

Outsiders, Isolates, Environmentalists, Visionaries: The Spectrum of Descriptors in Contemporary American Folk Art, are They Valid?

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The general term “folk art” encompasses a variety of forms of expression. Rather than recognize that this is a continuum of aesthetics, the current interest seems to be in placing these artists into categories without recognition that the circumstances under which they create their images is quite determinative. It would seem more productive to accept the idea that the real focus should be the artist’s similar and collective inner creativity rather than the object’s relationships to those fashioned by traditional artistic conventions or even the original work of others.

The term “outsider” suggests that these artists may be estranged from the social mainstream, while, in fact, many of these artists are an active part of their resident community and participate with their general environment. For example, on a recent visit to Lonnie Holley, a major theme of our interaction consisted of his informing us about his work with the “poor black children.” His purpose in this voluntary effort seems to be to act as a role model of resident creativity and his own brand of civic responsibility under rather dire circumstances. Lonnie hopes to preserve a tradition of the creation of folk art by blacks as does his friend, Charlie Lucas. Certainly, 84th Street North is outside the posh residential areas of Birmingham, but is not “outside” the world of Lonnie Holley and disadvantaged blacks. Would one have considered Robert Henri, John Sloan, or George Luks “outsiders” because they chose as subject matter “ashcans and clotheslines” representing, the urban squalor of their new American shortly after the turn of the century? Outrageous they may have been, but “outsiders” they were not.

Reuben Miller, Howard Finster, and the late Benjamin Franklin Perkins have, at various times, been described as outsiders; yet as ministers they are significant public figures in their own environment, and much of their inspiration comes from a knowledge of current events. Miller and Finster were very attuned to the threats of terrorism and to the events of the “War in the Desert” and have created their own visual interpretations of problems of global magnitude. The Reverend B.D. Perkins fueled his unpretentious patriotism with an appreciation of the relative status of our country in the total world order. Perkins has interpreted these revelations in his imagery regaling the virtues of his native

land. Although his last congregation numbered only about 20 dedicated souls, Perkins' visions undoubtedly represent a significant community force. He expressed his political convictions in the "burning of the flag" issue and taught this respect for things Americans to local school children. These artists are isolated from the mainstream of traditional art, but why must this, by definition, be considered "Isolated?"

When one encounters the term "isolate," the prerogative term brings forth visions of a mystic living on a rock high above the population zone or even the tree line. We further insist that these artists should be relatively untouched by civilization and certainly not tainted with offerings of the popular media. The savage creative instinct in these isolates should be uncluttered and unaffected by the normal societal influences incumbent upon their contemporaries in traditional art circles. This obviously is hyperbole but not without some substance. Part of this vision could be fulfilled by someone like James Harold Jennings, who lives in a series of school buses in a community with the appropriate appellation of Pinnacle. Pinnacle is no more than a bump on the geographic relief map, and the paved road reaches to within 50 yards of James Harold Jennings' world. However, when you are greeted by a middle-aged man pedaling, his bicycle attired in shorts, combat boots, a linesman's leather vest filled with artists' as well as carpenters' tools, a scruffy mane flowing to his waist and all of this array set off by a crown fashioned from bark atop a toboggan, "isolate" might certainly be one of the descriptors considered. If this initial presentation were followed, as it predictably will be, by a semi-lucid discussion of "metapsychosis", a more lasting image begins to take shape. However, if you take the time to actually visit and exchange ideas with Jennings, you soon realize that he is in very close touch with reality, the global situation, the traditional canons of art and even an assessment of his own place in the art world. Leafing, through his readily displayed order book, you find notes, business cards, names and addresses of the rich and infamous, art historians and curators, and a number of well-known and fashionable dealers. Jennings may only be isolated from or outside conventional reality by his personal interpretation of the facts of the world. Jennings dances to the tune of his own chosen rhythm, but he is neither unaware of society nor without interest in the world around him. His theme of "apostle of the sun, moon and stars," the forced speech pattern and wry smile make one wonder whether James Harold is having fun with you and may even be partially manufacturing his own appearance of a visionary or "outsider" knowingly.

Sometimes geography appears to create an isolate or outsider. Sam Doyle, for example, lived in the community of Frogmore on St. Helena Island, east of the town of Beaufort (not "Bofoat"; that's another state), South Carolina. His neighbors were Gullah blacks whose lyrical dialect and social and religious traditions set them apart from the low country whites of South Carolina. The citizens there on St. Helena Island had powerful, strong beliefs and practices of African and African-Caribbean origin. Witch doctors, voodoo (hoodoo) apparitions, mojo men and dream interpretations were an intrinsic part of their culture. For years St. Helena Island was separated by the mainland and was only reached

by boat. Many of the ideas unique to this isolated area were captured by Sam Doyle in the images he composed using ordinary house paint on tin and set out in his yard for the elements to “cure” and probably for others to see. However, Doyle also painted his versions of Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson and other black public figures he became aware of from the news media. Sam Doyle. Remote? Yes. Isolated? Not entirely. Interesting, whimsical and original in presentation? Most definitely!

Walter Anderson was a painter traditionally trained as an artist in New York, as was the Reverend McKendree-Long who studied with William Merritt Chase in Italy. Both evidenced later behavioral characteristics somewhat off the bell shaped curve. Can they even be considered as folk artists, as many art historians/critics consider formal art training as an unalterable criterion for exclusion from this group? The technical style of Anderson and McZKendree-Long is unquestionably non-traditional. Also there is a significant temporal separation from the training and the artistic expression for which they gained acclaim. McKendree-Long had over a 20-year hiatus from art while practicing as a Presbyterian Minister. Walter Anderson left New York and pursued a quite non-conventional life style in Ocean Springs. Anderson prepared himself to observe the effects of coastal storms by lashing his torso to cypress stumps almost at water level during the height of a gale. These men were for a while definitely part of the social establishment but at a later time in their life they rejected convention and crated their one artistic environment.

Many folk artists began their careers by decorating their own environment – not just to make it more aesthetically pleasing but often to embellish its meaning to them. Creation of a sense of place has been the predominant theme of artists, writers and poets since the beginning of time, but the dramatic manner in which these self-taught, self-actuated, creative individuals have done this as earned them the description of “environmentalists” – they have created or sometimes altered their environment. Howard Finster began with his “Paradise Garden,” using material donated and hauled in for that specific purpose by his neighbors. Certainly, these were not environmentalists in the traditional sense. They were more of an affirmation of the “trash may be treasure” adage.

It is not difficult to believe that Vollis Simpson has changed his environment on the farm outside Lucama “just off Highway 301,” where you will see monumental metallic constructions of horse-drawn wagons, airplanes and guitar players arising out of the rural landscape and with the wind moving to and fro some 40-60 feet in the air. Vollis could probably wax more eloquently about the NRA than the Sierra Club, but he certainly has changed his personal environment by these heroic constructions. Thus, in this same context, he and artists like Mary T. Smith, David Butler, Loy Bolin and Nellie Mae Rowe could be given the same description. Q.J. Stevenson is more of our traditional environmentalist. He has spent most of his life observing the creatures of the creeks and marshes near his home and creates images that represent their adaptations for survival, the fossil remains and his own private ideas about man’s treatment of God’s legacy.

In the Konceyo traditions, huts and houses were often decorated to either release or toward of certain spirits. Identifiable types of structures could be characterized by exterior symbols placed there for that specific purpose. If one is particularly observant, this same type of decorative accolade can be seen in rural areas of America today and even in the ghettos of our cities. David Butler placed objects on tin outside his house, and Mary T. Smith put them in her yard almost as decorative fences. Are these the symbols of a culture fast disappearing from modern society soon to not be just isolated but extinct or is this a personal statement by the artist demanding public affirmation of their private thoughts and aspirations? If this is their goal they move from outside to our definition of the inside.

Ralph Griffin and Bessie Harvey were "root sculptors" who fashion symbolic figures from driftwood, fallen trees, stumps, limbs and branches. These artists may be unable to articulate a direct spiritual link to Funzi, the spirit who invests water and hence, wood with its power, but the similarities in imagery are compelling. Their yards are decorated with the spectrum of forms and compositions these root sculptures can take. The effect upon the landscape is unassailable, but the characterization of contemporary folk artists as visionaries, isolates, environmentalists is, at best, tenuous.

When one describes a group of artists as visionaries, traditionally we refer to such well-known painters as Albert Pinkham Ryder, Ralph A. Blakelock, Eugene Higgins, Robert Loftin Newman and their colleagues. Their *métier* was nocturnal marines and idyllic landscapes. Often, their eccentric personal habits and reclusiveness proved fascinating to both historians and collectors, as did their experimental technical applications of pigment. However, in its context of contemporary folk art has different connotations.

Minnie Evans painted her dreams in an almost psychedelic fashion, employing intricate relationships of colors and symbols to create images that are simultaneously complex and bold. The imagery of Bill Traylor may at the same time be naïve and simple yet wonderfully sophisticated. The interpretations of the paintings of this former slave are, indeed, in concert with the idea of visionary representation of African traditions, which makes the work of Traylor and contemporary artists, Juantita Rogers, Joseph Elmer Yoakum, J.B. Murray and Thornton Dial so universally acclaimed. These are visionaries in the broadest sense but not according to the historical artistic interpretation. Applied to our current folk artists, this characterization, if accepted, must be taken in the particular context, which somewhat discounts our artistic conventions.

Thus, one may attempt to describe the various contemporary facets in American folk art and to categorize these wonderfully creative individuals according to the determinative applications. This exercise may well create a greater understanding of the contemporary folk art genre and allow a certain familiarity with specific expressions of this movement. However, these descriptions and characterizations if applied at all should be considered in a non-traditional format, as should the images themselves. Folk art is appealing, on the one hand, for its different interpretation of a familiar reality and on the other, for its departure from unconventional origins of inspired imagery.

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