Art does not come and lie in the bed we make for it. It slips away as soon as its name is uttered: it likes to preserve its incognito. Its best moments are when it forgets its very name.

Jean Dubuffet

*Oakmont Regatta, c.1980, by Ines Hess, Upper St. Clair.*
What's in a Name?
Folk Art Defined

By Nancy S. Kempf

The question of what defines art has been disputed for centuries, so it should come as no surprise that a debate over what to call the vast range of objects and environments created by people not associated with the “fine” art academy arose as the public became increasingly aware of such artifacts. Aside from a few collectors and artists, mainstream Americans were relatively unacquainted with what generally became known as “folk art” until 1932, when the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) exhibited American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man 1750 – 1900, for which Holger Cahill wrote the exhibition catalogue. Interest grew, collectors multiplied, and a field of interest and scholarship developed.1 Terminology is helpful to facilitate a discussion about anything, including folk art, but when many found the term “folk art” problematic, a debate ensued over labels and designations. By May 1950, when The Magazine Antiques held a symposium titled “What Is American Folk Art?” opinions were flying fast and furious. Editor Alice Winchester admitted to the imprecise nature of the term, writing that while the symposium focused on “the paintings, carvings, and other decorative objects that go by the name of American folk art, ... there is still much disagreement as to just what our folk art is.”2 The participants offered a diversity of terms—folk, vernacular, naïve, primitive, provincial, pioneer, popular, unschooled, untutored, and non-academic. Yet, if there was one thread that could be said to run through the discussion, it was the degree to which the art under examination was the product of the individual as a consequence of the peculiar nature of the emergent American democracy and the rise of industrialization.

Symposium participant Frank Spinney of the New Hampshire Historical Society concluded the discussion opting for the term “non-academic, negative and unsatisfactory as it is,” to describe “the artist pursuing his own individual creative career, out of touch and uninfluenced by prevailing academic concepts.”3 Erwin Christensen, then curator of the Index of American Design (an archive in the National Gallery of Art of some 18,000 watercolors), described American folk art as invested with an aesthetic quality “spiritually related to early art,”4 while John Baur of the Brooklyn Museum identified “two major strains of American folk art”: one that is “naïve” or “untrained” and “realistic in intent” but “inspired by emotion rather than visual realism,” and “our [other] larger body of folk art [that] is in a decorative and relatively static vein.” Baur concluded in a rather ungenerous disposition that the “consistency of character” in both strains “seldom disappoints us, but it seldom surprises us either.”5 James Thomas Flexner dismissed the terms “folk” and “primitive,” and alternately offered three major categories to describe non-academic painting: Artisan Painting, done by trained professionals; Amateur Painting, “created by non-professionals for personal pleasure;” and Folk Painting, “passed down practically without change from generation to generation by... people who live in a static society that can be expressed by traditional symbols.”6 E.P. Richardson of the Detroit Institute of Arts, however, applied the term “primitive” to “the art at the beginning of a long development, e.g., primitive Greek sculpture,” and “folk”
as a term distinguishing an object created in “an unselfconscious, highly developed, traditional craft” with an element of “continuity” that is “made for use.” He saw three sub-terms that are “confused under the indiscriminate use” of these two major terms: 1) Naïve amateur work, the product of the child within us; “2) The work of the untrained professional,” who possesses “a sensitive eye, an intuitive sense of design, [and] sensitive feelings;” and 3) Folk art made by “highly skilled craftsmen” who “thought of themselves as professionals.”

Jean Lipman, an early collector and promoter of American folk art, identified the folk artist as working “from insight rather than eyesight, creating from within rather than recording the surface appearance....” Fellow collector Nina Fletcher Little, who documented the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection in 1957, made the distinction that, to be elevated from craft to art, an object needed to be characterized by spontaneity that is “essentially the expression of the individual” and “have been made with a conscious attempt... to enhance it above the purely utilitarian, either by adornment or refinement.”

To confuse matters further, symposium participant Carl Drepperd identified folk art as “a misnomer,” seeing these objects as “a crude imitation of the luxuries employed by the upper classes” and “the beginning of mass production,” e.g., early pottery, chalkware, etc., that might more appropriately be named “minor art for the people.” Edith Gregor Halpert, director of The Downtown Gallery, averred that “folk art developed logically as an authentic expression of the community for the community, in contradistinction to the established art of the few for the few” and cites as contributors to the “rapid decline” in the production of folk art the “advent of photography, mass printing, and machine production [that] eliminated the need for handmade originals.”

One of the earliest proponents of contemporary American folk art, Holger Cahill, opted for the term “popular” as in the French art populaire, though by this he insisted he did not mean a purely “provincial” art. Cahill argued that the rise of the industrial revolution and the decline in the need for a handcraft system demanded that the “conceptions of folk art, certainly of its range, must broaden as new material comes into view,” such as the eccentric artists he was among the first to document.

John Kouwenhoven, author of Made in America, suggested that “the folk art most [collectors] are interested in is not, in any real meaningful sense, American.” He argued that “there is something quite misleading about the notion, fathered in the early thirties by the now-famous exhibition of folk art at the Newark Museum and the MOMA, that such forms are ‘evidence of the enduring vitality of the American tradition.’ It is more accurate to think of them as evidence of the enduring vitality of peasant craft traditions in a civilization which typically has nothing to do with either peasants or handicraft.”

Kouwenhoven — like Cahill but unlike the collectors he describes — was catholic in the objects he included in the classification of contemporary folk art.

The contributors to the Antiques symposium seemed to more or less agree that as American culture became more industrialized and urban, it became “modern,” the craftwork tradition from European immigrant backgrounds gave way to a uniquely American kind of non-academic art. Kouwenhoven trenchantly observed that, as the nation emerged, American folk were “the first people in history who, disinherited of a great cultural tradition, found themselves living under democratic institutions in an expanding machine economy” and who “carry in themselves the seeds of the future, rather than memories of a nostalgic past.” Like Cahill, Kouwenhoven included forms that the other members of the symposium overlooked, including California hot-rods, amateur movies and home recordings, and backyard inventions.

Unlike Cahill, Flexner argued that, “Uns suited to a rapidly evolving bourgeois society, folk painting tended to wither at contact with American life.” Perhaps it is rather that at this historical, sociological juncture, the forms that we had been accustomed to call “folk art” began not to wither, but to expand. Little observed that “the study and classification of non-academic American painting has [by 1950] progressed beyond the point where one heading can satisfactorily be used to cover the whole subject.”

Like others, Janet MacFarlane and Louis C. Jones of the New York State Historical Association felt the need for sub-categories within the prevailing terminology and suggested a breakdown into three classifications: unadorned “utilitarian objects which have an aesthetic appeal... deriving from their basic design,” decorated utilitarian objects; and objects that are decorative with “no ulterior function.” Significantly, this latter classification...
tion they believed was necessary "to include not only those objects which we now recognize, but also those which a growing awareness of our folk culture may call to our attention as time goes by." For, they warned, "The greatest mistake we can make is to close our minds as to what constitutes our artistic heritage at a folk level."18 Richardson wisely concluded that "American folk art is not Americana. It is art."19

In 1974, eclectic collector Herbert W. Hemphill, Jr., published Twentieth Century American Folk Art and Artists with Julia Weissman. Hemphill chronicled the persistent debate over the definition of "folk art." In the antiques field, the term "primitives" is often applied; the noted dealer in modern art, Sidney Janis, used the term "self-taught" in his 1942 book They Taught Themselves; MOMA's 1932 exhibition used the phrase "popular artists," in the sense that they were ordinary people, "the populace," and the European authority Oto Bihalji-Merin called these artists "masters" of "naive" art.20 Hemphill dismissed the variously suggested alternatives:

Others have labeled them "Sunday artists," which seems to derogate their seriousness, since for many of them, their art rather than their livelihood is their really important work, even if done during "idle" hours. "Amateur" suggests something less than first-rate ability, while "art of the common people" has an aura of political polemic. Other often-used terms are "grassroots" art (introduced in 1968 by Gregg Blasdel as an alternative to "primitive" and "naive" to distinguish the large structures created by reclusive, isolated individuals, e.g., Simon Rodia's Watts Towers], or "compulsive," "spontaneous," and "unconscious." These latter, though certainly expressing qualities inherent in this art, have the gloss of patronizing psychoanalysis.21

Hemphill finally opted for the term "folk art" to describe art produced by "everyday people out of ordinary life... who are generally unaware of and most certainly unaffected by the mainstream of professional art."22

This art, says Jane Livingston in her essay "What it is" in the catalogue prepared in conjunction with the Corcoran Gallery of Art's 1982 exhibition, Black Folk Art in America 1930–1980, ... has to do not with crafts or traditional utilitarian artisanship, but with full-fledged gratuitous art objects, paintings and drawings and sculptures. The artists working in this esthetic territory are generally untutored yet masterfully adept, displaying a grasp of formal issues so consistent and so formidable that it can be neither unselfconscious nor accidentally achieved.23

Today the discussion continues and the terminology multiplies. In recent years, other terms have been applied to contemporary artists in an attempt to distinguish their art from what we have traditionally come to call folk art, Hemphill's application of that term aside. The word I favor for what has come to be most generally called "outsider" art — gratuitous objects (to use Livingston's qualifier) created to manifest an inner, imaginative landscape — is "visionary," which I intend in precisely the same sense that the 18th-century English poet and engraver William Blake is described as a visionary whose work, like that of many so-called "outsider" artists, is spiritually driven. It is the particular quality of the manifestation of an interior visionary realm, a personal revelation, or what Hemphill calls "a personal universe, a world of his or her own making," that speaks most directly and most powerfully to me in the sphere of folk art.

Though the term "folk art" is still employed as a generic umbrella for various objects produced by non-academic artists, there may be some tenuous categories emerging throughout the dialogue that might help to establish a working terminology to facilitate the discussion. At this point, it seems fair to make a distinction between objects that grow out of a craft tradition and those that are purely the creations of a quite private, inner vision, for which we might, after all, accept the prevailing term outsider art.

Critic and historian Roger Cardinal is among the most influential in establishing this category, having used it as the English equivalent to Jean Dubuffet's term l'art brut. I would argue that, by contrast to the characteristics that elevate craft to art, the decorative embellishment of "folk" objects is motivated by a desire to decorate rather than by a compulsion to manifest personal, imaginative expressions, for as Cardinal argues in his seminal 1972 study Outsider Art, in a craft tradition there is a "subordination of individual inventiveness to a cultural standard."25

Further, I would argue that for the object to qualify as art, entirely outside a craft tradition, it must be what Livingston calls "gratuitous." In other words, just as we make a distinction that "fine" art is painting, sculpture, photography, and print making, with no functional purpose beyond the aesthetic/metaphysical, so the artist working outside the boundaries of academic art nevertheless produces a purely gratuitous object that exists
only to convey a creative vision. ("Intuitive," "obsessive," "eccentric," and "psychotic" have been added into the mix of subsets of "outsider" to describe one or another aspect of this vast body of art.)

The discussion that has revolved around this art — sometimes called the "art of the other," though this designation has been criticized by some as pejorative — began in Western Europe at the turn of the 20th century. Alfred Jarry introduced the work of untrained painter Henri Rousseau, or "innocent" as Cardinal refers to him, to an emerging circle of avant garde, academic artists. Rousseau's work was exhibited alongside theirs and called art naïf in contrast, for in order to be avant garde, artists had to have a firm knowledge of the formal techniques they were reacting against.

In 1922, the Swiss doctor, Hans Prinzhorn, published Bildnerei der Geisteskranken, an examination of the art of mental patients, primarily schizophrenics. Prinzhorn identified the source of their artistic energies to be what he called an "original creative urge," though he refrained from employing the word "art" (Kunst), preferring to describe their activity as Gestaltung (forming, shaping). Gauguin and Picasso were drawn to primitive, tribal visual sources, while Klee and Kandinsky found stimulus in the innocence and spontaneity of child art. Dubuffet became so enraptured of the art he began to collect in the 1940s that he coined a term that through his manifestos would constitute a firm classification to this day: l'art brut, literally "raw art," or what he would also call "the art of the alienated."

Dubuffet defined three subdivisions to the category of l'art brut: art by schizophrenics, mediums, and innocents. It is logical that the art of the insane would be of particular interest to those drawn to the emerging field of psychoanalysis as well as to artists such as the surrealists fascinated by art that was without mediation, a direct outpouring of the subconscious. The 2001 publication, Self-Taught Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art, brings together a collection of scholarly essays investigating the significance of outsider artists. The editor, Charles Russell, takes as his starting point a basic definition: "those individuals who have no academic artistic training and little connection to the mainstream traditions of Western art history, but whose works have undeniable aesthetic impact."

A PROPOSED TERMINOLOGY

With this cursory overview in place, I submit a proposal for some working, albeit inexact and overlapping, definitions based on the discussion as it has evolved.

**Primitive Art** — Despite the use of the word "primitives" in the parlance of collectors of American antiques, the term "primitive" probably would be best suited, in this linguistic sorting out, to apply to objects created in a tribal tradition. It would make the work of classification simpler if we were willing to assign the term to the products of a tribal culture — including decorated utilitarian objects and ritual objects, both of which are invested with mythic significance — and leave it, as a terminolo- gy, out of the dicussion of American folk/outsider art altogether.

**Popular Art** — Popular art could be said to constitute products of the popular culture, such as tavern and other advertising signs, cigar store Indians, circus art, carousel animals, and the tanware and other commercially manufactured pieces in the History Center's exhibit.

Folk Art — It seems fairly safe to assume that the term "folk" art usually has come to be applied to the European craft tradition of a learned pattern of technique and execution. The term "folk" art also carries with it a somewhat romantic notion of objects produced by people in a pre-industrial era, an idealized past uncompromised by the complexities and alienation of the Modern age. Most often, the fundamental motivation for the manufacture of "folk" objects is necessity, though that necessity is then entwined with a human desire to elevate everyday objects with embellishment as evidenced by the Armstrong County long rifle made by William Schreckengost. Decoys, weather-vanes, slipware, quilts, all exist with an a priori function that surpasses the decorative. The utility of schoolgirl samplers lies in teaching young girls stitchery, though they sometimes additionally serve a commemorative function, as do carved gravestones and narrative quilts.

Vernacular Art — The term "vernacular" art carries connotations similar to "folk" art, though it is variously applied to outsider art, as well, and in both instances suggests an art
informed by specificity of place. When used as an alternative to “folk” art, it indicates an art produced within a context of a shared sense of community, such as the frakturs from Pennsylvania German communities that are directly descended from the tradition of German fraktur and the Soap Hollow furniture produced by the Mennonite community in Somerset County. Russell points out that, in addition to the connotation discussed above, the term “popular art” has been applied specifically to the work of painters, suggesting that “serious art could be made by the many, by the ‘common man.’”

He cites John Kane as an example, though Kane’s work might better be described as “vernacular,” for a fundamental characteristic of Kane’s work, like John Graves’, Ines Hess’, and Joseph Youhon’s, is that it seeks to document a very specific place.

When applied as a substitute for the term “outsider” art, “vernacular” seems to suggest, not so much an art produced within a community, but an art that grows out of psychological isolation, rural or urban, yet is nonetheless informed by its specific period and geography, such as the work produced by many rural Southeastern American artists.

Untrained, Un schooled Art – These terms usually applied to art created by people with no formal training but with an inherent knowledge of a communal visual vocabulary, who consciously set out to make art. These terms are often used interchangeably with “vernacular” and “self-taught.”

Naive Art – Again, “naive” art may be said to be art produced by people with no training. Though they may work from a more childlike perspective, they nonetheless seek recogni-
tion for their efforts. In Outsider Art Cardinal includes in this category “autodidacts, neoprimitives, Sunday painters, etc.” These are people, he suggests, producing art that is not truly “subversive” because on one level or another they are “striving for recognition as ‘artists,’” e.g., Grandma Moses.

Self-Taught Art – If we accept Russell’s categorization, the term “self-taught” is more commonly applied to “artists whose work is more self-enclosed, obsessive, or simply idiosyncratic than the art of those believed to be rooted in traditional, collective, supposedly ‘folk’ traditions.”

We could say, then, that self-taught art is produced by people with no training, who are compelled by a personal, interior motivation. In the current exhibit, this categorization includes Butch Quinn and Peter Contis.

Outsider Art – Art produced by people who have been marginalized by society could be defined as “outsider” art. It is art that often has a compulsive quality, an obsessiona l motivation. The people who make outsider art often do not think of themselves as artists or think of what they create as art. Probably the artist who is most representative of this classification in the current exhibit is Robert Wright, whose work is a direct manifestation of visionary experiences.

Unlike traditional “folk” art, outsider art, grows, not out of a traditional vocabulary of motifs and symbols, but out of a powerful inner truth that provides a personal, idiosyncratic vocabulary of signifiers that constitutes a work that speaks for itself from within, a criterion required of any work of art we categorize as “great.” For despite its singularity and overwhelming inner-ness, outsider art does speak to us in a universal language of the collective unconscious. The aesthetic is rarely “pretty,” just as Picasso’s Guernica is not “pretty.” In Twentieth Century Folk Art and Artists, Hemphill quotes from Herbert Read’s Meaning of Art:

... the sense of beauty [is] a very fluctuating phenomenon, with manifestations in the course of history that are very uncertain and often baffling. Art should include all such manifestations ... and whatever one’s own sense of beauty ... admit ... manifestations of that sense in other people.

We always assume that all that is beautiful is art, or that all art is beautiful, that what is not beautiful is not art, and that ugliness is the negation of art....

Art ... is not the expression in plastic form of any one particular ideal. It is the expression of any ideal that the artist can realize in plastic form.

It may produce effects of terror or horror which are powerful and even sublime, and then ... we are in the presence of a work of art.

Taking note of Read, while a proposed terminology imprecise and approximate as it
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is has been offered, I am compelled to include remarks from two critics who object to the latter term altogether. In a 1994 collection of critical essays debating the issue of terminology, The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture, Lucy Lippard takes issue (and she is not alone in her position) with the term “outsider” vis a vis perceived cultural bias. She asks,

These artists are “outside” of what? Their own social contexts? Sometimes. The mainstream? Usually. In fact, these people, like some of the best artists who function within the art world, are really insiders. They are outcasts only because those who live in their head tend to be ignored in a society that primarily decorates the pocket and the outer self. Their isolation is actually a perceived but unacknowledged class difference. From an existential position, they are no more isolated than most modern souls. So it is a matter, once again, of an ethnocentric society’s negative naming process, based on what is not rather than what is; the margins are defined by the center.35

Lippard prefers “the term vernacular or home-made or self-taught, though of course all good art is to some extent self-taught.”36 In the same collection, Kenneth Ames, though he applauds “renewed attention to content and context” by those who have attempted “to bring art back to life,” similarly believes that “outsider art is a flawed and injurious concept that promotes and perpetuates a dehumanizing conception of art.”37

In Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester’s 1974 The Flowering of American Folk Art (1776–1876), Winchester cites Maxim Karolik, the Russian collector of fine art and folk art, “who [she says] had a greater appreciation for American art than many Americans...” Karolik reflected,

One wonders whether, from the artistic point of view, the question of Folk Art versus Academic Art has any meaning. The question I continue to ask is whether lack of technical proficiency limits the artist’s ability to express his ideas. I do not believe that it does.... Among the unknown painters in this country were a number of men of exceptional talent. Fortunately, they had no academic training. Because of this they sometimes lacked the ability to describe, but it certainly did not hinder their ability to express.38

The question of terminology has persisted over five decades, and the plethora of terms it has generated continues to multiply. Ultimately, among the most important aspects of the recognition of whatever we decide to call this art that is produced by people outside the academy, is to grasp the understanding that art is not something “other,” something that can only be borne of orthodoxy trained artists in a milieu from which the general population is omitted. In her essay in Self-Taught Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art, Ellen Dissanayake considers “art, including self-taught art, ethologically — that is, as a universal biological activity of the human species, based in precultural precursors.”40 Indeed, this vital creative spirit has existed at every turn in ordinary people.

Though technology has powerfully advanced our industrial and informational capabilities, it has, at the same time, vastly diminished the need for handwork skills and has introduced passive, mass-produced substitutes for creative activity. Worse, it has spawned an in-authenticity that is the inevitable result of a culture whose values grow out of consumerism. Nonetheless, there are those indomitable spirits who impose their personal visions upon their private worlds, and in so doing, provide a porthole into their unique universes.

In a post-modern age that has seen terminologies proliferate and in which the academy overly has come to rely on “isms”, it may be necessary to forgo categories in order to heed a deeper imperative that recognizes those among us who possess a gift that enables them to manifest their very personal and idiosyncratic visions so that they might speak to the peculiarities of our collective American experience — and to essential human experience. Being creative individuals who have rejected the stultifying mold of an homogenized society, these artists provide a model of independence of thought and integrity of spirit. However useful terminology may be to facilitate the discussion, what these individuals create is ultimately ART — without need of qualifiers or labels. Art is necessary to the ordering and interpretation of lived experience. It is, as English romantic poet William Wordsworth described it, experience “recollected in tranquility.” Art, in all its variety, like love, is best understood on its own terms.
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2. In 1924, the Whitney Studio Club (later the Whitney Museum of American Art) featured the exhibition, *Early American Art*, but it was not exclusively “folk art.” The MOMA exhibition was the first at a major U.S. museum to focus exclusively on folk art (however the term was being interpreted).
4. Ibid., 362.
5. Ibid., 366.
6. Ibid., 355.
7. Ibid., 358.
8. Ibid., 361.
9. Ibid., 360.
10. Ibid., 360.
11. Ibid., 357.
12. Ibid., 358.
15. Ibid., 359.
16. Ibid., 357.
17. Ibid., 360.
18. Ibid., 361.
19. Ibid., 362.
22. Ibid., 9.
24. Hemphill, 10.
25. Cardinal, 35.
27. Ibid., 39.
28. Ibid., 18.
29. Ibid., 35.
31. Ibid., 5.
32. Cardinal, 35.
34. Hemphill, 8.
36. Ibid., 7.