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ART VIEW; In Love With the Myth of the 'Outsider'

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PROBABLY NO ART SO CATERS TO THE public's hatred of the establishment as outsider art. The work of the uneducated, the insane, the criminal and the underprivileged, outsider art preserves a myth of esthetic purity for a culture tired of its experts. The outsider artist has not suffered the deforming influence of art school, and his art requires no esoteric explanation from critics. Motivated merely by the joy of making art, the outsider is totally unaware, or so the story goes, of the history of art or of the marketplace. The lives of outsider artists, moreover, are frog-prince parables. The biographical labels beside outsider works upstage the pictures, telling stories of broken homes, poverty, physical or mental disability and unrelieved bad luck. Then, at long last, the sufferer takes up brush or chisel and finds satisfaction.

That is not to say that outsider art is without masters. But these few geniuses cannot account for the public frenzy over art made by the naive, the mad and the marginalized. And frenzy it is. The fourth annual New York Outsider Art Fair, held on the last weekend in January, was bigger and more successful than ever. "Everything was up," reported Sanford L. Smith, the fair's producer. "Gate, sales, catalogues." Thirty-five dealers displayed the work of hundreds of artists, from the famous Adolf Wolfli and Howard Finster to the lesser known Carlo and Michel Nedjar. (Mr. Imagination, who wears his work, didn't come this year.) Three hundred people attended the opening dinner given by the Museum of American Folk Art, where each guest was invited to "become an insider." No sooner had the fair closed than "The Price of Madness," a play by Catherine Filloux, opened Off Broadway at the Intar Theater. In the play, a sculptor named Henri, depressed by his artist's block, discovers the work of his mad aunt Aloise, named for one of the psychiatric patient-artists beloved of the painter Jean Dubuffet, who created the category of "art brut" in the 1950's. Aloise draws with crayons and toothpaste. When Henri arranges a show for her, a reviewer describes her work as a celebration of "the cosmogony of a woman, the feminine pulsation." Aloise's work becomes an instant sensation, and artists all over town copy her, testing toothpaste as an expressive medium. Aloise's dealer is ecstatic, and Henri gets over his block.

The importance of outsider art has also been proclaimed by Congress. In November, the American Visionary Art Museum opened in Baltimore, designated in a Congressional Resolution "the official national museum, repository, and educational center for American visionary and outsider art." Congress defined it as art "produced by self-taught individuals who are driven by their own internal impulses to create" and hailed it as "a rare and valuable national treasure." The museum's opening exhibition, "The Tree of Life," contained works in wood, from the stunning reliefs of the African-American Daniel Pressley to a huge model of the Cutty Sark executed in toothpicks. Artist after artist depicted the Garden of Eden as if pointing to the imperiled innocence of the outsider artist.

On the top floor of the museum, visitors could dine in the Joy America Cafe, directed by the chef Peter Zimmer, who, the museum explains, is also self-taught, possessing an "intuitive genius" appropriate for an institution that champions "raw inventive artistry." One of his visionary dishes is "Chinese dim sum with charred pineapple and coconut aioli."

The art fair, the play and the museum are all parts of what Gerard C. Wertkin, director of the Museum of American Folk Art in Manhattan, calls the second wave of interest in outsider art. The first wave occurred in the 1920's, fanned by "high artists" like Charles Sheeler, Marsden Hartley and Elie Nadelman, who sought in unknown artists an essentially American creativity. The current wave, which started in the 80's, is concerned not with Americanness but with authenticity. In an art scene overrun with political and ideological work, people hunger for art without artifice, "an unmediated expression of the inner self," Mr. Wertkin says. This esthetic purity is the false promise of outsider art. The contradictions in the outsider myth are so blatant that it takes a willed blindness to go on believing. After all, outsider art is bought, displayed and criticized, and whatever purity it has is controlled not by the artist but by those who sell and exhibit the work. John E. Ollman, director of the Janet Fleisher Gallery in Philadelphia, one of the premiere showcases for self-taught artists, describes the lengths to

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which he goes to prevent "contamination." He will not supply his artists with materials, supervise their financial or personal lives, or even meet them.

Jack Lindsey, curator of American decorative art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, insists that he will neither buy nor accept gifts of outsider works unless he can satisfy himself that the artist's dealer is not interfering with the work in any way, that the artist's background is free of academic influence and that his or her parents' background is likewise unsullied. These criteria, Mr. Lindsey contends, would disqualify more than half the works in the recent Outsider Art Fair. Though not every specialist is as strict as Mr. Ollman or Mr. Lindsey, the essence of outsider appeal lies in this Rousseauesque idea (Jean Jacques or Le Douanier -- you choose). What Hitler called degenerate, audiences today find vital and honest. And they are willing to pay for this contact with the real thing. The best works of William Edmondson, an African-American stone carver who had a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1937 and then dropped from public view, now sell for more than \$300,000. Major museums have acquired outsider art, private collections accumulate it and a canon of outsider "masters" has emerged: Edmondson, Martin Ramirez, Joseph Yoakum, Bill Traylor, Grandma Moses and Horace Pippin. Outsider art is "the hottest field in art at the moment," Mr. Smith says, "the only real enthusiasm."

This excitement could not be directed at a more problematic concept. Even its name is a matter of confusion. Outsider, self-taught, visionary, folk, isolate, marginal, maverick, primal, naive, "brut," inspired, raw, radical, pure and unedited are just some of the terms in use, and none seems quite appropriate. More troubling, there is not a single criterion of "outsiderness" that cannot be found in "inside" artists. Van Gogh was mad. Joseph Cornell was self-taught. Caravaggio was a criminal. El Greco was a visionary. Socially deviant high artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat are a dime a dozen. Chagall's paintings are as full of fanciful folk elements as any outsider artist's, and everyone from Duchamp to Rauschenberg has made art out of scraps and refuse.

As television and computers become ever more pervasive, no one in the West will be totally innocent of high-art conventions, and as more critical and curatorial energy is directed at outsider artists, they can hardly remain innocent of their audiences. In "The Price of Madness" Aloise ends up dancing at an exhibition of her work, and at least six outsiders sat at their own booths at this year's Outsider Art Fair. Under the circumstances, experts like Mr. Ollman believe that the category of outsider art should be dropped altogether. If a work is of as great value as that of the best insiders, he says, it should be put in the same collections. If a work is not great, it should not be valued simply as an expression of an unconventional mind. And if some artists' habits of creativity do not include quality control and self-editing, their dealers should perform this task for them, as dealers do all the time for insider artists.

That kind of interference may seem incompatible with the ideal of outsider purity, but utterly unmediated art is an impossibility anyway. As soon as a work enters the market and receives critical response, it is related to academic art traditions. The moment of discovery of an outsider artwork is the beginning of its expulsion from Eden. TO THE MANY PEOPLE invested in the outsider myth, this misses the point. Outsider works are generally accessible and affordable, unlike the products of SoHo and 57th Street, and they confirm a democratism that is congenial to a public tired of elitist values. First the experts forced abstraction down the public's throat. Then, when people had developed some reluctant tolerance for subjectless art, representation returned. And what was represented? Sex, deviance, child abuse, blasphemy. By contrast, the works of outsiders is representational but unthreatening. Its subjects are typically Biblical scenes, nature, the family and small-town life, and its canvases are full of bright colors and decorative exuberance.

Outsider art is flourishing because the art establishment have become the true outsiders of our day. Though outsider artists are almost invariably discovered by trained artists, curators and dealers, the carefully maintained myth of the isolate persists: that artworks can be produced and understood without reference to history or tradition but as immediately gratifying objects. The myth is a way of believing, yet again, that expertise and education interfere with beauty -- an impatient insistence on esthetic enjoyment that denies the complexity of pleasure in art.