

Outsiders welcomed in

By Jane Leverre

Why is the work of self-taught artists distinctive? A fine American collection raises big questions



'Family Band' by Jon Serl (1994-1993)

Outsider, or self-taught, art might well have a revival in the US this year, with the opening of a major new exhibition of a top private American collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. More than 200 objects from the collection of Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz make up *Great and Mighty Things*, an exhibition whose spare, modern aesthetic echoes the way the art is displayed in the Bonovitzes' Philadelphia brownstone premises: each of the 27 artists has his or her own white alcove, with a brief red wall text.

Outsider art is a controversial term, so the authors of essays in the show's catalogue use "outsider art" and "work by self-taught artists" interchangeably – a deliberate decision, the curators say, to avoid "term warfare". In the introduction, Ann Percy, curator of drawings at the museum, attempts a definition, describing the Bonovitzes' collection as "work by untrained makers whose production does not emerge via the usual channels, who turn to creating art from unexpected places and situations, and who often incorporate unusual or eccentric materials into their pieces."

The roots of the Bonovitz collection go back to the collectors' youth. As the daughter of well-known Philadelphia art gallery owner Janet Fleisher, Jill Bonovitz grew up with art. Sheldon, on the other hand, traces his passion for African-American artists in particular to his childhood in Cleveland, where he worked at his uncle's fish company. "I helped load trucks, shovelled ice into bins, did bookkeeping. I got to know workers" – virtually all African-American – "really, really well, and realised that some were so talented. I saw their terrible living conditions, how they were discriminated against. It just wasn't right," he recalls.

A show of American black folk art at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington in 1982 is "what really turned us on to" outsider work, according to Jill; on display there were artists such as Bill Traylor, a former Alabama slave who often drew on found materials. Thirteen of the Bonovitzes' Traylor are on display in Philadelphia, including "Men Drinking, Boys Tormenting, Dogs Barking" (c1939-42), a striking watercolour on grey card that bustles with human and canine figures.

Besides Traylor, among those represented in Philadelphia are luminaries William Edmondson, with limestone sculptures of a woman, an angel and various animals, including three almost abstract doves perched on a log; Martín Ramírez, whose seven drawings, mostly on pieced paper, include "Dragon Train," an imaginary landscape that incorporates recycled newsprint figures; and James Castle, with 15 works, made of salvaged scraps, soot, string and spit.



Limestone sculpture of an angel by William Edmondson (1874-1951)

Among lesser-known artists is Purvis Young, a former teenage criminal from a poor neighbourhood in Miami, who began to read and draw in jail and dedicated his life, on release, to his art; on display are a painting of a ship – seen as a mode of escape from racism and suffering – and others of horses, also symbolising freedom. Another lower-profile but still dazzling star of the show is Jon Serl, a vaudevillian, voiceover actor and painter whose "Family Band" contains Brueghel-esque musicians plus a tiny, ghostlike child, who perhaps recalls Serl's youth, when he was forced to starve to stay thin for his family's vaudeville act.



'Horses' by Purvis Young (1943-2010)

Herself an accomplished artist who works in porcelain and wire, and has pieces in the permanent collections of the Stedelijk, the Hermitage and the Museum of Arts and Design, Jill says it is "the immediacy" of outsider art that appeals to her. "It's not an intellectual attraction, it's much more emotional," she says, adding that outsider art is not like work by "a trained artist influenced by what's going on in the art world."

Sheldon, on the other hand, is drawn to art "that has colour and interesting composition and is painterly". Not surprisingly, what also appeals to Sheldon, who describes himself as a "transaction guy" in his law practice, is negotiating for art. "I'm always involved professionally in advising the buying or selling of some asset or other. I do enjoy the art of the deal. I can tell you when and where I've bought each work," he said.

Describing the couple's decision to promise their collection to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which already owns 315 works of outsider art and staged a James Castle retrospective in 2008, Sheldon explains: "It's a great museum, with wide-ranging collections, and, most importantly, it's a museum that treats outsider art as part of modern and contemporary art. It will incorporate the collection into its contemporary art collection. This is consistent with how we believe the work should be shown."

Jane Kallir, co-director of Galerie St Etienne in New York, an outsider art dealer since 1940, called the Bonovitz exhibition "great," in part because the collectors "have such in-depth holdings. They have two fantastic pairs of eyes. The show is really, really good at asking the questions that need to be asked. What is distinctive about this material? Does the material hold together in any cohesive way? How in the future should we be looking at, displaying and studying such work? The fact that the exhibition is taking place in a world-class, encyclopedic museum guarantees that the issues it raises get a broad hearing."

Henry Boxer, a dealer in Richmond, England, who discovered George Widener – an outsider artist included in the Bonovitz collection who lives in North Carolina and often chronicles historical events such as the sinking of the Titanic – believes that this show and a Widener exhibition currently at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin could stimulate interest in outsider art among a variety of collectors.

"I can see this in the sale of the artwork of Widener, important contemporary collectors are now acquiring this work. The outsider market is an emergent field rich with the possibilities of picking up extraordinary artwork, sometimes for a song, comparatively speaking," he says.

'Great and Mighty Things', until June 9. www.philamuseum.org

Eastern approaches

"Outsider" art is not just a US phenomenon. Two exhibitions this spring will showcase work by self-taught artists from Russia and Japan.

The Russian show, due to start next month at Dasha Zhukova's Garage Centre for Contemporary Culture in Moscow, has been curated by the Museum of Everything, "the world's only travelling museum for undiscovered, unintentional and untrained artists". Established by James Brett in 2009, it has had shows in London and Paris, and will also have a presence at this year's Venice Biennale. The Garage show is the fruit of a trip Brett made across Russia last summer in search of fresh unsung talent.

Japanese outsiders, meanwhile, are the subject of *Souzou*, starting on March 28 at London's Wellcome Institute. Some 300 works are promised, from "residents and attendees of social welfare institutions across Japan" – not the most glamorous milieu, perhaps, but Wellcome shows rarely fail to fascinate.