ANTHONY PETULLO

The Collector in Context

Note: This is the Introduction to Self-Taught & Outsider -
The Anthony Petullo Collection. University of Illinois Press.

Throughout the ages, collectors have served as the primary link between artists and the broader public. Patronage has ensured artists' material survival, while collectors' custodianship has preserved the art works themselves. Along with cherished gatherings of carefully chosen objects, collectors bequeath their aesthetic values to subsequent generations, who in turn subject the objects to their own processes of collecting and reevaluation. Yet despite these crucial functions, collectors figure tangentially, if at all, in most histories of art. This is in part because collectors' tastes are by nature idiosyncratic, whereas art historians attempt to formulate global judgments based on a perceived consensus. Then, too, collectors are amateurs in the first and best sense of the term, and art historians are understandably inclined to protect their professional turf. The juxtapositions of objects that collectors create are often no more arbitrary than those proposed by curators, but as a rule collections are as mortal as their progenitors. Works get dispersed or jumbled together with other items in museums, and the original collector's vision, always underappreciated, is eventually effaced entirely.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, we are actively reassessing the traditional narratives that have been used to chart our history. In the case of art, rigid hierarchies of value and linear notions of "progress" are being jettisoned in favor of a looser, more egalitarian approach. Recognizing that the formalist aesthetic which dominated the art world as recently as 20 years ago was conditioned by a white, male, Eurocentric bias, we are now open to a broader variety of ethnic and artistic options. In the process, people have become more aware of the multiple societal forces that shape taste. Our revised art-historical narrative documents the interaction of these forces, rather than lionizing individual artist heroes or positing qualitative absolutes.

These changes in our approach to art history have sweeping implications both for our understanding of the collector's role in a general sense, and specifically for the appreciation of "outsider" or self-taught art.[1] By focusing less exclusively on artists and more generously on the myriad other shapers of taste, we allow the collector a more visible place on the stage of art history. At the same time, our eagerness to embrace a host of unconventional artistic traditions has given new legitimacy to self-taught art. And, most curious of all, there seems to be a subliminal connection between these two phenomena: for the recent surge of interest in self-taught art is almost entirely a collector-generated initiative. This is one trend in which the academics have lagged far, far behind.

The Anthony Petullo Collection, then, can be read on several levels. First and foremost, the story of the collection is the story of one man's odyssey: his adventures, his triumphs and mistakes, his vision and ambition. But Petullo is also emblematic of a certain type of collector and of a specific collecting phenomenon, and his odyssey therefore must be examined within the context of the self-taught field as a whole. As a collector, Petullo to a degree helped create that field, though he would hardly claim normative status for his own selection criteria. Nevertheless, given that no one has as yet been able to agree on an acceptable definition for "outsider" or self-taught art, Petullo's selection criteria--honed over two decades and yet largely intuitive--offer at least one plausible, cohesive way of organizing an inherently unruly body of material.

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Before turning to the specifics of the Petullo Collection, however, it may be useful to review the larger history of self-taught art. Although self-taught art per se has always existed, the field of self-taught art is essentially a modernist construct. At the beginning of the 20th century, as the European avant-garde attempted to break free of the academic tradition which had heretofore separated "high" art from everything else, people began for the first time to look seriously at the work of a number of artists who, for various reasons, had been denied formal training. Interest in self-taught art was one segment of a much larger anti-academic trend that also encompassed non-Western exemplars (such as Japanese prints and tribal art), indigenous

folk crafts and the work of children. The first contemporary self-taught painter to capture the attention of the avant-garde was the French toll collector Henri Rousseau (fig. 1), who was discovered by Picasso and his circle in the early years of the 20th century and featured in the German Expressionist manifesto, Der blaue Reiter Almanac, in 1912.

After World War I, as the European avant-garde began to develop a broader popular following, champions of the new art naturally developed a concomitant interest in self-taught creators. Initially, Rousseau had seemed an isolated case, but it was not long before other painters of similar inclinations were unearthed. Commonly dubbed "naives" (based on a pejorative misreading of Rousseau's personality), these self-taught painters popped up in almost every country affected by modern art, but they were particularly numerous in France, where the art dealer and writer Wilhelm Uhde established a sort of movement under the rubric "Painters of the Sacred Heart."[2]

Artists and curators familiar with European modernism brought an awareness of self-taught art to the United States in the 1920s and '30s. Again here, initial interest in the genre was quite far-ranging, and included a fascination with earlier American folk artifacts. However, the search for a contemporary "American Rousseau" soon yielded results: in 1927, a Pittsburgh housepainter named John Kane (fig. 2) was admitted to the prestigious Carnegie International Exhibition. No less an institution than the fledgling Museum of Modern Art pledged its support to self-taught art, and the genre rapidly became a relative commonplace in the nation's more forward-thinking galleries and museums. As in Europe, there was no short supply of artists to fill the new demand.[3]

Nonetheless, over the course of the 1940s, the American art establishment gradually withdrew from the field of self-taught art, choosing instead to throw its full weight behind the emerging movement that became known as Abstract Expressionism. Rightly or wrongly, the arbiters of taste came to perceive a rift between "naive art" (which was eminently accessible to a broad range of people) and the nascent American avant garde (whose work was difficult, and hence judged artistically superior). The mass appeal of Grandma Moses--surely the most

popular self-taught artist of the century, and also one of the most successful artists of her time[4]--only served to confirm this prejudice. Moses (fig. 3) was, in fact, so successful that she spawned a host of imitators, who persist to this day. This proliferation of "faux naives" has indeed cast a lasting pall on the entire "naive" branch of self-taught art.

In Europe, the genre of naive art developed along lines that were roughly parallel to those prevalent in the United States. By the 1960s and '70s, naive paintings were routinely turning up on calendars and dinnerware, and the style had emerged as a staple of children's book illustration. Once this genre became a received style instead of a self-invented one, it was essentially dead. Rampant commercialization called into question the very viability of naive art in the postwar era. How, one might rightly ask, could anyone in this age of mass-market periodicals, television and radio, remain truly remote from culture? Even if an artist had not gone to art school and hence was "self-taught" in the most literal sense of the phrase, how could any visually sentient person avoid being saturated by a plethora of pictorial matter? How could he or she fail to have heard of Grandma Moses? The strict division which Picasso and his generation had perceived between the academically educated and the self-taught no longer seemed to hold.

The first generation of naives--from Rousseau through Grandma Moses--consisted of people who might well have become professional artists, had fate dealt them different hands. It was for the most part economic circumstance that prevented these people from pursuing artistic careers and forced them instead into more practical pursuits. The vast majority began painting only late in life, after retirement, and their artistic goals remained relatively conventional. The first-generation naives were essentially picture-makers out to record their external surroundings, and their work tends to fall into the orthodox categories of landscape, portraiture and still life. Nevertheless, this early contingent of self-taught artists was sufficiently remote from mainstream culture to develop startlingly original technical and pictorial solutions.

In the second half of the 20th century, it became evident that economic circumstances alone could no longer generate the cultural isolation required to produce a genuine "naive." And this, in turn, led to a focus on the more extreme aspects of lifestyle embodied in the currently

popular (if controversial) designation "outsider." Outsider Art is the English counterpart to the French term Art Brut (literally "raw art"), a concept invented in 1945 by the artist Jean Dubuffet as a catch-all for work created by artists who operate at the furthest remove from received culture. Dubuffet began by collecting art made by mental patients, and Art Brut is still largely associated (some would say wrongly) with the work of the mentally ill.[5] In Dubuffet's scheme, mental illness was only one of a number of possible factors that might position an artist on the margins of culture and thereby set up the circumstances requisite to the production of Art Brut.

In Art Brut, Dubuffet had invented a concept that was both compelling and fundamentally unworkable. He would spend the rest of his life honing definitions without ever arriving at an entirely satisfactory solution. As Dubuffet's collection of Art Brut grew--eventually to the point where it commanded an entire museum[6]--Dubuffet was forced to recognize that an art totally divorced from culture was an ideal that never could exist in reality. He determined that it would be more practical to define Art Brut by placing it on a continuum somewhere between the acultural and the fully cultured (the "raw" and the "cooked," as it were). Yet the question of how and where to draw the boundaries along this continuum remained a problem. Eventually, Dubuffet coined the phrase "Neuve Invention" (new invention) to cover those artists whose work, though somewhat brut, was not quite pure enough to qualify as Art Brut. These artists would, in Dubuffet's museum, be housed in a separate annex.

From the start, it seemed clear that whatever it was, Art Brut was inherently different from naive art. The naive artists, with their conventional notions of picture-making, were far too clued in to received culture to qualify as brut. Where the naives looked outward, to their surroundings, the brut artists tended to look inward, recording visions and obsessions that were on some level meaningful only to themselves. Their distance from received culture was not only aesthetic, it was personal. And this posed a logistical dilemma for connoisseurs of Art Brut: at a certain point, aesthetic judgments would have to defer to judgments involving creative authenticity. An artist might create something that looked brut, but if the artist was too savvy about cultural issues, the work would nevertheless have to be disqualified. Ignorance of wider

cultural issues, on the other hand, generally demanded an extreme degree of marginalization in the artist's lifestyle. Much as Dubuffet might protest that there is no such thing as an art of the mentally ill (any more, he said, than there is such as thing as an art of people with bad knees), Art Brut came to be defined at least partly in terms of the artist's biography.

The problem of definition and the uneasy reliance on artists' biographies only grew worse when Art Brut became translated into English and, eventually, traveled to the United States as Outsider Art. "Outsider Art" was, as it happens, a rather arbitrary coinage, selected by the British art historian Roger Cardinal as the title for his 1972 survey of Art Brut from a list of possible names proposed by his editor.[7] The British definition of Outsider Art did not, at first, differ markedly from Dubuffet's admittedly nebulous definition of Art Brut. However, as Outsider Art began to gain currency in the United States, the definition started to blur. The sharp divide that Dubuffet had seen between the naive and the brut, difficult enough to sustain in Europe, proved even more untenable in America.

The United States did not establish art schools until the late 19th century, and so the distinction between academic and non-academic art was less meaningful here than it had been to the European avant-garde in the early years of the 20th century. Due to America's distance from the European academies, our young nation had a much richer tradition of historical folk and self-taught art than was common in the Old World. It was therefore never clear whether our modern self-taught artists were simply extending the practices of their 19th-century predecessors, or belonged in an entirely different category. Nor, for the most part, did American connoisseurs respond as strongly to the art of mental patients as did their European counterparts. Americans instead tended to lump all self-taught art together as expressions of the stereotypical rugged individualism that is so much a part of our national myth. The kind of theoretical hair-splitting so dear to the Europeans--between naive and brut, between true brut and Neuve Invention--never had much appeal in the United States.

Without this theoretical rigor, the term "outsider" became increasingly meaningless; applied sloppily, it also had the potential to be profoundly offensive. On the one hand, there were

those who used the word "outsider" as though it were a synonym for "self-taught," casually throwing together artists such as John Kane (who in Europe would be classified as a naive [fig. 2]) with the likes of Martin Ramirez (a mental patient who falls more logically into the Art Brut camp [plate ___]). On the other hand, as the "outsider" label began to gain advocates among collectors and dealers, there were those who focused on biography almost to the exclusion of all else. Autism, schizophrenia, mental retardation and the like became, in the crudest hands, marketing tools. When the designation "outsider" was applied to African-American artists--who because of their intrinsically marginal status were prime targets for the new trend--the label acquired covertly racist connotations. "Outside of what?" members of the African-American community might rightly ask. These artists were operating outside of mainstream white culture to be sure, but still very much within their own legitimate communities.

Collectors do not typically concern themselves with theoretical squabbles, but every collector of self-taught art must in some fashion negotiate a veritable minefield of conflicting ideologies and disparate types of art. Needless to say, each collector's approach to this situation will be different, and there are probably as many different collections of self-taught art as there are definitions of the field. Anthony Petullo's collection, as it happens, hews fairly closely to the categories (naive, Art Brut and Neuve Invention) outlined in the foregoing brief history. In Petullo's words, the artists he favors are either "true naives," "true outsiders" or "marginal outsiders." Yet Petullo did not set out to follow a pre-formed agenda, and the visual shape of his collection is very much of his own making. Moreover, when Petullo first began collecting, the field of self-taught art as we know it today did not exist.

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Anthony Petullo's interest in self-taught art dates to the mid 1970s, when he discovered the work of a local artist, Pat Thomas (fig. 4), at a juried exhibition in his hometown of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Petullo was almost a complete stranger to museums, and he had never before looked seriously at art, never studied it and certainly never purchased it. Nonetheless, he became deeply involved with Pat Thomas, endeavoring to help her negotiate a safe path through

the sometimes unscrupulous art world and eventually even establishing a gallery primarily to sell her work.[8] Thomas might best be described as a second-generation naive painter, and Petullo soon branched out to collect other artists of her ilk. Many of these artists turned out to be faux naives, and their work did not wear terribly well over time. As Petullo grew to be a more experienced collector, he hungered for work that was more substantial, more satisfying. It would, however, take a decade or more before his collection found its present direction.

The mid 1970s was in some respects a particularly inauspicious time to begin a collection of Outsider Art in the United States. In part because of the prevalence of faux naives, the field of 20th-century self-taught art had been entirely written off by academia. It is significant that the Whitney Museum's 1974 survey of the genre, The Flowering of American Folk Art, contained no 20th-century material whatsoever. As the curator, Alice Winchester, put it, "American folk art came into flower during the early years of our nationhood, and by the last quarter of the 1800s it had begun to fade."[9] Using criteria that revolved around pre-industrial norms, scholars like Winchester had simply defined modern self-taught art out of existence. Even a specialized institution such as New York's Museum of American Folk Art had a board dominated by collectors of 18th- and 19th-century material.[10]

The Americans who chose to collect self-taught art in the 1970s (and in essence paved the way for Petullo)[11] did so without any prospect of mainstream support or validation. This situation was very different from that which had greeted the first American collectors of self-taught art in the 1930s. Often followers of the European avant-garde, these early collectors were encouraged by informed artists and curators to acquire folk and naive art.[12] Similarly, Art Brut in Europe was principally the domain of a cadre of respected artists and allied intellectuals. American collectors of contemporary Outsider Art, by way of contrast, had no elite guides, no road map to follow. They literally had to make up the field as they went along.

These circumstances are at least partially responsible for the disparate materials and conflicting agendas that today constitute the field of self-taught art in America. Since it was up to each collector to formulate his or her own definition of the field, the final definition naturally

varied from person to person. Academics could come in after the fact (as they are indeed doing today) and validate different collectors' visions by writing about the material, or exhibiting it or acquiring it for a museum. But this is one case where the subtle rearranging that art historians practice in working with objects does actual damage to the history of those objects, because in a very real sense, the history of Outsider Art is the history of collecting Outsider Art.

That history has yet to be written, and even a modest attempt would be beyond the scope of the present essay. However, a few general observations may serve to situate the Petullo collection in context. The basic American context for collecting self-taught art twenty to thirty years ago was neither the museum nor the gallery, but the flea market. Collectors who buy at flea markets tend to differ in certain key ways from collectors who buy at galleries. Given that most of the work on display at a flea market is uninteresting, buyers are constantly searching for the special object, the one that stands out amidst the dross. Whereas exhibitions at galleries already entail a culling and pre-selection on the part of the dealer, in the flea market arena, it is the collector who does the culling. The decision to buy will be based on the collector's immediate visceral response and cumulative collecting experience, but in most situations the flea market collector will not have an opportunity to compare an individual work to a larger body of material by the same maker. The monographic publications and exhibitions on Outsider artists that exist today were not available to the earliest collectors of this work.

The thrill of the hunt was certainly a great part of the appeal which Outsider Art held for its original aficionados. The search that began at roadside junk shops eventually expanded to include encounters and visits with artists. The authenticity of these encounters--the certification that the work and its maker were "for real"--was often as important or even more important than the aesthetic perfection of the object. Works could on occasion reveal a meaning <u>in situ</u> that they would lose immediately upon installation in a collector's home or, later on, a museum. Conversely, repositioning Outsider material in new surroundings could also effect a more constructive alchemy, turning the proverbial lead into gold. While certain Outsider Art collectors lived in homes as cluttered and dusty as junk shops, as the field gained in sophistication, museum

framing and halogen spot-lighting transformed the objects into something they were never meant to be: works of modern art. There was (and remains) a genuine conflict between the original context of these objects--as material evidence of a particular cultural environment--and their conversion into high art.

Mainstream artists are active participants in an ongoing art-world dialogue conducted in partnership with dealers, collectors, critics, curators, art historians and other artists. Self-taught or Outsider artists, by definition, are incapable of taking part in that dialogue, and therefore enter the discussion not of their own volition, but solely at the election of the other participants. Whereas in mainstream art, there is always a conscious exchange between the artists and the art-world players who do the choosing, in the field of self-taught art, the choosers are in total control. And very often the selection criteria used by these choosers has more to do with the choosers' own agenda than with the maker's original intentions. The artists' relative passivity is yet another reason why collectors have played such an exceptionally powerful role in shaping the field of Outsider Art.

As collections of Outsider Art began to coalesce in the 1970s and '80s, various agendas came to the fore. The flea market route tended to yield collections dominated by three-dimensional work: extensions of 19th-century folk-craft traditions (e.g., face jugs, tramp-art boxes made from popsicle sticks [ill?]); utilitarian objects endowed with extra-ordinary artistic verve (e.g., shop signs, weathervanes, cigar-store Indians [ill?]); and creations turned out by eccentric hobbyists (e.g., fanciful whirligigs [ill.?]). The quest for unique artistic encounters led to the discovery of bizarre, self-contained environments, such as the Possum-Trot doll-world assembled as a tourist attraction by Calvin and Ruby Black [ill.?], or the evangelical religious garden constructed by the Reverend Howard Finster [ill?]. Particularly in the African-American community, there were a number of people who made homespun paintings or carvings to express their religious faith. And then there were the "pure" picture-makers: from the homeless Bill Traylor (plates ___), who created brilliant, iconic drawings with the detritus found on the streets of Montgomery, Alabama, in the late 1930s and early '40s, to the reclusive misanthrope Henry

Darger (plates ___), who authored a massive pictorial narrative in the solitude of his humble rented room on Chicago's North Side. Some of these many artists died before their work was discovered, while others lived to reap the rewards of new-found careers, thereby inevitably raising questions about exploitation and compromised creative authenticity.

The growth of individual Outsider collections was paralleled by the growth of commercial galleries specializing in this material. Many of today's Outsider dealers originally came out of the flea-market and antiques world. They were, at the start, "pickers": that is to say, people who made the rounds of country auctions and such looking for special objects and then marking up the prices for resale. As living artists entered the mix, the dealers showed their work as well; after all, not every collector wanted to take the trouble to track artists in the field. The presence of Outsider galleries in major cities such as New York, Philadelphia and Chicago made Outsider Art accessible to a wider group of collectors. While certain dealers displayed decided proclivities (for example, Phyllis Kind in New York and Chicago leaned more in the direction of Art Brut, while Ricco/Maresca in New York showed both two- and three-dimensional work, including utilitarian objects such as weathervanes), in the aggregate the dealer field was as far-ranging as the collector field, and covered more or less identical ground.

In the overall context of the American Outsider Art world, Anthony Petullo may be termed a "second generation" collector. Unlike the first generation, he had access to a small cadre of dealers and even an occasional museum advisor (such as Russell Bowman, Director of the Milwaukee Art Museum), and Petullo relied on these more experienced professionals not only for information but to provide access to a broader variety of materials than he could possibly have located on his own. He did not feel the need to search for treasure amidst the jumble of the flea market (in fact, flea markets hold little appeal for him), and while he has met his share of self-taught artists, the personal encounter is not key to his collecting process. Petullo prefers to exercise his eye by plowing through a vast body of work by one artist (as he has done on many occasions, both in galleries and at the homes of collectors), eventually emerging with a few seminal works. Especially in the beginning, he accepted suggestions from people like Bowman

and the British dealer Alex Gerrard, but the ultimate decision was always his; Petullo never bought according to anyone else's shopping list.

As Petullo is quick to point out, a collection such as his could never have been formed single-handedly: it is too far ranging in scope, including European as well as American work, and many pieces by artists who are no longer living. The two cornerstones of the collection, in Petullo's view, are Alfred Wallis (plates ___) and Bill Traylor (plates ___), the one British, the other American. While most Europeans would probably classify Wallis as a "naive," and Americans generally place Traylor among the "outsiders," Petullo's pairing of these two--both of whom created iconic but basically representational images--makes aesthetic sense. At the more "brut" end of the spectrum, the collection is anchored by the Mexican-American Martin Ramirez (plate __) and the Swiss Adolf Wölfli (plate __), both of whom were institutionalized mental patients. Petullo's tastes are somewhat skewed in favor of European material--possibly because it is often more pictorially complex than its American counterpart and because European work was more accessible to Petullo's friend and principal guide, Alex Gerrard. Most (though not all) of Petullo's choices can be found in Dubuffet's museum, but a few artists (such as the German Max Raffler [plates __], the Englishman James Lloyd [plates __] and Poland's great self-taught artist, Nikifor [plates __]) have been irretrievably claimed by the naive camp. Although the artists in the collection span the entire 20th century and both sides of the Atlantic, most did not receive substantive recognition until after World War II, and the collection as a whole definitely reflects contemporary tastes. The first-generation naives who came to the fore prior to World War II are scarcely represented.

Yet if the Petullo collection is very much of its moment, it makes no attempt to be encyclopedic, and it is as noteworthy for the things omitted as for those included. For example, Petullo has never much been attracted to three-dimensional work, and one finds in his home none of the rough-hewn, quirky crafts objects that figure so prominently in many formative American collections of Outsider Art. The predilection for a refined aesthetic extends to Petullo's taste in two-dimensional art as well--certain artists who have been popular with other collectors (for

example, Thornton Dial, Sam Doyle, Howard Finster, Sister Gertrude Morgan and Mose Tolliver [ill?]) are simply too "raw" to fit in here. Petullo feels no compunction to own works by these artists: he only buys pieces that genuinely move him.

Like most collectors, Petullo finds it difficult to put his selection criteria into words--his is an emotional response that almost defies rational description. Yet it is an informed response, nonetheless, and there are certain overriding sensibilities that unite the objects in the collection. His preference for two-dimensional work stems from a profound appreciation of the craft of picture-making. Most of the works in the collection are tightly structured, either through dense patterning (e.g., Minnie Evans [plates __], Martin Ramirez [plate __], Joseph Yoakum [plates __], Johann Garber [plates __], Madge Gill [plates __], Scottie Wilson [plates __], Adolf Wölfli [plates __]) or a lushly worked paint surface (e.g., Alfred Wallis [plates __], John Serl [plates __], William Hawkins [plates __], Justin McCarthy [plates __]). Though self-taught, the artists instinctively muster an impressive array of techniques: Eddie Arning (plates ___), for example, is a master of negative space; Henry Darger (plates __) orchestrates magnificent color harmonies over his mural-length panels; Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern (plates __) renders his fantasmagorical creatures in meticulous detail. There are a lot of ways of looking at self-taught art--as expressions of a particular community's culture, as throw-backs to a pre-industrial craft tradition, as manifestations of personal idiosyncrasy--but it is clear that Anthony Petullo looks at this work, first and foremost, as art.

This is not to say that the romance of the artists' stories holds no appeal for Petullo. Every collector of self-taught art has at some point made a deliberate decision to favor this type of work over more mainstream efforts. For the Europeans, from Picasso to Dubuffet, this decision was prompted by the conviction that mainstream art had grown stale and that only the untrained were still tapped into the primordial sources of creative expression. American partisans of self-taught art, both in the first and the second halves of the last century, tended to give the European theory a more egalitarian, democratic twist: self-taught art was equated with the individual empowerment that lies at the heart of the American dream.

It is no coincidence that Anthony Petullo for many years ran a temporary and contract staffing company and that his collection originally adorned the walls of his company's headquarters in Milwaukee. Petullo is a humanist, and just as his company empowered people by giving them jobs, his collection proclaims the right of any individual to make art. In their struggles to overcome adversity, the self-taught artists personify the Horatio-Alger parable: most of these artists led difficult lives, yet they still managed to produce work of transcendent beauty. Privileging their work over and above that of trained artists also entails a rejection of the centralized authority of alleged art-world sophisticates. The moral of the story is not only that anyone can make art, but that anyone can appreciate and collect it. From this perspective, the fact that the Outsider field did not have the art-world's seal of approval in the 1970s and '80s was pivotal to its appeal and hence to its growth.

At first glance, it may seem paradoxical that a collection such as Petullo's, which is so quintessentially American in motivation, should be so international in content. In part, this internationalism may be due to a typically American generosity of spirit: the at-times naive tendency that some Americans have to assume that human universals invariably transcend national cultural differences. However, by eschewing the provincial chauvinism that characterizes most other American Outsider Art collections, Petullo accurately reaffirms the original connection between Art Brut and Outsider Art. His selection criteria provide a very cogent synthesis of the historical continuum that lies at the heart of the self-taught field as a whole.

Consciously or not, Petullo has selected examples of American Outsider Art that complement or reflect an extension of European sensibilities. In avoiding three-dimensional work, he instinctively recognizes that these objects belong to a different tradition: more influenced by craft and folk art, less concerned with the art of picture-making per se. Petullo has chosen to focus on the strength of individual expression, rather than on works that bespeak a more communal or religious orientation. In this, he seems far ahead of many aficionados of self-taught art, who often tend to throw these disparate works into the same pot.

Petullo's high aesthetic standards impart another important lesson sometimes overlooked by partisans of self-taught art: quality does count. When self-taught art is viewed purely as evidence of material culture or as illustrations for exceptionally sordid biographies, issues of quality can become obscured, and folklorists or psychiatrists may legitimately feel no need to pay attention to quality. The fact that self-taught art can and does serve several masters, however, does not countermand its right to be taken seriously as art. The best self-taught artists are fully the equal of their trained colleagues, but this becomes evident only when their work is consciously culled from the mediocre majority. If tastes are variable and the definition of "quality" subject to constant revision, the process of culling does not change much. Repeated viewing trains the eye, and "better" can be distinguished from "worse" only when one has seen an ample sampling of comparable works.

This is the service that Anthony Petullo (and every serious collector) performs for the rest of us. Self-taught art has thus far always been a field defined in the negative: it is everything that mainstream art is not. However, the individual works and their makers do have their specific histories, both in and of themselves and within the art world that anointed them and gave their work a larger meaning. If and when self-taught art becomes a fully mature field of scholarly study, the various different types of work that have been lumped together in the non-academic category will have to be untangled and restored to their original contexts. It will probably turn out that self-taught art is not one field at all, but a mass of different fields, each with a distinctive trajectory of its own. The Petullo Collection, unified by an especially compelling point of view, provides an important contribution to the ongoing dialogue about the nature and history of self-taught art.

NOTES

[1]For the purposes of this essay, the term "self-taught" will be used in the broadest sense, to cover the full range of works in the Petullo collection. "Self-taught" is also the most neutral and comprehensive of the various designations commonly used to designate Western art made outside the boundaries of the artistic mainstream. However, the term has its limitations: for one thing, not every artist who falls into this category is completely self-taught, and second, there are artists (for example, Vincent van Gogh) who, though self-educated, do not belong in this group. As is discussed in the course of the present essay, the term "outsider," if used correctly, should apply to a narrower segment of artists within the self-taught contingent. It will be used herein to refer specifically to the European Art Brut group and their American counterparts.

[2]What Uhde dubbed the “Sacred Heart Group” included the French artists André Bauchant, Camille Bombois, Séraphine Louis, Henri Rousseau and Louis Vivin.

[3]Among the American self-taught artists who achieved recognition between 1927 and the early 1940s are Morris Hirshfield, John Kane, Lawrence Lebduska, Israel Litwak, Grandma Moses and Horace Pippin.

[4]Grandma Moses had her first one-woman exhibition at the age of 80, in 1940, and died in 1961, at the age of 101. Her fame only grew greater over the course of this 20-year career.

[5]In the beginning, Dubuffet was drawing on the work of Hans Prinzhorn, a psychiatrist who in the early 1920s had established a massive collection of work by mental patients at the Heidelberg Psychiatric Clinic in Germany and who in 1922 published the landmark book Artistry of the Mentally Ill. Following the publication of Prinzhorn's book, the art of the mentally ill was embraced by a number of avant-garde artists in tandem with the then ongoing investigation of disparate non-academic art forms. However, psychiatric art never during this period attained the broad popularity of naive art.

[6]The Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland, established in 1976.

[7]Roger Cardinal, Outsider Art (London and New York: 1972).

[8]This foray into art dealing was not particularly successful and did not last long: Petullo's Milwaukee gallery was in operation from 1982 to 1984.

[9]Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester, The Flowering of American Folk Art 1776-1876 (New York: 1974), p. 9.

[10]During his tenure as curator at the Museum of American Folk Art (then tellingly called the Museum of Early American Folk Art) in the late 1960s and early '70s, Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr., organized several ground-breaking exhibitions of 20th-century self-taught art. However, the Museum did not make a formal commitment to this area until 1997 [check date with museum], when it established the "Contemporary Center."

[11]Probably the most seminal collectors of American self-taught art in the second half of the 20th century were Michael and Julie Hall (whose collection is now housed at the Milwaukee Art Museum) and Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr. (whose collection went to the National Museum of American Art). These collectors, who often traveled together, favored the flea market route and had a strong predilection for three-dimensional work. Together with Julia Weissman, Hemphill wrote the first basic guide to the emerging "outsider" field: Twentieth-Century Folk Art and Artists (New York: 1974).

[12]Important early collectors of American self-taught art include Abbey Aldrich Rockefeller, Duncan Phillips and Albert Barnes. All of them formed collections (the latter two revolving principally around the avant-garde mainstream) that are today housed in eponymous museums.