

INTRODUCTION TO OUTSIDER ART

Before we look at some of the artists and artworks in *HEAVEN+HELL*, let's discuss what makes this show so different from exhibitions of traditional religious art. The art on view was all made by self-taught and outsider artists, which means that they received no formal artistic training and were not necessarily familiar with the conventional ways of depicting religious subject matter in Western art. In order to make sense of the work on view, we need to understand these artists' unique backgrounds and some of the characteristics of their style and technique.

- "Intuitive and outsider art" is the work of artists who demonstrate little influence from the mainstream art world and who instead are motivated by their unique personal visions. This includes what is known as art brut, non-traditional folk art, self-taught art, and visionary art.
- Some common visual tendencies of outsider art include:
 - *horror vacui*, or fear of empty spaces, which means that these artists typically do not like to leave empty spaces (or voids) in their artworks
 - bold colors
 - visionary scenes, based on dreams and/or religious imagery
 - blocky or naïve handling
 - use of unconventional materials (plywood, house paint, corrugated tin, etc.)
 - repeated patterns
 - writing
- Outsider art is not, however, a style. There are counterexamples for every one of these visual tendencies. Outsider artists are more alike in their difference from mainstream artists than in their similarity to one another. The most important point is that outsider art reflects the unique visual attitudes of the people creating it.

Discuss: What are the advantages of being a self-taught artist? How might some of the differences we talked about be seen as strengths?

- Many people value self-taught artists for the originality of their style and the uniqueness of their perspective. For instance, in the mid-20th century, many trained artists began to collect and imitate outsider artists. They felt that outsider art was more expressive and authentic, because the artists didn't worry about rules, popularity, or financial success. Instead, outsider artists were seen as people moved to express themselves by a genuine artistic impulse.