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Conserving the self-taught artists collection at the Smithsonian American Art Museum

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Evolving curatorial frameworks for art beyond the mainstream have influenced how conservators approach preservation and degrees of intervention. Unconventional materials and techniques, along with inconsistent or compromised care during the artist's lifetime necessitate artist-specific materials knowledge and a curatorial perspective that considers the artist's historical lack of agency as a factor in preservation strategies.

Keywords: Self-taught artists, African American, James Hampton, Purvis Young, Minging Mike

Introduction

The history of non-academic art is hard to distill, as it could encompass every form of creation beyond the mainstream canon. Dialogs between professional artists and the untrained 'folk' date to classical times, but in the modern era tensions between the two realms have become more provocative as class structures and boundaries have increasingly been challenged.

In Europe, influential artists, including Pablo Picasso and André Breton, celebrated the innovation of marginalized artists early in the twentieth century. European proclivities thereafter tended to favor the art of the insane, or artists who somehow reflected a dramatic singularity in world-view.

In America, the link between individualism and modern vision was promoted by Alfred H. Barr, the Director of New York's Museum of Modern Art from 1929 to 1943. Barr identified self-taught art, Surrealism, and Abstraction, as the 'three principle movements of modern art' (Russell, 2001, p. 9). In 1937, Barr presented a pioneering solo exhibition for African American stone carver William Edmondson and in the following year mounted the first institutional group exhibition to celebrate American self-taught painters. In the 1940s, artists such as Grandma Moses became wildly popular. The emerging American model celebrated an unfettered, 'primitive' sense of national character, a yearning for an authentic American Modernism and, during the Federal Arts project, a model of the artist as worker.

After World War II, enthusiasm for pre-industrial art felt uncomfortably close to the folk revivals endorsed by the totalitarian regimes of Germany and Japan. By mid-century, nationalist content, by trained or untrained artists, was conflated with communism and fascism, so that abstract expressionism, which was seen to represent liberal democracy, took hold. By the 1960s, the Black Power and Women's Liberation movements urged the art world beyond its white, male, urban norm. The histories of these interventions are individual, regional, and numerous, but collectively reflected a zeitgeist of equality and diversity.

In 1982, the Corcoran Gallery of Art's exhibition *Black Folk Art in America* shifted attention to self-taught African American artists. As one of the authors (Leslie Umberger), who is Curator of Folk and Self-Taught Art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM), explained, 'the curatorial model was widely criticized, yet the work commanded attention, so that in the 1980s and 1990s a market developed for art that could be bought cheaply or could be wrested from artists who were perceived as unsophisticated and illiterate'. (Unless otherwise noted, information on self-taught artists comes from the original research and writings of Umberger).

Ultimately, this era drew attention to art that was important in its own right and would thereafter have its own place in the larger sphere. In the twentieth century, such art was discussed in terms that underscored its difference from the mainstream. The terms — such as primitive, naive, and outsider — paradigmatically reflected the period and the works, but have since been rejected or challenged as thinking about equality and diversity has further evolved. Even more

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appropriate terms (folk, self-taught, vernacular, and visionary) are used more sparingly and with greater specificity. The academic trend is to avoid coded language that may undermine an artist's identity and devalue his or her art; that is, to value and honor difference and diversity rather than fetishizing and pathologizing them. In the new millennium, work by self-taught artists has been increasingly viewed as culturally and artistically important, and serious exhibitions and scholarly endeavors are setting new standards.

The SAAM played an early role in this trajectory. When an assemblage found in a nearby garage came to the museum's attention in 1968, it was so unique that deputy director Harry Lowe could not fully grasp it, but knew it would expand the story of art in America (Lowe, 2013). *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly* (*The Throne*), is the finest endeavor of an uneducated laborer transplanted to Washington DC from South Carolina, and became an icon and the nucleus for a shift in the museum's collecting.

The ensemble was inventoried and treated structurally to allow it to travel to multiple venues in the 1970s. Subsequently, *The Throne* was installed in various iterations at the SAAM. An ardent public demanded it remain on view so, except for renovation closures, it has been on display since 1977. The awe Lowe experienced and wanted to share set a course for the entry of diverse and disenfranchised artists into the mainstream museum and, gradually, into a greater consciousness.

The collection of unconventional art was expanded significantly in 1986 when Herbert Waide Hemphill Jr facilitated the acquisition of over 400 works from his renowned collection. Hemphill was the founding curator at the American Folk Art Museum in New York in 1961 and co-author of the groundbreaking book *Twentieth-Century Folk Art and Artists*. Before the Smithsonian acquisition, collecting folk art was solely for niche museums. This more encompassing venue raised the profile of the category at both the SAAM and beyond. The more frequently public audiences encountered art made by minority groups, the more skewed and unacceptable the old narrative appeared, so that today the work of untrained and unconventional artists is seen, understood and appreciated more than ever before.

In 2012, the SAAM appointed an inaugural Curator of Folk and Self-taught Art, while at the same time evolving curatorial frameworks for art beyond the mainstream have influenced how conservators at the museum approach preservation and degrees of intervention.

Materials and preservation strategies

Self-taught artists, particularly in the absence of academic culture or consumer affluence, often employ

common and ephemeral materials. They generally learn organically, conferring an aesthetic of meaning and value upon quotidian objects and materials. Such works, in turn, shape a vital cultural anthropology and reflect social conditions.

Knowledge of an artist's practices and materials is essential for conservation. Materials such as homemade paints and unknown media challenge established treatment standards and motivate alternative approaches in methodology. Unconventional substrates and construction methods are challenging to stabilize.

When examining artworks incorporating unconventional or worn materials, distinguishing between original condition and later deterioration or damage is difficult as there are often no photographs that document original appearance. Inconsistent or compromised care makes deciphering the effects of storage environments complicated, as does the frequent presence within the artwork itself of materials and/or techniques with an innate tendency to deteriorate: so-called inherent vice. Some works reflect the multifaceted challenge of unstable materials and an outdoor environment. Along the Atlantic coast, African American artists have thrived in spite of a culture that long denied them any agency and three such cases have informed the SAAM model.

James Hampton

James Hampton's *The Throne* (Fig. 1) incorporated desk blotters, cellulose acetate film, light bulbs, and other materials gleaned from the government office where he worked from 1946 to 1964. He converted used furniture into church-style accouterments. Casters from office chairs were attached to his multi-layered, winged elements to facilitate an ever-evolving arrangement. Fiber-based acoustic tiles were used as structural elements as they easily accepted the straight pins, brads, and tacks he favored. These elements formed the foundations for Hampton's extraordinary aluminum-foil-covered forms and embellishments, to which he affixed hand-written tags attesting to his spiritual visions.

These visions apparently guided Hampton's creation: an ecclesiastical environment to host the second coming of Christ as foretold in the Book of Revelations (Roscoe, 1974, pp. 13–9). As scholars became increasingly engaged with both Hampton's work and other works by African American self-taught artists, relationships between Afro-Caribbean folklore and American practices have been more carefully examined, deepening the understanding of such work as historically and culturally rooted.

Hampton's *The Throne* manifests conservation issues typical in art that comprises found, re-purposed



Figure 1 James Hampton, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*, gold and silver aluminum foil, Kraft paper, and plastic over wood furniture, paperboard, and glass, 180 pieces in overall configuration. Installation ca.1996. SAAM 1970.353.1.

or inexpensive materials, was created using experimental working methods and has suffered from poor storage (Fig. 2). *The Throne* was created in an unheated garage that was frequently opened to an urban alleyway to provide light and air. Dust deposition forced Hampton to re-cover many of the foil elements repeatedly to restore the sheen to dulled surfaces. Extremes of temperature and humidity in the workspace contributed to the deterioration of unstable components and the aluminum films (Ingalls, 2014).

The museum has several photographs of *The Throne* in situ and written documentation of its treatment in 1974, yet no photographic documentation of individual elements was made before or after any of the treatments that were conducted before the 1990s. Early repairs, such as supporting tall elements with long screws, were made for structural stability, while other actions were driven by a culturally embedded intolerance for the natural depredations of inherent vice and poor storage (Konrad, 1974). Acting with good intentions, museum staff covered or replaced some degraded foils. Current approaches seek, however, to balance the validity and importance of artist's intentionality with abiding realities, often favoring authenticity over restoration.

Repairs made in the last 20 years include mending cellulose acetate film and torn Kraft paper and re-

adhering broken elements. Preservation measures have included improving airflow to curtail dust deposition and installing low-emission, long-lasting lighting to reduce movement and handling. Most critical to stewardship of *The Throne*, however, is dusting and vacuuming the reflective foil surfaces to ensure that they conform to Hampton's standards for spiritual brilliance (Thompson, 1983). Additional future measures will include the removal of gallery carpeting, which is a source of dust.

Purvis Young

Purvis Young used old doors and slatted cupboards salvaged from the streets and alleys of Miami as supports for his dynamic drawings and colorfully painted images. Young's incorporation of wooden fragments, leftover paints and drawing materials elevated discarded materials into expressive artworks that reflected the struggles of his impoverished neighborhood. He stored drawings in shopping carts or amongst the pages of discarded books and displayed his paintings in a narrow backstreet known as Goodbread Alley.

While Young's precarious environment allowed for public display and social engagement, it also exposed his art to the elements, hastening deterioration. His use of cast-offs, combined with their life 'in the street' and inherent vice, created challenges for



Figure 2 James Hampton in his garage with *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly* behind him. Image: courtesy of the SAAM.

surface cleaning, consolidation, and aesthetic compensation in the preservation of his works. Delaminating paint layers, incompatible materials, and ephemeral substrates challenge traditional treatment protocols.

Young's *The Struggle* (Fig. 3) was acquired by the SAAM in 2014. *The Struggle* is an icon of challenge and persistence; it was part of a core group of paintings that comprised the long mural Young made in Goodbread Alley between 1971 and 1975. *The Struggle*, which is the central panel, depicts interracial strife, and the trials of immigrant life in a depressed area. It is bordered by a number of smaller, individually dated paintings describing life's struggle; these show figures working, dancing, singing, swimming, fighting, trying to move up in the world, and raising their arms in a show of unity. The main painting is on re-purposed plywood with remnants of wooden planks nailed to the outer edges. The two smaller paintings are on degraded fiberboard panels and are attached by nails to the two top corners. This painting was constructed on site in Goodbread Alley and is widely regarded as

an iconic example of his work and a rare survivor from this period.

After the painting's acquisition, large paint losses, with associated areas of lifting paint, were noted along the applied, painted wooden borders. The areas of unstable paint were consolidated for structural stability. The painting was cleaned of accretions and accumulated grime using repeated applications of aqueous cleaning solutions and cosmetic sponges. Substantial losses to the small vignettes interrupt the lyrical flow of painted figures that form a symbolic frame for the central composition. Yet, it was decided that the losses along the borders would be left unfilled, honoring the painting's outdoor display circumstances as a critical part of its history.

The lack of documentation of the painting's original appearance aided this decision, as any reconstruction of the missing compositions would have been subjective. The only esthetic compensation deemed appropriate was to a damaged corner in the upper right painting of a truck. This area was visually disruptive to the central composition and distracted the viewer's

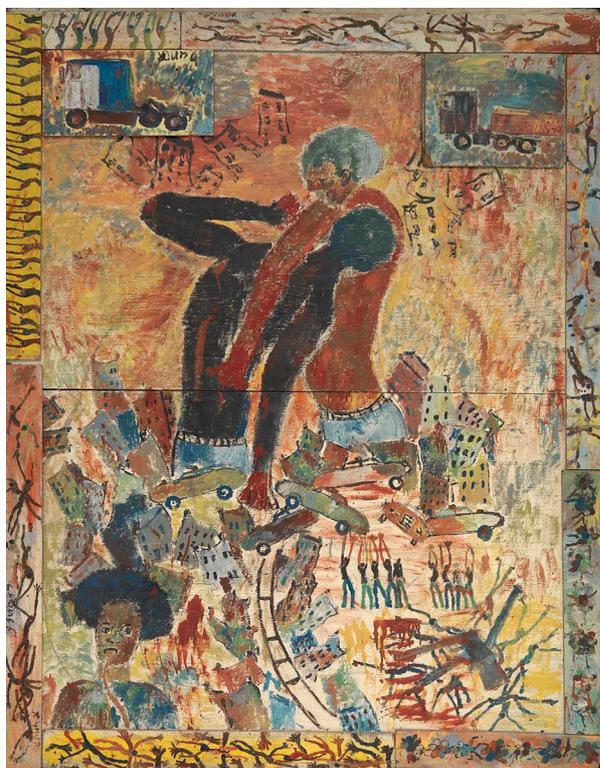


Figure 3 Purvis Young, *The Struggle*, acrylic on wood. SAAM 2014.15.

eye from the intended imagery. To minimize this distraction, the loss in the fiberboard support was compensated with a paper insert and in-painted to blend with the surrounding scene. The other losses, which added historical context without detracting from the visual coherence of the paintings, were left.

Mingering Mike

The artist called Mingering Mike explored subjects of local and national resonance such as racial equality, love, substance abuse, black popular culture and music, and the Vietnam War. The body of work made by this artist from Washington DC between 1968 and 1974 reflects his youthful fantasy of becoming a famous soul singer/songwriter. He fashioned replicas of LP albums and 45 rpm records with original album art, lyrics, and liner notes (Fig. 4). After storing it for over 20 years, Mike lost his collection, which was rediscovered at a flea market in Washington DC in 2004 by a collector who subsequently reunited it with the artist and worked to place the entire collection at the SAAM in 2013. Staff members at the SAAM were fortunate to have significant interaction with the artist during and after the acquisition, with revelatory conversations about materials, techniques, and ideas.

Close examination of the artworks revealed a range of materials harvested from neighborhood stores: colored, paper-based 'poster board', felt-tipped markers, ball

point pens, spray paint, Testors® enamel paint, Elmer's White Glue®, Scotch® tapes, and plastic sleeves taken from vinyl LP record jackets (Mike, 2012, 2014). Album covers were constructed of wood pulp paperboards, which the artist folded, glued, and often taped. Many of these inexpensive, impermanent materials are especially vulnerable to deterioration. Most works showed condition problems that would worsen with handling and display: some tape carriers were detached, paperboard edges were brittle and frayed from contact with tape adhesive and spines were frequently cracked and broken from flexing and inherent acidity. Furthermore, the collection suffered water damage in storage, sometimes causing disfiguring, even irreparable, damage. In some cases, the potent words and imagery in Mingering Mike's careful constructions competed with severe issues, including surface mold, tears and breaks, delamination, stains and the bleeding of media.

Treatment was carried out with close collaboration between conservator and curator. With over 60 objects requiring attention, a balance was sought between consistency and case-by-case decision making. The primary goal was physical stabilization for safe handling and display. Delaminated paper along record and jacket edges was consolidated without darkening the wood pulp materials. One water-damaged LP showed delamination and loss to its coated paper surface, with adhered remnants of the same material from another previously adjacent artwork. Treatment involved carefully removing the extraneous material under magnification and consolidating the abraded paper fibers and red felt-tipped marker.

Curatorial input was essential, particularly in the decision to remove and separately store some severely damaged original materials, for example torn, stained and mold-damaged plastic sleeves and disfigured, almost detached pressure-sensitive tapes. Furthermore, treatment was shaped by the curatorial perspective that the artist's disadvantaged circumstances were embodied in the works' appearance and important to its history. Priority was given to procedures such as minimizing stains that affected critical design elements and compensation for paint losses on the records to restore their strong, iconic shapes.

Conclusion

James Hampton (1909–64), Purvis Young (1943–2010), and Mingering Mike (b. 1950) each created a body of work that embodies persistence, self-reclamation, and aspiration. Each worked against the backdrop of a dominant society that did not value their art or culture. Although they were disenfranchised in myriad ways, their art embodies tremendous vision, but also an inestimable will to go



Figure 4 Works by Minger Mike: (A) record jacket, *GROOVING WITH MIKE*, mixed media on paperboard, SAAM 2013.8.33R-V; and (B) LP record, *Decision: 'SLOW' N 'EASY'*, mixed media on paperboard, SAAM 2013.8.42.2. Images: © Minger Mike.

forward, assert the validity of suppressed identities, and stake a lasting claim for self and community.

In looking at art made outside market structures, for personal reasons, with limited resources, and with disregard to the fashions and tastes of the art world, we are ultimately asked to re-evaluate the role and meaning of art. We are also challenged with the task of broadening the story of American art and, in turn, American culture as a whole.

Former SAAM curator Lynda Roscoe Hartigan's comment that a 'willingness to locate and analyze the specific realities of self-taught artists and their objects is crucial' applies to conservation practice (Hartigan, 1993, p. 7). For conservators, partnering with curators to understand historical realities and diverging world-views adds critical context to an object, aiding interpretation of appearance and condition, and informing care and treatment decisions that impact the long-term conceptualization of the

object. This process has become part of the SAAM approach to honoring both art and artist.

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