize information on artists, related subjects (e.g., African

¹⁰⁸ Jentleson, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

American quilting, weathervanes, music, and performance), individuals (e.g., collectors, scholars, and curators), and organizations. It complements resources managed by Collections and Archives, which encompass institutional records and accession files.¹⁰⁹

Another means of sustaining ongoing scholarship in this area is to increase in-person access to an artist's work through the following three key recurrent processes, providing curators with opportunities to reassess aspects of works about which little is still known and update the corresponding fields in the collection database:

- *Acquisition*: Reviewing the work when it arrives at the collection facility ahead of an acquisition meeting.
- *Exhibition*: During the planning of an internal exhibition or an external loan process, curators may review objects in person, which can lead to catalog record updates and standardization.
- *Object preparation*: Unframing, conservation, photoshoots, and preparation of objects for loans and exhibitions facilitate comprehensive examination and data collection.

3.3.1. Recommendations on Acquisitions

Self-taught art remains a comparatively underdeveloped field of scholarship—a gap that *Rethinking Biography* aims to address. The following recommendations for museum acquisition processes provide a foundation for future research, strengthen the documentation of artworks—their creators, provenance, historical and cultural contexts, and exhibition histories—and promote responsible cataloging practices.

- To approach the cataloging of works—particularly those by neurodivergent artists, artists with disabilities, psychiatric patients, and individuals with a criminal history—responsibly and ethically, effort should be made to locate artists, their families, and their representatives, and engage in open discussions with them.¹¹⁰
- Center first-person accounts and community perspectives whenever possible.
- Gather correspondence and conduct primary-source research to corroborate any biographical data pulled from Getty ULAN and Library of Congress.
- Prioritize provenance and exhibition history.
- Cross-reference information given by dealers and collectors with scholars and curators in the field.
- Treat information accompanying new acquisitions as unreliable until verified with external sources.
- Whenever possible, avoid nonspecific descriptions. For instance, provide a date or date range rather than “no date.” Although “mixed media” may be used when materials are unknown at the time of cataloging, make every effort to establish a comprehensive list of exact materials and, when possible, consult the artist.

¹⁰⁹ Access to such resources may be limited, as they may contain restricted or confidential information.

¹¹⁰ AFAM's exhibition projects featuring recently acquired works by Eugen Gabritschovsky, James Edward Deeds, and Carlo Zinelli exemplify this approach.

- Consider adding a “Keywords” section to the catalog records review of acquisitions to facilitate research and optimize discoverability. Use pre-generated, controlled-vocabulary terms. This may illuminate historical categorizations specific to a given time and place, as well as overlooked systemic power, authority, and inequity structures.
- Consider adding a “Classification” section to the catalog records review of acquisitions to interrogate preestablished classificatory convention. For instance, a door covered with painted motifs by Jean-Daniel Allanche might be classified as a “sculpture” rather than an “architectural element.”
- Problematic images, offensive and problematic language, and cultural appropriation: Establish a workflow for curatorial review once material is flagged by Collections. Develop written statements, in collaboration with internal staff, for publication in the collection database and on public platforms such as the Museum website. These texts should incorporate multiple perspectives, including artist statements and analyses by curators and scholars.
- Subjects: In the curatorial research folders, under “Subjects,” include a glossary of terms (e.g., definitions and vocabulary) and types of objects (e.g., African American quilting weathervanes, and performance) related to this art field and ongoing research.¹¹¹
- Maintain comprehensive photographic documentation of new acquisitions, including multiple views (back, details), to support research and enhance the object’s exhibition potential.
- Fill gaps by increasing the acquisition of artist-created collections (in addition to collector- and dealer-generated collections) in Archives, in support of giving agency to these makers.

3.3.2. Recommendations on Exhibitions

Regarding the artists selected for *Rethinking Biography*, monographic and thematic exhibitions will continue to generate new scholarship by building on existing research. Accordingly, the planning of in-house exhibitions and loans—both outgoing from the Museum’s collection and incoming from outside collections—offers valuable opportunities for curatorial and collections teams to examine objects firsthand, update catalog records, and standardize collection documentation. The following recommendations support these efforts:

- Internal exhibitions allow curatorial and collections teams to review objects in person, update catalog records, and advance the development of consistent cataloging practices, notably during object preparation (for instance, unframing

¹¹¹ To this point, Katherine Jentleson described “subject” research files compiling the scholarship she has developed over recent years on Black quilts—an area in which objects are frequently unattributed and marked by limited provenance and exhibition histories—in an effort to articulate their distinctive aesthetic traditions from the period of enslavement onward: “I have had to learn a lot more about patterns and variations on patterns among Black quilters—patterns that developed in the Black South, like housetop and variations on log cabin, that are often a couple of steps removed from whatever the original was.” In Jentleson, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

and conservation may reveal additional information). The exhibition *Self-Made: A Century of Inventing Artists*, presented at AFAM from April to September 2026, grew out of the *Rethinking Biography* catalog records review, with many of its artists featured in the project. The curatorial approach to the exhibition foregrounded the artists' voices and placed their work at the center of interpretation, demonstrating how the project's principles could inform the presentation of self-taught art. For instance, most object labels for "untitled" works included inscriptions made by artists on their works, captured during cataloging. The curator Cristina Agostinelli observed that in preparation for a 2025 exhibition at the Grand Palais, "a substantial effort was undertaken to standardize the spelling of artists' names and place names, as well as the dates of birth and death. Documentation of inscriptions on the works and materials compiled by registrars and conservators during the inventory process was also incorporated."¹¹² Collaborative work across departments during exhibitions and gallery reinstallations, as objects are retrieved from storage and prepared for display, may prompt discussions around reassessment and standardization of existing tombstone information, particularly when differing perspectives emerge.

- Any loan—incoming or outgoing—provides an opportunity to review artist records, identify inconsistencies, and discuss updates with partner institutions and lenders. This process can be strengthened by including provisions in loan agreements that welcome proposed tombstone revisions and require prior consultation among all parties. For the presentation of the Madalena Santos Reinbolt exhibition organized by the Museum of Art of São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), AFAM provided all lenders with updated tombstone information alongside exhibition labels. Similarly, the High Museum of Art's traveling exhibition on Nellie Mae Rowe provided the curator with an opportunity to standardize tombstone information across the checklist in consultation with lenders: "The works," Katherine Jentleson said, "were never really titled or inscribed. We wanted to make it clear that we were giving them descriptive titles and wanted to narrow some date ranges. Rowe backdated everything at a certain point."¹¹³
- Consider organizing exhibitions on understudied artists or areas of the collection: Monographic exhibitions within the field of self-taught art offer particularly valuable opportunities to advance scholarship on individual artists and inform future acquisitions, cataloging, and interpretation. As Jentleson explained, she has pursued such projects at the High Museum "largely because it is an opportunity to do collection work, to be really methodical and make recommendations. I have tried to be strategic about choosing projects that, again, do both things at once. I was able to do significant research on an artist like Nellie Mae Rowe, who is uniquely important to our collection, because we don't have time to do collection research for the sake of it."¹¹⁴

¹¹² Agostinelli, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

¹¹³ Jentleson, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

- Exhibitions entail promoting the artists selected for the project across internal and external platforms. This often prompts staff to address cases in which copyright and licensing for artworks remain unresolved, particularly when self-taught artists lack formal registration due to their circumstances. Such findings will be incorporated into the collection database.

3.3.3. Recommendations on Cataloging

The catalog records review undertaken as part of *Rethinking Biography* aligned with AFAM's broader effort to standardize and strengthen the Museum's collection records. Under the leadership of Anna Schwartz and Lisa Machi Ortiz from AFAM's Collections team, object-level metadata were updated to improve accuracy and consistency across the database. All records followed AFAM's cataloging guidelines manual, a shared resource for the Collections and Curatorial teams based on Getty's Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA) and Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO) standards.

To what extent do these guidelines address the specificities of self-taught artists and their work? As Lisa Machi Ortiz, Assistant Registrar & Collections Database Manager observed, "Any cataloging and standardization comes with its own limitations and drawbacks, including those based on a cataloger's own point of view."¹¹⁵ The project led to these recommendations:

- To reflect the knowledge generated through ongoing scholarship, it is beneficial for both the Collections and Curatorial teams to draw on a broad range of representative and idiosyncratic examples throughout the cataloging guidelines manual during acquisition research, catalog records review, and cataloging. In addition, listing examples of accepted terms and controlled vocabulary from the self-taught art canon in the Classification authority fields section can help clarify an object's function and meaning—for example, putting Art Environment under "Sculpture"; Whirligig under "Tools and Equipment"; Weathervanes under "Architecture"; Quilts under "Textiles"; and Scrapbook, Sketchbook, and Notebook under "Books/Manuscripts/Information Artifacts." These distinctions are defined by the primary intent of the creator, the type of content, and the physical structure of the object.
- Curators should consider adding notes to the metadata spreadsheet to document updates, terminology, techniques, and other findings emerging from scholarship and compiled under "Subjects" in the curatorial research folder.
- Catalogers and curators should add remarks (dated) on the metadata spreadsheet to record changes to object-level metadata (title, date, geographic attribution, medium, etc.), including the rationale behind the decision and supporting evidence. Recording the basis for revisions creates a foundation for future scholarship.

¹¹⁵ Lisa Machi Ortiz, written interview by Valérie Rousseau for *Rethinking Biography*, New York City, NY, January 5, 2026.

The following examples offer considerations for developing tombstone information for these artworks:

Artists and Makers

The “Artist and Maker” review (artist names, alternate names, life dates, and places of birth and death) of the 155 artists identified for *Rethinking Biography* revealed that artists within the self-taught canon are often surrounded by a mythology shaped by others, as Research Associate Suzie Oppenheimer reported, in which lived biographies have at times become secondary. Consultation of official records enabled the team to establish facts that are, in many cases, well documented. For example, Clementine Hunter’s birth date had previously been recorded as “1886 or 1887,” suggesting a degree of uncertainty. Yet her gravestone, inscribed by her family, records “March 19, 1887,” a date also confirmed by the U.S. Obituary Index. Together, these sources document the birth date recognized by her community and reflected in the historical record.¹¹⁶

An artist’s identity is not fixed but evolves over the course of a lifetime. Recording the full range of alternate names enables museums to reflect how artists identified at different moments in their lives. This is particularly relevant for women whose maiden and married names represent distinct chapters of their identities, such as Mary K. Borkowski and Sybil Gibson; artists whose names changed through immigration, including Simon Rodia and Consuelo (Chelo) González Amézcuca; and those whose adopted names or pseudonyms marked shifts in identity, such as Henry Darger and Eddie Owens Martin (St. EOM). Likewise, acknowledgment of multiple national affiliations recognizes the complexity of artists’ lived experiences. The fact that Jean-Daniel Allanche was born in Tunisia and died in France foregrounds the formative significance of migration, exile, and transnational experience.

Over years of field research, we have repeatedly seen that many works of art were created collaboratively with the involvement of a spouse or child, yet authorship was attributed solely—whether intentionally or not—to the family patriarch or matriarch. Conversations with artists and family members during the acquisition process are therefore essential to clarifying authorship.

Artists Unidentified

Even something as fundamental as an artist’s name is not always definitive. For example, one maker in AFAM’s collection is recorded as both “Artist Unidentified” and the “Philadelphia Wireman,” a designation the maker did not use. The maker’s identity remains unknown, as do the motivations behind the objects, their uses, or whether or where they were displayed. Rather, the designation was assigned by members of the art

¹¹⁶ Changes to existing authority records such as names should be systematically recorded, with relevant databases notified accordingly, to ensure that this new information is preserved, traceable, and accessible to other institutions.

world: it references the city where the objects were found, the wire used in many of them, and implicitly genders the maker. The approximately one thousand known objects are widely believed to have been created by a single individual. In 2023, AFAM received a gift of fifteen works, reuniting them with the seven sculptures already in the Museum's collection since 2001. Because the maker is widely known by this sobriquet, AFAM retains the designation for recognition purposes pending further research that may establish an identity, as occurred with James Edward Deeds, formerly known as "The Electric Pencil," and Antoine Rabany, whose sculptures were formerly attributed to the "Barbus Müller."

Across the collection, AFAM's cataloging practice uses the designation "Artist Unidentified" to indicate that an attribution remains unresolved.¹¹⁷ The terminology acknowledges that the maker's identity was either unrecorded or has not yet been established, without presuming that it is irrecoverable. Unlike the historically problematic labels "Anonymous" or "Unknown Artist," which can obscure cultural context, "Unidentified" accurately reflects the current state of knowledge while recognizing the possibility that future scholarship may recover the artist's identity. It affirms that the maker existed, whereas "Unknown Artist" may imply an inherently anonymous work or one without a recoverable cultural origin.

An alternative to "Artist Unidentified" is the designation "Artist Once Known," adopted by a growing number of museums in selected exhibition and collection records. This terminology emphasizes that each artwork was produced by an individual whose identity was known at one time; it can be especially useful as a means to acknowledge historical erasures associated with colonization, the forced displacement of Indigenous peoples, and slavery.¹¹⁸ For example, "Artist Once Known" was adopted for the exhibition *Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield, South Carolina* organized by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (2023) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2023), which also traveled to the High Museum. As High curator Katie Jentleson explained, visitor surveys exploring this alternative designation found them to be meaningful: "We are acknowledging the humanity of this person, that they had a family, that they had possibly an artistic community, or another kind of community. They were known to many."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ This practice is limited to AFAM's collection database; exhibition tombstones typically do not list any information in the maker line if an artist is unidentified.

¹¹⁸ The designation "Artist Once Known" was first introduced by Wanda Nanibush (Beausoleil First Nation) in exhibitions of First Nations art at the Art Gallery of Ontario. According to Michael Hartman, formerly the Hood Museum Associate Curator of American Art and now at the Rhode Island School of Design, "The invocation to consider why these artists are 'once known' helps us reckon with archival absences and challenge how archives and museums have traditionally told stories rooted in White settler colonial histories. Why is someone not known? What historical erasures or violent actions caused someone to be unknown to us today?" Michael Hartman, "Why do some labels say 'Artist once known' at the Hood Museum of Art?" Hood Museum of Art, website, March 4, 2024, <https://sites.dartmouth.edu/meanwhileatthemuseum/2024/03/04/why-do-some-labels-say-artist-once-known-at-the-hood-museum-of-art/>. These designations can also have shortcomings, insofar as they presuppose a context in which the maker was indeed known and recognized as an "artist," while also implying a singular authorship.

¹¹⁹ Jentleson, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

In summary, adopting alternative terminology to describe unrecorded artists addresses these factors:

- Humanizing the creator: Phrases like “Unknown” can imply that the artist’s identity is irrecoverable. “Artist Unidentified” and “Artist Once Known” remind us that there is a person behind every object.
- Acknowledging historical erasure: This term prompts us to critically examine archival absences especially within communities with colonial or otherwise marginalized histories. These names were often lost to time due to neglect or deliberate erasure by colonizers and collectors.
- Contextualizing cultural significance: This perspective elevates the perception of objects from mere artifacts to esteemed fine art, recognizing their craftsmanship and artistic value.

Titles

Works by self-taught artists may enter the Museum’s collection with existing titles. Were these titles assigned by the artists themselves or later attributed by dealers or collectors during their intake process? Because titles have often been assigned to works by self-taught artists without the makers’ involvement—and have not always been historically captured—it is important to determine whether an artist had a documented practice of titling their work. In the absence of an artist-given title, the work should be cataloged as “Untitled.” A secondary descriptive title is used only if a work was previously referred to by that title.

Within the field of self-taught art, works are often encountered as elements of larger ensembles—such as art environments, scrapbooks, or costumes—rather than as standalone objects. The works by Emery Blagdon in AFAM’s collection, for example, were originally part of *The Healing Machine*, a vast environment that Blagdon developed over time before it was dispersed and its components sold individually for their aesthetic qualities. As Allison C. Meier has argued, these elements “should not be exhibited purely as sculptures . . . as that ignores that they are part of a whole. His environment was the energy of the world itself to potentially heal.” Similarly, recognizing that works by James Edward Deeds and Henry Darger are individual pages removed from larger bodies of work helps to restore their original context and meaning. Such relationships should be reflected, whenever possible, in cataloging and titling practices. For example:

- Emery Blagdon. Untitled, from *The Healing Machine*
- Simon Rodia. Table, from *The Watts Towers*
- James Edward Deeds. Page 195, from handbound and untitled sketchbook of 283 drawings

Dates

Although many self-taught artists did not date their works—due to a sense of continuity and interconnectivity among the different works related to an overall evolving, lifelong ensemble—it is important to avoid recording “no date” whenever possible. Cristina Agostinelli explained that at the Centre Pompidou, “when it was not possible to determine a work’s date of creation with precision, we relied on the period of activity established through the artist’s biography or the year the work was acquired by the donor.”¹²⁰

An example in AFAM’s collection, included in *Rethinking Biography*, is Henry Darger, who didn’t date his work. Approximate dates can be established through research into visual sources, such as collaged newspaper and magazine clippings or printed advertising visible on backboards, including Kodak-branded materials. Darger’s works, discovered posthumously, can be understood as a single monumental magnum opus, a characteristic that shapes the description and dating of its individual components. On the artist’s table in his one-room apartment were found three untitled sketchbooks in which he had hand-bound approximately three hundred double-sided watercolors, later separated and dispersed to be offered to collectors and the art market. During the *Rethinking Biography* project, many works originally assigned descriptive titles were retitled to better reflect the artist’s voice, an effort that may ultimately facilitate the reconstruction of their original sequence. Darger also wrote unpublished novels whose narratives correspond closely to these watercolors. His apartment walls were covered with collages bearing inscriptions such as “Angelina Aronburg” and “Francis Pickford,” names of characters that also appear in his manuscripts and paintings.¹²¹

Art environments are evolving ensembles composed of elements modified by the artist over decades. When an element is sold during the artist’s lifetime, it should retain the date assigned by the artist.¹²² If a precise date can’t be identified, the overall period of the environment’s creation may serve as the object’s date, with acknowledgment that the installation has since been dismantled and dispersed.

Places of Creation

AFAM emphasizes the importance of recording the place where an artwork was created. In a field in which scholarship continues to evolve, identifying this information is one of the most effective ways to counter historical erasure. This locational designation, which situates an artwork within its cultural, geographic, and historical context, is especially valuable. As Meier noted while writing biographies for this project, “I find that mentioning where they [artists] do their work and if it is a workshop/studio that supports disabled

¹²⁰ Agostinelli, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

¹²¹ By displaying these collages on his walls and “framing” their compositions with rows of Christmas seals, Darger appears to have designated them as artworks. When AFAM initially acquired them, they were cataloged as source material rather than art objects. Subsequent scholarship brought their location to light and prompted a reassessment of their status within the broader context of Darger’s art practice.

¹²² The date may correspond to the date of its removal from the environment, which indicated its completion.

artists is showing that they are participating in that space without us needing to know exactly what brought them there.”

Materials

Expanding scholarship on self-taught artists has yielded more nuanced understandings of their intentional selection and use of materials. Jesse J. Aaron, for example, may have drawn on the trees and fallen branches surrounding his property in Gainesville, Florida, because they were readily available, but he was also highly deliberate in choosing each piece. Martín Ramírez sourced all of his materials within the DeWitt State Hospital in Auburn, where he was institutionalized. Rather than relying solely on paper sheets supplied by the staff, he collected discarded correspondence, memos, envelopes, and newspapers from trash bins, assembling them with a homemade adhesive of saliva mixed with oatmeal, bread, or mashed potatoes.¹²³ Alongside conventional media such as crayons, watercolor, and ink, Ramírez also created pigments from crushed crayons and colored pencils, match heads, charcoal from burnt matches, and shoe polish, diluted with fruit juice, saliva, and sometimes phlegm. In later works, he incorporated collaged images clipped from illustrated American magazines.

As artists gain recognition, their access to materials—and, in turn, their art practice—may evolve. J. B. Murray, for example, used unconventional materials in his early works before later adopting commercially available art supplies. The works in AFAM’s collection, including drawings with rounded, cell-like forms, date from this later period. Much of the chronology is based on information provided by Murray’s physician, who also supplied his art materials. Although this documentation helps to reconstruct Murray’s artistic development, it also reflects a narrative mediated through secondary sources rather than the artist’s own account.

During cataloging, the Collection de l’Art Brut places particular emphasis on documenting unconventional materials and techniques—a common characteristic among self-taught artists—“especially when we no longer have access to first-hand information, and when artists have left no account of their creative processes or have used materials dictated by specific life circumstances. For example, during the conservation treatment of a sculpture by Joseph Giavarini, known as the Prisoner of Basel, the team conducted a detailed analysis of the materials, revealing that he combined clay, beeswax, and bread crumbs to model his sculptures before immersing them in plaster to harden them. Similarly, we sought the expertise of a professional seamstress to examine Marguerite Sirvins’s dress, who was able to demonstrate that the artist combined conventional and invented embroidery techniques.”¹²⁴

¹²³ Although the medium would be cataloged as paper, curatorial notes may identify specific sources and content.

¹²⁴ Lombardi and Mack, interview for *Thinking Biography*. Many institutions have limited capacity for material analysis and therefore catalog unconventional materials without testing. Notes in curatorial and collection records can address this uncertainty and articulate what is known about the artist’s practice.

Together, these examples demonstrate how careful documentation of materials and techniques can illuminate artists' working processes and the circumstances of artistic production, particularly when first-hand accounts are scarce.

3.3.4. Recommendations on Audiences and Accessibility¹²⁵

For the *Rethinking Biography* project, we asked members of the Learning & Engagement team at AFAM to reflect on how working with artists historically associated with folk art, outsider art, self-taught art, and art brut shapes their practice in exhibition contexts, as compared with those in encyclopedic or modern and contemporary art museums. What additional approaches, ethical considerations, or interpretive strategies, if any, have they incorporated into their work?

Rachel Rosen, Director of Learning and Engagement, reported that working with these artworks "absolutely impacted choices both in introducing these specific artists and AFAM's collection as a whole,"¹²⁶ whether through in-gallery teaching, school programs, or work with LaGuardia Community College student interns, Teen Youth Art Connection participants, and AFAM's Museum Career Internship cohorts. AFAM's collection is introduced to college audiences as follows:

- "Students are provided with historical information about the origins of terminology in this field, from Hanz Prinzhorn's *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* to the development of progressive art studios such as Creative Growth. . . . Definitions of folk art and self-taught art [are likewise examined] by means of open-ended inquiry such as 'What do these terms make you think of?' "¹²⁷
- "Students are asked to think about the role of biography in an institution such as AFAM. How does interpretation of an artist such as Vincent Van Gogh, who spent time in a psychiatric institution, compare [with the histories of self-taught artists]? Students are invited to share their thoughts on these ethical issues. [Biography can't be ignored in order to gain] a deeper understanding of certain artists' work."¹²⁸

AFAM's Learning and Engagement team develop programs attentive to diversity across race, gender, neurodiversity, disability, and national origin. When introducing the Museum and its mission to a youth and general audience, educators approach it in these ways:

- They complement academic engagement with relevant secondary sources with experiential knowledge gained through dialogue with colleagues and disability advocates.

¹²⁵ The ideas put forth in this section were drawn from a written interview completed by the Learning & Engagement Team, under the leadership of Rachel Rosen. It includes her responses as well as those of Natalie Beall and Nicole Haroutunian.

¹²⁶ Rosen, Beall, and Haroutunian, interview for *Rethinking Biography*.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

- “When our Museum Educators are teaching, they generally lead not with biography but with sustained investigation, open-ended inquiry, and multi-modal engagement with the artwork.”¹²⁹
- “They bring in biography at various points in the conversation. If it comes up organically, [they] will share details about the artists, their intention, their context, and their process. This information might include disability, neurodiversity, incarceration, and institutionalization. If these topics don’t come up organically, we will still generally mention neurodiversity or disability, if applicable, for a few reasons:
 - “Expand the canon: Many people don’t picture disabled or neurodiverse artists when they think about whose work is included in a major New York City museum, and they should.”¹³⁰
 - Foster recognition and belonging through the artworks on view: Many visitors have a disability or have personal connections to neurodivergence and disability. AFAM provides sustained opportunities for audiences to encounter the work of neurodivergent artists and artists with disabilities.
- Information about artists’ diagnoses, for instance, are presented neutrally, in order to counter objectification of people.¹³¹
- Bringing the personal lives of the artists to the forefront during an exhibition tour offers opportunities to discuss the “discriminatory, oppressive, and unfair treatment or reception they might have received. A diagnosis might have been impacted by racism, xenophobia, or ableism, as is the case for Martín Ramirez.”¹³²
- A lack of biographical and contextual information can lead to ambiguity. Educators should feel free to say that they don’t know about the artist’s own perception of their creative activity and the attributed meaning of an artwork. This “not-knowing,” according to Senior Educator Nicole Haroutunian, can become a frame for conversation.¹³³

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ For instance, the Australian disability activist and comedian Stella Young coined the term “Inspiration Porn” to critique how the media and society portray disabled individuals as one-dimensional sources of inspiration, rather than as full, multi-faceted human beings, to make able-bodied people feel good or motivated. On this matter, novelist Daisy Lafarge, diagnosed with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, recalled that “Those advocating for disability justice know all too well that representation alone runs the risk of furnishing inspiration porn to ableism’s scopophilia, prompting sympathy and blandishments about individual bravery without reflection on the broader structures of healthcare, rights and access that would foster solidarity.” See Daisy Lafarge, “On Illness.”

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

The Learning & Engagement team was also asked to reflect on the diversity of the Museum’s audiences and on the experiences they seek when visiting exhibitions at a specialized institution, where they are consistently exposed to a wide range of artistic practices and biographies. Here are some examples:

- “AFAM regularly partners with supportive art studios and other groups for young adults with disabilities, such as ArTech, Summertime Gallery, the Cooke School, AHRC, and the JCC CORE program. [Although these groups partner with many cultural institutions, they appreciate the fact that] AFAM offers them a consistent, ongoing opportunity to see themselves represented. The artists represented in our exhibitions helps these visitors to feel more comfortable in the space and empowers them as artists themselves.”¹³⁴
- “During the run of the exhibitions *What That Quilt Knows About Me* (2023) and *Material Witness: Folk and Self-Taught Artists at Work* (2023), Nicole Haroutunian worked with a group of high-school students that included a Deaf student. That we could easily plan a program including three Deaf artists—Judith Scott, James Castle, and Jessie Dunahoo—especially without that being the theme of the program, was incredible.”¹³⁵
- “Similarly, for the exhibition *Somewhere to Roost* (2024), we welcomed a group of homeschooled students to see Kambel Smith’s *Divine Lorraine Hotel*, sharing with them that the artist has autism. One teenage student couldn’t wait to tell everyone that he was autistic, too. He had his mom following the artist on Instagram to learn everything about him. He said something like, ‘That must be why this is my favorite artwork! This is the one I would make.’ . . . They have been back since with a group, and booked another program in a few months. The mother has shared that they have had many unsuccessful museum field trips, and that visiting AFAM stood in contrast to those. Similar experiences occurred when presenting the work of George Widener with groups; a child once leapt to her feet when she was told that the artist has autism—she couldn’t wait to tell everyone that her brother had autism and he was awesome, too.”¹³⁶
- AFAM’s educators reported significant audience engagement with the work of Judith Scott, particularly in ways that elicited personal associations and experiences: “After spending time talking about one of Judith Scott’s artworks with a group of older women, the educator shared information about the artist’s background. A woman was deeply moved by the artwork and the artist’s story, as it made her feel closer to a relative who had experienced institutionalization. . . . She said that she was not expecting to have such an experience at a museum.”¹³⁷
During another program around Scott’s work, educators “started with a reading

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

from the children’s book her sister wrote about her. That opened up conversation with the kids and families in attendance about Down syndrome—for the most part, the kids didn’t know what that meant and some of them started . . . feeling uncomfortable. One parent pointed out, ‘Hey, you know someone with Down Syndrome, it’s [this person].’ It wasn’t something most of them seem to have talked about before. . . . As we all continued to talk together, investigated the artwork, and made our own based on Scott’s, though, everyone was able to connect to her art.”¹³⁸

- Accommodations apply to the content communicated as a powerful vector of engagement. During the exhibition *Material Witness: Folk and Self-Taught Artists at Work* (2023), “a Deaf student visiting on her own would not have known that James Castle and Judith Scott were Deaf, just by reading the labels. The curator deliberately left that information off the wall text in order to ‘foreground the work’ [a recurrent strategy in art museum].”¹³⁹ To this point, the Learning & Engagement team observed “how impactful it is for visitors to see themselves reflected in the museum. [The Educator explained that] mentioning that an artist is Deaf doesn’t take away from the work. . . . When contextual information is included [in wall text], neurodivergence and disability should [ideally] be mentioned, especially since it is one of the elements that bring the artists within the purview of AFAM.”¹⁴⁰ The team reported that a disability scholar, who works with disabled self-advocates—and also is the mother of a child with Down syndrome who is Deaf and nonverbal—offered her view on this case, suggesting that it would be a missed opportunity to see a label with those pieces of Judith Scott’s identity missing.

How can museums reconcile these two interpretive frameworks—adopting a neutral approach intended to avoid defining an individual through disability, and recognizing disability as an important aspect of identity—and their distinct objectives? The work of a Deaf artist, for example, may paradoxically become opaque to audiences who share the artist’s lived experience when they are presented with minimal biographical context, thereby perpetuating another form of erasure. The Deaf artist and writer Joseph Grigely advocates for approaches that “involve a wide array of possibilities outside the norm of what it means to be human.”¹⁴¹ His own art, centered on archives, written language, documents, and related artifacts, “addresses questions about the materialization of language and communication, and the ways conversations might be represented in the absence of speech.”¹⁴² Grigely once criticized the ableism of Sophie Calle’s *The Blind* (1986), “a work where she photographed blind people and paired them with their

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Emily Watlington, “How Joseph Grigely Blazed a Trail for Disability Arts,” *Art in America*, January 30, 2026, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/joseph-grigely-primary-information-otherhow-disability-arts-deaf-1234771332/>.

¹⁴² Ibid.

descriptions of beauty. . . . He points out that the series is wholly inaccessible to the population it depicts, that the work both romanticizes and others its subjects.”¹⁴³

Such questions were explored in the program of the Yale Center for British Art symposium “Neurodivergence and Art Museums,” which asked: “How can we imagine art museums as public spaces that embrace and engage individuals with a diverse range of neuro-abilities, and create opportunities for dialogue, connection, and innovation?”¹⁴⁴ By extension, can exhibitions, by virtue of their temporary nature, privilege certain interpretive approaches and subordinate others based on staff-determined objectives without such selectivity being perceived as discriminatory? In light of these concerns, and in response to the goals of *Rethinking Biography*, as articulated through consultation with AFAM’s Learning & Engagement team, these following recommendations are proposed:

- Integrate accessibility meetings in the exhibition-production process following an exhibition approval. These discussions may inform the exhibition checklist while also enabling the Learning & Engagement team to develop programs and interpretative strategies responsive to the diverse needs of audiences.
- Have discussions about “identity-first language” and “person-first language.” Many self-advocates might prefer identity-first language, which places a person’s disability or defining trait before their personhood (e.g., “autistic person” instead of “person with autism”), because it frames their condition as an inseparable, natural part of their identity rather than an accessory or a disease. Based on guidance from Lisa Sonneborn, Director of Media Arts and Culture at the Institute on Disabilities at Temple University, who consulted with the Learning & Engagement team prior to the run of the exhibition *Francesc Tosquelles* (2024), it was proposed to use person-first language when we don’t know, or until we know, how a person chose or chooses to identify.
- Involve the Learning & Engagement team in the editing phase of the exhibition script.
- Determine how the Curatorial and Learning & Engagement teams can cross-share their resources.
- Use primary sources and the artist’s own words in presentations and tours as a best practice, when possible.
- Establish observation of the artwork, without initially disclosing biographical information, as a standard practice within AFAM’s Learning & Engagement methodology.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ “Neurodivergence and Art Museums,” symposium, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, October 23 and 24, 2025, <https://britishart.yale.edu/videos/symposium-neurodivergence-and-art-museums>.

- Visits to organizations such as Fountain House and the Living Museum can deepen and broaden students' understanding of diverse ways of making and thinking that are also reflected in the Museum's collection.
- Aim at presenting permanent displays of works by neurodiverse artists.
- Advocate for ongoing enhanced access and accommodations across the architectural, pedagogical, social, and physical dimensions of our exhibitions, such as professional expertise in accessibility and the integration of sensory considerations into exhibition design. Museums can benefit from creating inclusive environments that accommodate diverse ways of engaging with art, particularly for neurodivergent people and people with disabilities. These practices can foster trust, deepen engagement, and contribute to more welcoming, equitable, and responsive museum experiences.

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 Cataloging:**
 - Created a mapping spreadsheet
 - Created metadata spreadsheets
 - Produced metadata spreadsheets
 - Created a glossary of twelve searchable keywords (Library of Congress subject headings) in the metadata spreadsheets to map the artist pool. Not recorded in TMS, but may 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: artists' names, alternate names, life dates, birth and death locations, and nationalities.
 - TMS updates
 - Updated records in TMS following metadata reviews.
 - Cataloging procedures and metadata guidelines
 - Updated the institutional cataloging 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 283 objects.
 - Maintained preexisting workflows.
 - Digitized and imported 34 portraits of artists.
 - Flagged objects in line for 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
 - Consultation 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 Folders: A Robust and Scholarly Resource**
 - Created curatorial research folders in which there is a folder for each of the 155 IMLS artists. It incorporates primary sources, secondary sources, and supplemental images.
 - Flagged areas of growth.
- **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
Gironelm 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 (Artist Unidentified)
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
Skylas, 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
2024.2.1 (Artist Unidentified)

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 Valérie Rousseau, with 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 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 using 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 of his work were held 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 with schizophrenia 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 the 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 colors 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 recognition 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 in 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, intertwine, 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

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