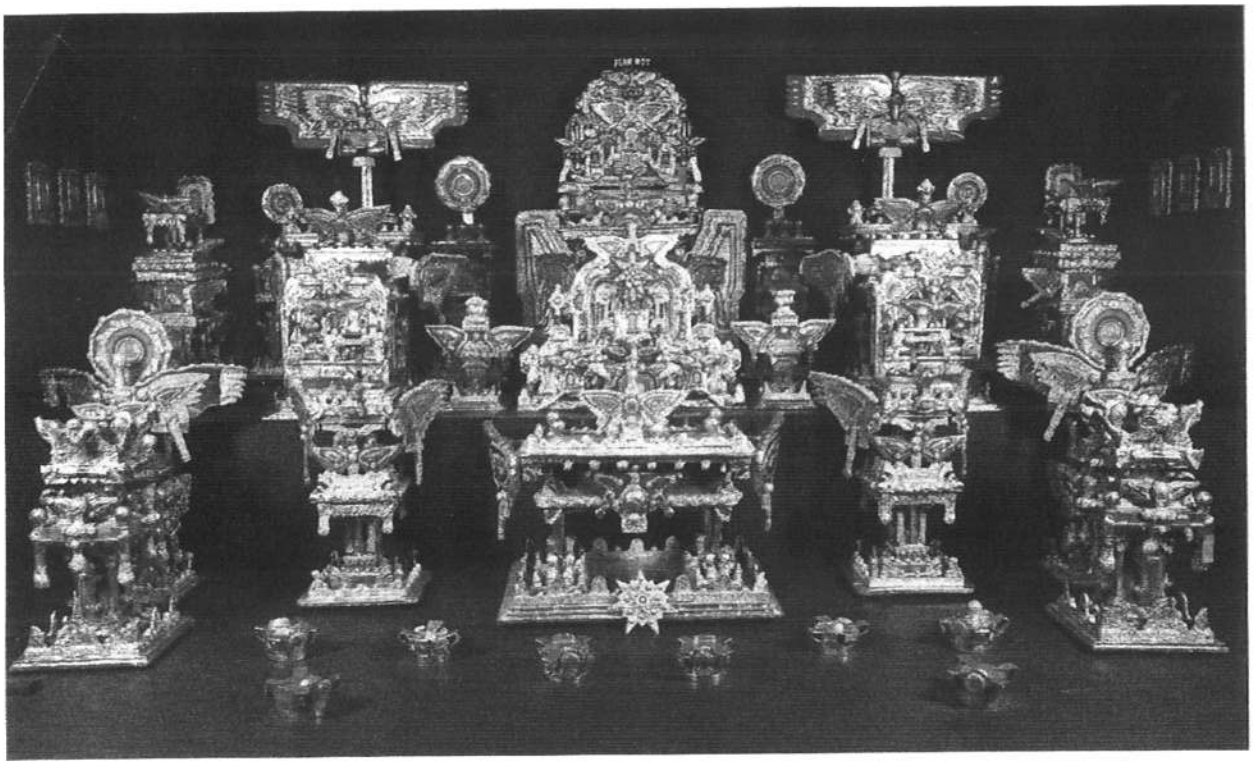

James Hampton: *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*, ca. 1950-64, gold and silver aluminum foil, Kraft paper and plastic over wood furniture, paperboard and glass, 180 pieces, 10½ by 27 by 14½ feet. Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

The Other Art World

Leslie Umberger interviewed by Richard Vine

GIVEN THE CONTEMPORARY art world's penchant for separating "winners" from the vast majority of less-recognized artists, it seems appropriate to recall that not all art-makers are, or even want to be, part of the mainstream game. Some practitioners—lacking training or conventional social skills, and driven by idiosyncratic visions—create their work in relative isolation, for purposes outside the professional norms. Yet in the postmodern era, these individuals, too, have steadily come to be considered members of the extended art world family.

That recognition is both commercial and institutional, reaching now to the highest levels. In fall 2012, after serving for more than a decade as senior curator at the Kohler Art Center in Sheboygan, Wis., Leslie Umberger was appointed curator of folk and self-taught art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) in Washington, D.C. Recently, intrigued by the issues specific to this burgeoning field, *Art in America*'s managing editor engaged her in a candid e-mail interview.

RICHARD VINE Is your museum position newly created? And, if so, what does it indicate about the Smithsonian's curatorial initiatives today?

LESLIE UMBERGER The Smithsonian American Art Museum started collecting work by untrained artists in 1970, when James Hampton's astonishing *Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly* (ca. 1950-64) came to light in a Washington, D.C., carriage house following the artist's death. Fortunately, a couple of prescient individuals (who have preferred to remain anonymous) understood that this kind of work was a critical, missing part of the greater story of American art and saved it.

Hampton's *Throne*—an installation of some 180 spiritual objects fashioned from scrap materials and found items—offers insights into an alternate reality. It suggests a radically different narrative in which an African-American artist, who was born and raised in the Jim Crow South and who worked a menial job by day, was nevertheless able to privately, powerfully and lastingly assert his faith, identity and freedom. The donors' gift became one of the most beloved treasures at the museum; it also became an icon of SAAM's mission to develop an encompassing view of America through the art of its people.

Elizabeth Broun, the museum's director, and curator Lynda Roscoe Hartigan took this work seriously. From the beginning, the staff researched and presented it in a way that validated Hampton's experience and beliefs, positioning his

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Levi Fisher Ames: *The Celebrated Black Hodag Captured in Oneida County, Wis[illegible], ca. 1897*, wood, graphite, ink, paper, fabric, glass and metal, 6¼ by 17¼ by 2¾ inches when open. Courtesy John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection, Sheboygan, Wis.

creation—made under the cover of darkness by a disenfranchised individual—alongside art world masterpieces.

In the 1980s, Hartigan collaborated with collector and curator Herbert Waide Hemphill Jr., making his seminal collection of work by folk and self-taught artists the foundation for the American Art Museum's growing interest in this field. Over the years, other important gifts and acquisitions followed, increasing the prominence of both the museum's collection and the artists whose works comprise it. Since 2006, a significant amount of this art has been continually on view, in dedicated exhibition spaces, for SAAM's one million annual visitors.

In September 2012, I became the Smithsonian's first curator devoted exclusively to this area of art. That appointment signals the American Art Museum's deep commitment to such work and endorses its abiding value. It also indicates an institutional equity among creative realms.

VINE How would you describe the historical reception of folk and self-taught art? Clearly, there was a time when this material was not considered art at all.

UMBERGER Yes, the art world has traditionally constructed "superior vs. inferior" oppositions. The realm of "Art" was long dominated by work from a certain Western-centric historical continuum. Nearly everything else was, as you say, not considered art at all.

However, like other racial and cultural biases, that attitude has eroded over time; the overt preference for any one group over another has become less and less acceptable. But these perceptions change slowly, generationally, and there is still a hermetic group that considers nonstandard work invasive; for these people, it is still quite threatening.

Since ancient times, object-makers of various ilk and intention have played against one another, often subscribing to—or being forced to accept—a strict hierarchy of cultural worth. In Europe and the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries, industrialization increasingly brought together populations of disparate rank and experience, and the results were generally quite provocative. Modernism challenged the idea of an art solely by and for the elite, championing greater individualism instead. But at the same time, it established a new elitism—an intellectual art world that favored erudite white men.

The art of many other cultures (to the extent it was seen at all) was alternately reviled as grotesque or hailed as exotic source material, as was the creative production of various subsets of Western culture—most particularly the insane and the uneducated. Now, though, that modernist paradigm is largely considered every bit as flawed as any that preceded it.

VINE Did Massimiliano Gioni's exhibition "The Encyclopedic Palace" at the Venice Biennale last year signal a major shift in critical and curatorial thinking within the larger art world?

UMBERGER I think it signaled a breaking point, a social fatigue with the rancorous insider/outsider dichotomy and a desire to move beyond a hegemonic sphere in order to encounter imaginative expression in an unlimited and unlimiting way.

As Massimiliano was planning the Biennale, we spoke about some of the artists we both admire, such as Emery Blagdon, Levi Fisher Ames and Eugene Von Bruenchenhein. These are artists I feel very strongly about, so I believe the acknowledgment in Venice was both deserved and overdue. Massimiliano has explained that he wanted this highly visible international forum to address ideas of belonging and non-belonging, but also, more significantly, to offer an engagement with private domains of imagination that emanate great vibrancy.

This is a key point: interiority that generates great power. This is not unique to untrained artists, but catering to the demands of the art world can be quite limiting; work created apart from that realm is inherently different. Massimiliano raised the hackles of some viewers—but apparently only those with a profound lack of understanding about the content and intentionality (both often presumed to be absent) of the work of the self-taught.

Overall, the mandates of contemporary art forums like the Biennale entail challenging, thwarting and redefining. So

what will be more interesting is to see how museums, which organize primarily through studied categorization, will embrace or reject this kind of a challenge.

VINE Is it better to have separate departments or even whole museums of folk and self-taught art, or to integrate this work into "mainstream" collections?

UMBERGER Every institutional model has its own strengths and weaknesses. But institutions specializing in artists who are untrained or trained in vernacular traditions have unquestionably preserved and validated important works that otherwise might have been lost.

Some of the older American institutions, such as Vermont's Shelburne Museum and Virginia's Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum (founded, respectively, in 1947 and 1957) established and adhere to strict parameters for early American folk art and craft forms. In 1953, the Museum of International Folk Art (MOIFA) in New Mexico began to promote the traditional arts of all cultures, aiming to foster a postwar sense of global community. Still America's largest specialized folk art institution, MOIFA very successfully foregrounds folkways and folk arts as time-honored creative expressions that carry cultural identity and unite communities.

Hemphill, who was such a boon to the Smithsonian, pioneered new directions for the field with the collection he began around 1936 but shaped more attentively in the 1950s and '60s. Commenting on their ongoing exchange, Hartigan, now chief curator at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass., has noted that Hemphill never intended to redefine "folk art" or engage in a terminology debate. Rather, he wanted to celebrate, without boundaries, a gamut of production encompassing Americana, traditional practice and highly autonomous creations. Hoping to keep things simple, Hemphill generally referred to all of it as "folk art"—although later he conceded that this label might have actually complicated understandings.

In 1961, Hemphill and some cohorts formed New York's Museum of Early American Folk Arts—which by 1966 needed to amend its restrictive name to the Museum of American Folk Art, and by 2001 to adjust it again when the museum decided to explore work beyond the U.S. Today's American Folk Art Museum does great work, but its institutional identity remains an issue for those who believe the discrepancy between the name and the featured material (which exceeds the parameters of tradition-based work) is problematic.

Organizations like the Kohler Arts Center in Wisconsin have more broadly based missions, but show real muscle in this field through exemplary exhibitions, scholarship and preservation advocacy. Chicago's Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art has also given the work earnest and consistent attention, although the term "outsider" is increasingly regarded as a moniker that should fade from use.

Variously, institutional names and tightly described missions entail some juggling of perceptions: specificity versus narrowness, specialization versus marginalization.

Large multifaceted institutions can adapt to evolving models and effectively position the work within the context of mankind's pinnacle achievements. They also may bring a wider range of perspectives to the conversation, thus freshening critical perceptions of the art itself.

Among the large institutions to feature noncanonical work, however, far too few have demonstrated a genuine and lasting commitment through supported scholarship, full-time curatorial positions, dedicated galleries and integrated installations. If big museums are going to take this material as seriously as work in their other areas of specialization, and assert its true importance rather than subtly endorse its ongoing marginality, key changes must occur.

VINE Do we need distinct critical criteria for the work of self-taught artists, or should it be subject to the same principles of assessment as work by professionally trained artists?

UMBERGER Both. It is art, and it is art with special distinctions.

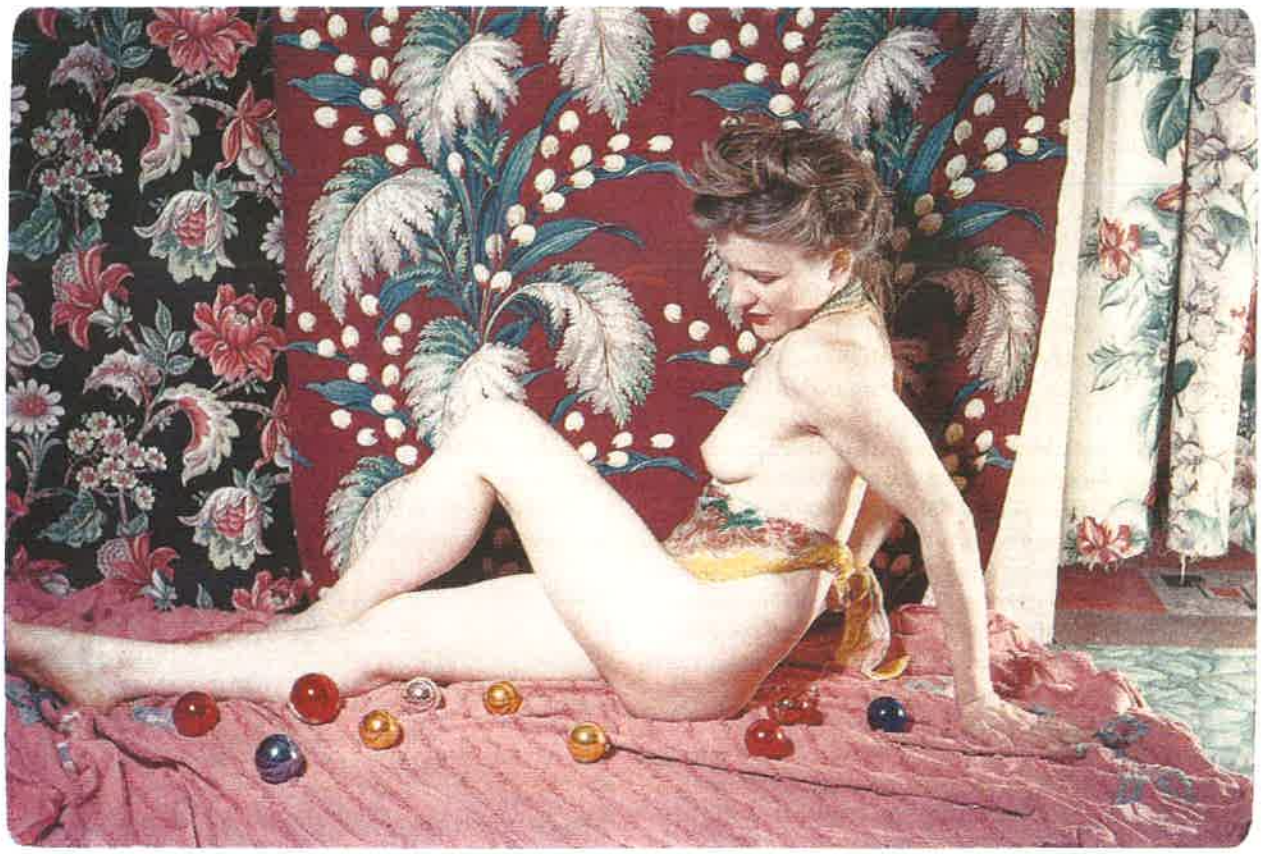
Today the trend is to call for dissolving categories—and understandably so, since faulty and misused terms, along with the sensationalizing of biographies, have pigeonholed the work of the untrained as "inferior."

A component from Emery Blagdon's *The Healing Machine*, ca. 1955-86, oil paint and mixed mediums on wood, 9 by 12¼ inches. Courtesy John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.

But declaring all categories null and void doesn't eliminate the human need to classify or to learn through valid frameworks; it just sidesteps a complex issue.

We need to disown sloppy and demeaning epithets that obfuscate the art, and instead use greater specificity to describe and chronicle creative forms. All artistic practice should be situated within its shaping context, and because the context that gives rise to folk and self-taught art is fundamentally different from that of the mainstream art world, it indeed requires specialized interpretative tools and a field of dedicated scholars.

I think the common misconception that this work is inherently simple or crude has sometimes resulted in an inverse vetting process. Institutions may actually have softer standards for what comes into their collections in this area, because they are ill-equipped for evaluating it according to



Eugene Von Bruenchenheim: *Untitled (Marie)*, ca. 1943–60, print from a transparency, 6¾ by 9¾ inches. Courtesy John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

the criteria they would otherwise use. This sometimes creates an emperor's new clothes situation for venues that collect and display this material without first developing a sufficient knowledge base.

VINE Should visionary work (by makers who consider themselves not so much artists as spiritual mediums or religious prophets) or, in other instances, work that used to be called "art of the insane" be treated as categorically distinct from more normative forms of folk and self-taught art?

UMBERGER I view nonacademic art as a spectrum, with tradition at one end and autonomy at the other. Between these poles are infinite degrees of distinction and overlap. A full complement of descriptors may help chart the constellation of a particular individual's experience, beliefs, ways of learning and creative expressions.

It's crucial to reject subjective oppositions like "normal" and "abnormal" and instead evaluate the nuanced factors and worldviews that shape an individual practice. The categories you mention are neither interchangeable nor unrelated; I would no more conjoin the spiritual and the mentally ill than I would conflate a person who learned through a cultural group with a person with a highly individualized experience.

What your question perhaps intentionally identifies is the ways in which thinking of categories as distinct and easily selected buckets is detrimental. The art should invite exploration and discovery, not be interpreted through a definition.

VINE Has the explosion of the self-taught art market been, on balance, a boon to the field and the artists, or primarily a means of financial exploitation?

UMBERGER Optimistically, it could mean the days of blatant financial exploitation are over.

Before this material gained recognition, one could argue, it simply did not have a competitive market value, and so the negligible sums paid to artists in the 1970s were fair or justifiable. But in far too many cases, artists who could not speak for themselves or who could not follow the language and logic of contracts—or who simply trusted the wrong people—were treated abysmally. To me, this has always been the real meaning of the base term "outsider," those who could be easily abused by the insider system. Things have improved incrementally over time, but this is still an issue.

VINE So where do you think this field is headed? Is the latest spate of interest another fad or does it have staying power?

UMBERGER The material certainly has staying power; it's a vital part of the fabric of American history as well as the history of art.

I think the art world has scrambled as it became increasingly clear that the work of traditional and autonomous artists resonates deeply and engages people in lasting ways. Art that tells indelible stories and poignantly chronicles the experience of humanity is going to remain largely independent of art world trends, so whether or not it is experiencing a fashionable moment matters far less than having cultural and educational institutions take full notice and make valuable contributions to its legacy. ○