

Ohio Art Council's Riffe Gallery
Outside in Ohio: A Century of Unexpected Genius

Curator's Statement

ON OUTSIDER ART IN OHIO

By Mark Chepp

OUTSIDE IN OHIO: A CENTURY OF UNEXPECTED GENIUS delivers a timely overview of Ohio's contribution to that uniquely twentieth century phenomenon, Outsider Art. Variouslly defined in terms of auto-didacticism, grassroots populism or idiosyncratic personal experience, Outsider Art in all of its manifestations has most often been characterized by its separation from the "Insider" art world of critics, curators and academics. Frequently idealized as isolated geniuses unmotivated by the commercial art mainstream, true Outsider artists, in this construct, produce highly personalized art forms, impelled by an irresistible need to express...something. Rooted in 19th century Romantic notions of similarly unrecognized artists trying to break into the art world, the 20th century Outsider had come to be seen as oblivious to or at least unconcerned with that arena.

Now, after a decade of 21st century hindsight, we know better. It may be true that the term "Outsider" came to apply those artists marginalized from mainstream society by geographical or psychological isolation, incarceration, lack of education, physical limitations, etc., but it is equally true that these artists lived (and continue to live) in a culture dominated by a relentlessly accelerating communications technology. Henry Church, for example, lived a secluded existence in Chagrin Falls, but he nonetheless mined imagery from mass-produced Victorian posters, trade cards and sales catalogs at the turn of the 20th century. During the Depression years, out-of-work Ben Hartman built, in a remote corner of southwest Springfield, a spectacular rock garden with iconic figures most certainly influenced by popular cinema. Today's ubiquity of both virtual and hardcopy imagery now allows young artists Chad Sines and Mark Thomas access to a cornucopia of visual sources which, just a generation ago, were available mainly to art history students. And alongside the Outsiders' increasing visual sophistication comes their concurrent awareness of that insider art world of

galleries, museums and academies where so much of the visual information came from in the first place.

How, then, to organize an exhibition which, in some meaningful way, communicates the essence of Outsider art in Ohio? Three criteria have been used here. First, each of these artists is primarily or entirely self-taught. Second, all have, at least initially, undertaken art making without expecting recognition from the commercial or mainstream art establishment. And, third, each has become, or is becoming, an acknowledged artistic personality in his or her own right. (This last criterion has naturally excluded from the exhibition any anonymous works even though many compelling examples exist.)

The alert viewer will also note that the term “20th century” is used rather loosely in the context of the exhibition’s chronology. Again we cite Henry Church. He survived just eight years into the twentieth century, but his paintings (all produced during his final twenty-two years) anticipate both the Surrealist and the shallow-depth Modernist tendencies of later, mid-20th century mainstream art. Eccentric, isolated and entirely self-taught, Church ushered in a century-long parade of notable Ohio Outsiders. Indeed, surveying the century’s production, one is reminded of William Gerdts’s famous assertion regarding American regional art of the same period: “Of all the states between the East and West coasts, it was Ohio that developed the greatest and most continuous artistic tradition.” The very same observation rings true for Ohio’s Outsider artists.

Twentieth century Outsider Art must also be seen in the context of the much longer tradition of “Folk” art. Unlike Outsiders, Folk artists work within well-established, community-supported frameworks that encourage and provide informal training in the production of functional objects (quilts, pottery, furniture) as well as “art-like” forms (sculptural decoration, ancestor portraits). However, both groups share the similar characteristic of operating primarily outside the mainstream art world. American Folk art from the 17th through 19th centuries enjoyed two popular revivals during the 20th century, the first during the isolationist and xenophobic decade of the 1920s, which coincided with the popularity of Regionalist and American Scene painting, and the second resulting from America’s Bicentennial celebrations of 1976. Both of these revivals contributed to the birth and expansion of the Outsider movement, tentatively at first (in the Depression Era work of Elijah Pierce and Ben Hartman, for example), but much more exuberantly during the post-

Bicentennial years. It is no coincidence that America's premier archive of traditional Folk art, the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum at Colonial Williamsburg, was established in the 1920s. Its New York offspring, the Museum of American Folk Art, began diversifying its collections in the 1980s to include the burgeoning new field of Outsider Art. And the end of the century saw the opening of several new museums, like Intuit in Chicago and the Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, devoted exclusively to 20th century Outsider Art.

Finally, a few words about the makeup of the exhibition are in order. Given Ohio's rich heritage of Outsider Art, the major challenge in developing a meaningful survey was, of course, which artists to choose and which of their pieces to include. The task was further complicated by the constraints facing a traveling exhibition, not least the physical variants of multiple venues. We established an early parameter of 45 to 60 works by 15 to 20 artists and ended up with 60 works by 18 artists. Curators always want more, but space makes its own demands and stringency can advance clarity. Most important, the 18 artists of this exhibition span the whole of the twentieth century, are inclusive of both gender and race, reflect the primary Outsider media of painting, sculpture and textiles, and include artists from all geographic pockets of Ohio. Nationally recognized figures like Elijah Pierce, William Hawkins and Mary Borkowski are exhibiting here with virtual unknowns like Charlie Owens and Ira Brukner. The raw, expressive figuration of Chad Sines provides a counterpoint to the graphic vigor and naive charm of Carole Estep's rugs. Ralph Bell's quadriplegia and Mary Merrill's agoraphobia could have paralyzed their creativity but, in fact and instead, making art allowed them both to leap heroically over their formidable physical and psychological barriers. Paul Patton's memory paintings of his beloved Rix Mills, Ricky Barnes's carved relief homages to his beloved Cincinnati Reds, and Tony Salvatore's obsessive and eerily mysterious pastel votives to his beloved Creator speak to the intensity of feeling so evident in all Outsider Art. As we move forward in time and gain a greater historical perspective, the modifier "Outsider," so hotly debated in late 20th century critical literature, becomes increasingly perfunctory as we advance through the 21st. In the end it is all, simply, "Art."