

## **A HISTORY OF OUTSIDER ART**

By John Maizels

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From the earliest beginnings of society, art has had a cultural function. In primitive communities it had its role in ritual and magic. As time went by, magic was transformed, turned into religion and art was harnessed to enhance its power. As religion and government became more entwined, art was employed to enhance the power of the state.

As society developed, so did the function of art. It gradually became part of high culture, its subject matter closely linked with the glorification of the ruling classes of the time and their accepted outlook. Practically all the art that has survived over the centuries falls into this category.

By the mid-nineteenth century, art began to break away from the cultural stranglehold that surrounded it. But even the great avant-garde movements of the twentieth century found themselves firmly part of the cultural elite of the day. The sequence of events, from the Barbizon to Impressionism, to Post-Impressionism to Expressionism and so on through the twentieth century, have an easily defined logic. One can clearly see how one thing led to another, how the different movements have a firmly defined place in the sequential progress of art history.

However, all this time, there was another art. An art created by people with no contact with the great cultural and intellectual conventions of the day. People who worked only for themselves, with an inner compulsion to create. There is little space for them in the annals of art history. Hardly any of their work was even noticed at the time, let alone survived beyond it. In the early years of the century there was one situation where those of culture and learning came into sympathetic contact with some of the lowest elements of society and were made aware that another art existed.

With the introduction of more humane practices in the mental hospitals of Europe, lowly patients were at last being treated as human beings. Every detail of their daily existence was examined with great fascination. A few enlightened doctors realised that some patients were producing, entirely spontaneously, highly original artworks.

The German doctor, Hans Prinzhorn, made a huge collection of works from mental hospitals and in 1922 published the first serious study of patient art, *Artistry of the Mentally ill*. Although the text was in German it was packed with illustrations and its influence among artists of the avant-garde soon spread. Paul Klee, Max Ernst and the Surrealists were all strongly affected by it, but none more so than the young French painter, Jean Dubuffet.

Immediately after World War II, Dubuffet began his own search for unusual works by mental patients. He visited asylums in France and Switzerland and began to build up a collection. He soon realised that it was not only the mentally ill who were capable of producing totally original and unusual works, but also rare individuals from other walks of life. He came across the paintings, drawings and objects made by mediums, pastry cooks, housewives, junk dealers and postman - all manner of perfectly sane individuals who nevertheless possessed the ability to produce unique and compelling works of art.

Dubuffet had made a major discovery. Art which had its roots deep within the psyche, art which owed nothing to art history or contemporary culture, art that was produced compulsively and intuitively could happen anywhere. This was an art with no name, an art with no history, an art with no place in books or museums.

Dubuffet gave this nameless art an identity and an intellectual rationale. He termed it *Art Brut*, or *Raw Art*. Raw because it was uncooked by culture, unaffected by art school training or contemporary trends and fashions. Art in its rawest and purest state.

Dubuffet realised that this art was not just the equal of cultural art - it was a superior art form. The directness of expression, the process of pure automatism, the wealth of invention, the lack of artistic influence, all went to produce the purest form of visual expression yet discovered.

Dubuffet became inspired by these unknown creators who could work with total dedication and involvement for years on end, and yet never exhibit their works or even have the need for an audience. He began to see culture as the great enemy of true creativity. Culture had an asphyxiating effect, smothering even the most aggressive of avant-garde movements.

After 30 years of collecting, Dubuffet's great *Collection de L'Art Brut* was given a home by the City of Lausanne and this new Museum opened its doors in 1972. It remains one of the worlds greatest art museums and has been an inspiration to others to follow its example.

Outsider Art has been called The Hidden Face of Contemporary Art, rather like the hidden face of the moon. It was the interest and enthusiasm of contemporary artists that allowed it to surface, although for many years it lived almost a clandestine existence, in the shadows of the mainstream.

The most well known outsider artist from Scotland is Scottie Wilson. Born in Glasgow in 1888, he left school at the age of nine, becoming a market trader, joining the army, and emigrated to Canada after the first world war. He opened a small junk shop where, well into his forties, he discovered, quite by chance as he tried out some old fountain pens, a passion for drawing. His pictures evoke strange realms of enchanting beauty, populated with Greedies and Evils, as well as delightful fountains, fish, birds and castles that evoked memories from his childhood. Scottie realised he could make a living by selling his pictures, and returned to Britain where he was discovered by London galleries. Both Picasso and Dubuffet collected Scottie's work, and many of Scottie's pictures are now in the major galleries of North America and Britain.

Madge Gill is another classic and wonderful British outsider artist. She was born in London in 1884, an illegitimate child, who became a nurse and lived with her aunt who was a spiritualist. She married and had three sons, one of whom died in an influenza epidemic. At the age of 35 she became seriously ill and lost the sight of one eye, after giving birth to a still-born daughter. Madge Gill became a medium, and began to draw, paint, embroider and knit, often working in bed by the light of an oil lamp. She felt that she was guided in her work by a spirit called My interest (perhaps meaning my inner self?). She created hundreds of drawings, some on long rolls of calico, many on postcards, using black Indian ink or coloured inks. The main image is a recurring female figure with an oval face, surrounded by complex and decorative designs (see picture). She continued drawing until her death at age 77. Her work is in numerous public collections in Britain and abroad.

Outsider Art holds in question our established beliefs of art education and art history. It is a glorification of the individual, creating only for themselves, without need of training or a critical explanation or awareness of art history. It is the purest and most natural form of visual expression. Its influence can only grow stronger as more people discover its power and its purity.

Further Reading CARDINAL, Roger. Outsider Art. Studio Vista, London. 1972. MAIZELS, John. Raw Creation. Outsider Art and Beyond. Phaidon Press Ltd. 1996. THEVOZ, Michel. Art Brut. (English translation). Skira, Rizzoli International Publications. London and New York. 1976; reprinted 1995. von SCHWAEWEN, Deidi & MAIZELS, John. Fantasy Worlds. Taschen, 1999. Images show (1) Scottie Wilson - Mask ( Pen, ink with colour crayon ) (2) Madge Gill - Mother and Child ( Pen and ink on card)

