

LINE OF THE MOMENT A NARROW-EYED SPHINX SPOUTING FLORID LATINISMS AND STUCK-PIG GRUNTS



## LONDON'S NEW MUSEUM OF EVERYTHING



James Brett has just opened Britain's very first museum for self-taught artists (he hates the term "outsider"). Vendeline von Bredow wanders its labyrinthine rooms ...

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"The boundary between 'normal' primitive art and the artistry of the insane is blurry," says Bruno Bischofberger, an art dealer based in Zurich with a sizeable collection of folk art. Yet "outsider art" is distinct from folk art, he explains, as it is often associated with the mentally ill. Indeed, many of the biggest discoveries of the genre were found in the archives of psychiatric hospitals.

This is perhaps why the term "outsider" irks James Brett, a filmmaker, entrepreneur and the founder of Britain's first museum dedicated to the work of non-traditional artists. The Museum of Everything opened its doors in London's Primrose Hill neighbourhood on October 14th, timed to coincide with London's Frieze Art Fair. But unlike the preening, self-conscious types who frequent the parties and gallery stalls of this contemporary-art extravaganza, Brett's museum is all about art created by people without formal training, who live "outside our modern society". Housed in a former dairy, the collection includes more than 200 paintings, drawings, sculptures and installations by around 95 artists, all of whom simply felt compelled to make something.

"There is a real difference", Brett says, explaining his preference for the term "non-traditional" instead of "outsider" in classifying these artists. "We also do not highlight that people have a disability, because often that makes people pre-define it in their minds."

The notion of outsider art was born in the late 19th century, when enlightened European psychiatrists began noticing the aesthetic value of their patients' artwork, often created with whatever fabric or materials they could get hold of. In 1922 Hans Prinzhorn, a psychiatrist and art historian in Heidelberg, Germany, published "Bildnerei der Geisteskranken" ("Artistry of the Mentally Ill"), a study of art made by the mentally ill, after amassing a collection of more than 5,000 examples of art from 450 patients in mental hospitals across Europe. His colleagues in psychiatry had reservations about his decision to collect the works and publish the book, but it was enthusiastically received by Max Ernst, Jean Dubuffet, Paul Klee and other avant-garde artists. They were fascinated by the raw quality of the art produced at the margins of society. Dubuffet in particular became a champion of what he called l'art brut, by which he meant uncooked art or art in its most immediate form.



At about the same time, in 1921, Walter Morgenthaler, another psychiatrist, published "Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler" ("A Psychiatric Patient as Artist"), a book about the work of a patient called Adolf Wölfli, who had worked for 30 years in his small cell in a Swiss mental hospital. Wölfli, who had been physically and sexually abused as a child, suffered from psychosis that led to severe hallucinations. After his arrest for child molestation, he was kept in isolation because he was violent. At some point he started to draw, eventually producing huge drawings bound in 45 mighty tomes, with ornate autobiographical writing recounting his mind's travels and exploits.

In the English-speaking world, awareness and knowledge of art brut or outsider art spread slowly. The discovery of the monumental work by Henry Darger, a Chicago-based artist, helped to make the artform better known in America. Darger, a hospital porter, lived alone in a rented room for more than 40 years, writing and drawing a 15-volume epic, "In the Realms of the Unreal". He created an eerie, powerful world of seemingly innocent children in idyllic settings, who must enter horrific scenes of carnage and torture in a brutal battle against child-slave owners (pictured top). Some of Darger's works are 30-feet long and many, including what is on display at the museum, are painted on both sides of the paper. Darger made himself the star of the narrative as the children's protector.

Darger's work has a room by itself in the labyrinthine Museum of Everything, which has numerous smallish rooms, staircases and one big hall-like space. His pieces are arranged so that visitors can see both sides of each one, zig-zagging along the pictorial path of his story-telling. At first Darger's images enchant with their children's story-book prettiness. It is only at second sight that one perceives what is so deeply unsettling about these scenes--their violence and bizarre sexuality.

Shortly before his death in 1973, Darger's landlord, a photographer, came across his work and immediately recognised its artistic merit. Today his art is included in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the American Folk Art Museum in New York, the Centre for Intuitive and Outsider Art and the Museum of Modern Art in Chicago, the Art Institute of Chicago, the New



Orleans Museum of Art, the Milwaukee Art Museum, and the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland.

In Asia one of the best-known examples of outsider art is Nek Chand's Rock Garden in Chandigarh in northern India. Chand started building in secret on government land, making his sculptures with recycled materials from demolition sites. His work was discovered 18 years later in 1975, when it had grown into a 12-acre area of interlinked courtyards, each filled with hundreds of pottery-covered concrete sculptures of dancers, musicians and animals. This makeshift sculpture park was in serious danger of being demolished by the authorities, but Chand managed to save it by getting public opin-

ion on his side. In 1976, the park was inaugurated as a public space. Chand was given a salary and a workforce of 50 labourers to maintain his magical kingdom, which eventually grew to a 25-acre complex.

Chand's work is one of the central displays at the new Museum of Everything. Its appeal is a bit more straightforward, with its brightly coloured rock sculptures and rag dolls. Chand was fascinated by the idea of creating something from nothing, and he skilfully managed to transform urban and industrial waste into beauty.

"Britain has never had a permanent home for artwork created outside mainstream art circles," says Brett. "Call it art brut, self taught, outsider art, what you will, these names mean very little and they rarely do justice to the astonishing range of private and personal imagery, made often by



those in the most difficult circumstances. It is like stepping into another world."

Brett explains that the works on view have been chosen for their artistic merit, not for the (often fascinating) biographies of the artists behind them. Wandering around the rooms here, visitors are left with a sense of what people can create--urgently, beautifully--without a thought for the art world.

Picture credit: all images courtesy of the Museum of Everything

(Vendeline von Bredow is a business correspondent of The Economist, based in London. She is on sabbatical to research and write the authorised biography of Gianni Agnelli. Her last article for More Intelligent life was about Alexander von Vegesack, director of the Vitra Design Museum, in Germany.)