

Unfiltered Visions

20th CENTURY AMERICAN SELF-TAUGHT ART

Throughout the twentieth century, American self-taught art has moved from relative obscurity into the public eye. First it quietly attracted the attention of contemporary artists, then collectors, followed by museum curators. NOMA has a long history of engagement with self-taught art—the museum presented the first solo exhibition of Clementine Hunter’s work in 1955, and began acquiring this material in the 1970s.

Unlike formally trained artists, self-taught artists are generally not conscious of art historical tradition. With minimal formal education and usually no art instruction, they work outside the artistic mainstream, seeking neither its acceptance nor depending on it for their livelihood. Although often referred to as folk or “outsider” artists, many lived as insiders, deeply rooted in their communities, unaffected by the synergy of the commercial urban art world. Their own life experiences were the source for their imagery, ideas and materials. Clementine Hunter documented life on Melrose Plantation; Purvis Young vividly portrayed Overtown, his Miami neighborhood; and Sister Gertrude Morgan drew inspiration from her devout religious beliefs. Others, however, lived primarily within their vibrant imaginations, like the reclusive Henry Darger, who created a fantastical 15,000 page written and visual saga.

Unconcerned with or unaware of customary art-making practices—such as painting on a rectangular canvas or using traditional sculptural materials—many of these artists utilized unconventional supplies and techniques. Some used roofing tin or a cypress door as a canvas; house paint sometimes mixed with mud, as media; and recycled car parts as sculptural elements.

From realism to abstraction, these artists display skills as able draftsman, sensitive colorists, inventive collagists and accomplished welders. Their raw, unfiltered visions have gained them a respected place in art history. Today, leading art museums actively acquire and display these artists’ works as both self-taught masterpieces and important American art.