

WE ARE MADE of STORIES

Self-Taught Artists in the Robson Family Collection

The Robson Family Collection at the Smithsonian American Art Museum

We Are Made of Stories celebrates a major gift of artworks from the collections of Margaret Z. Robson and Douglas O. Robson to the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The Robson Family Collection is a gift of Douglas Robson, given in memory of his mother, Margaret, and his father, John E. Robson.

The exhibition centers on artists who drew the attention of Margaret Robson between the late 1980s and her death in 2014. She believed that these artists reflected a richly diverse nation of makers and that their creative perspectives expanded the boundaries of American art in important ways.

The art that Margaret collected—sometimes with her husband, John, sometimes on her own—and that she inspired her son, Doug, to appreciate and advocate for as well, amplifies the voices and visions of people who faced challenges, oppression, and often extreme marginalization in their lifetimes, but who asserted their personal views of the world and told their own stories through art.

We Are Made of Stories: Self-Taught Artists in the Robson Family Collection is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Generous support has been provided by:

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William Hawkins
White Dog
1988
enamel, cornmeal, and collaged paper on Masonite

Collection of Douglas O. Robson, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

ROOM #1

We Are Made of Stories: Self-Taught Artists in the Robson Family Collection

The beginning of the twentieth century was a time of reinvention for the United States—for the country as a whole, and for the diverse people who together wove its fabric. After the agonizing years of the Civil War, Reconstruction proposed an egalitarian nation, but entrenched beliefs and ways continually thwarted this goal. Amid this long-lasting turmoil, artists from every region, every culture and ethnic background, and every degree of training and ability asserted their right to voice their views, define personal spaces and places, and attest to self-worth through creative perspective.

Of the identified artists on view, over half were born in the nineteenth century. Close to half were African American. Only two are living. Some remain unknown to us, while others lived to see their work become highly valued in the art market. They learned in personalized ways and faced challenges of being valued as artists. Each of them raised important questions about the power of language and categories, and revealed how humanity resists oversimplification. Whether a lot or a little is known about these makers, their artworks speak to individual ways of experiencing and seeing the world, and recording one's place within it.

Through forty-three artists, *We Are Made of Stories: Self-Taught Artists in the Robson Family Collection* explores the ways in which untrained artists, and the collectors and advocates who recognized the value of their work, brought lasting change to the face of American art.



Unidentified artist
Untitled (Memory Jug)
ca. 1890–1920
clay and found objects

Memory jugs give physical form to remembrance. Because these assemblages were rarely valued by anyone other than family members at the time of their creation, the identities of their makers were almost always lost to time. The profusion of mementos encrusted onto crockery traces the beliefs and customs of the people who made them and those they cherished. This jug features over 275 objects, from an extracted tooth to shells, tiny glass bottles, an Aunt Jemima button, and more, fragments of the material world chosen to remember a life, and to honor a loved one's spirit on earth, long after they are gone.

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Unidentified artist
Untitled (Figure with Hat)
late 19th or early 20th century
cast iron

Before the twentieth century, it was common for items rooted in trades and utility, domestic crafts, and decorative or commemorative objects to be recorded as being by “Anonymous,” as if the maker had chosen to have their identity hidden or forgotten. The names and stories of these makers were once known, to those who cared about them, but lost long before any collector or historian took an interest. Also embodied in terms like “anonymous” is a marked distinction between creative makers from poor or working-class communities and their socially empowered, affluent counterparts—for whom records were, almost without exception, better kept.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.81



Unidentified artist
Untitled (Eagle Weathervane)
ca. 1875
painted sheet iron

Whether a rustic carving or a forged metalwork, weathervanes have long been part of American rooftops, and their forms often suggested something about the beliefs of the people whose homes or buildings they graced. Fusing art, design, and functional object, weathervanes came to symbolize a democratic art form, something that could be made by farmers, blacksmiths, artisanal craftsmen, or anyone who wanted to. Patriotic fervor following the creation of the new American republic made the eagle an abiding favorite, symbolizing a nation born of strength, courage, and independence.

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Achilles G. Rizzoli
Margaret E. Griffin Symbolically Sketched / Palazzo Pianissimo
1939
ink on paper

Achilles G. Rizzoli lived his entire life in San Francisco, working as a draftsman in an architectural office for more than forty years. In his private time, he used his skills to create a highly personal body of work, particularly an extensive series of architectural renderings of a utopian city in which he portrayed people he knew, often his mother and her friends, as buildings. In architecture, Rizzoli found attributes he likened to the pinnacle goals of human aspirations: strength, beauty, and spiritual perfection. In this work, the artist blends the grandeur of an Italian palazzo (palace) with pianissimo's soft musical direction—capturing qualities he perceived in a person named Margaret E. Griffin.

Collection of Douglas O. Robson, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

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Unidentified artists (Clockwise from top):



Untitled (Snake)
20th century
painted wood



Untitled (Root Snake)
20th century
painted wood



Untitled (Articulated Snake)
20th century
painted wood



Untitled (Snake Trivet)
late 19th or early 20th century
hand-forged metal

From Africa to Haiti to the American South, snakes are powerful characters in belief and lore. Their imagery abounds in stories and art forms, from canes to toys to sculptures inspired by gnarled tree roots. Snakes live everywhere in rural America, but the fear these reptiles instill, particularly the venomous varieties that thrive in southern climates, has long been both real and symbolic.

For cultures the world over, a coiled snake is a sign of ill fate—peril awaiting unseen in the grass. In Africa and its diaspora, iron is a revered material that can activate spiritual power; the blacksmith, a master of transformation and supernatural power. While it is unknown whether the maker of the snake trivet was an African American, blacksmithing was a prominent trade skill for Black makers in the United States, both before Emancipation and after, and the symbolism embodied in both the material and act of shaping it suggests this possibility.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.76, .78, .82, .83

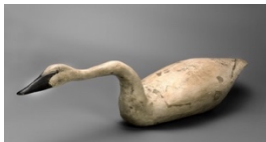
Text Panel, Gallery 1:

Rising Up: Self-Taught Artists Make Their Mark

Self-taught artists born in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century were held in far lower regard than their professional peers. The artworks they made were rarely viewed as important, sophisticated, or precious, and were more likely to survive if they had utilitarian value. Items spanning trade goods, domestic crafts, and decorative or commemorative objects were regarded as material culture, not fine art, and the names of the people who made them often went unrecorded. Yet over time, the impact that untrained American artists have had on the art world has been nothing short of remarkable. By asserting cultural pride and personal perspectives, they began to reclaim visibility, for themselves and for each other.

The exhibition follows the lives of the artists in a loose chronology: an arc tracing the late nineteenth century, the long twentieth century, and the still-young twenty-first. It charts a national narrative rooted in exclusion and prejudice, a long battle for equity and recognition, and a present moment wherein diversity and inclusion have become art-world mandates.

Artists who learned from family, community, and personal journeys have always been a presence in American art, but it was not until the late twentieth century that the collective force of their vision irrevocably turned the tide. This era was especially significant for artists who were marginalized in multiple ways—due to race, social class, gender, and cognitive or physical ability. These creative individuals witnessed social revolutions from civil rights to disability rights and made art that asserted both their presence and perspectives.



Unidentified artist
Untitled (Swan Decoy from Delaware)
ca. 1920
carved wood

The genre of “folk art,” objects and images made by working-class individuals, emerged in the early days of the American republic, with communally trained artisans or craftspeople and work that was often utilitarian or decorative in nature. In the early twentieth century, as folk art become more desirable among collectors, objects such as this swan decoy intersected with the clean, streamlined aesthetic of midcentury-modern art, shifting it from hunter’s lure to sculpture.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.79

Text Panel, Gallery 1, Gamechanger panel

Bill Traylor (ca. 1853–1949)

Bill Traylor was born, enslaved, around 1853 in rural Alabama. After Emancipation, his family remained tied to farmwork and the family that had enslaved them for many additional years. Traylor’s life was indelibly marked by the racism, brutality, and oppression of segregated Alabama. In the last decade of his life, in the state capital of Montgomery, Traylor made over a thousand drawings and paintings—the earliest and most expansive known body of images by a person born into slavery.

Forcibly brought to this country, enslaved Africans in America frequently practiced covert forms of creative and cultural traditions and activities from their earliest arrivals. Although oppression slowly eased after Emancipation, before the second half of the twentieth century, free and open creative and critical expression posed considerable risk for African Americans.

From 1939 to 1942, Traylor used graphic ingenuity and poetic radicalism to convey his experience in a racist society. His images give visible form to memories spanning the commonplace to the horrifying. Perhaps most notably, Traylor pictured his community with pride and positivity, representing Black Americans at midcentury in upward, urban scenes a world apart from plantation experience. Traylor didn’t live to see the attention his art would attract, decades after his death, but today he counts among the most transformative artists in our nation’s history.

Wall labels, Gallery 1:



Bill Traylor
Untitled (Man in Blue and Brown)
ca. 1940–42
opaque watercolor and pencil on paperboard

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Bill Traylor
Untitled (Drinker in Chair)
ca. 1939–42
pencil and poster paint on cardboard

Bill Traylor depicted a wide array of people, but his most powerful representations were of those from his own neighborhood. His ability to subtly convey age, physical characteristics, demeanor, and social status reveals the gamut of humanity, giving a sophisticated edge to his images. Among Traylor's most significant endeavors was to record the rising Black urban culture in Alabama's capital city, from an insider's perspective. Whether depicting a dapper businessman or a person experiencing hard times, Traylor effectively imparts an individual's humanity and personal story.

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Bill Traylor
Untitled (Seated Woman)
ca. 1940–42
opaque watercolor and pencil on paperboard

Traylor had a knack for compressing a world of emotion into the flattest of forms. He often made pictures in single colors—favoring blue, yellow, and red to convey different moods—but the paintings he made in solid black may be his most iconic. Here, a woman sits with hands on her hips, exuding confidence and personal power. Her chin and nose tilt upward in a pose that radiates pride. She faces forward, looking toward the future, ready to take on whatever comes.

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Wall labels, Gallery 1:



Bill Traylor
Untitled (Spotted Cat with Two Eyes)
ca. 1939–42
opaque watercolor and graphite on beige card

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Bill Traylor
Untitled (Brown Pig)
April 1940
opaque watercolor and pencil on paperboard

Having lived on farms surrounded by waterways and wilderness for most of his life, Traylor knew animals as fellow laborers, food sources, companions, and foes. Animals were among Traylor's foremost topics, and he was able to depict their forms and characters with exceptional specificity. He was fond of using their images as stand-ins for people in allegorical scenes, but Traylor also depicted creatures as individual beings, be it a beast he knew from the farm or a less familiar one encountered in the wild.

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Wall labels, Gallery 1:



Bill Traylor
Untitled (Mule, Dog, and Scene with Chicken)
July 1939
pencil on paperboard



Bill Traylor
Untitled (Mule)
December 1939
opaque watercolor and pencil on paperboard

Bill Traylor began drawing his memories sometime around 1939, when he was about eighty-six. After decades of farm labor, the aged artist spent his days in the city, observing and drawing in the Black business district of Montgomery. He took stock of the world around him, first in pencil, later in water-based paint, learning to organize his pictures as visual texts—telling stories and keeping a record of all he had experienced.

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Text Panel, Gallery 1, Gamechanger panel

David Butler (1898–1997)

David Butler was born in Good Hope, Louisiana, not far from New Orleans. Raised to revere biblical scripture and spirituality, Butler's worldview became a cultural fusion. His Christian convictions comingled with African folkways, and African American customs and beliefs that survived and morphed in Louisiana. He created sculptures from cut, hammered, and painted roofing tin, bringing to life a vivid array of creatures, some distinctly animal or human, others fantastical or drawn from dreams. Embellishing his home and yard with his creations, Butler reshaped his property into an installation in which sunlight and wind played active roles—sound, light, and motion bringing the entire space to life.

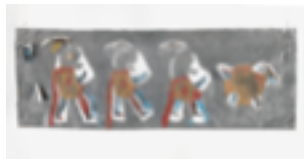
Butler developed a unique visual language that is curious and powerfully alluring. His extraordinary “yard show” created a space of magical dimensions, honoring spirits and

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ancestors through symbolic shapes and colors and physical and visual motion—a dynamic oasis in which meanings and interpretations were infinite. Individually, his sculptures reveal a striking creative vision; collectively, they formed a shelter that, for Butler, felt self-determined and protective within a larger world that was often harsh and unpredictable. By immersing himself amid artworks fashioned as spiritual shields, Butler presented art as a suit of armor, and prompted visitors to think differently about the role of art in one's life.

Wall label, Gallery 1:

David Butler 1898–1997



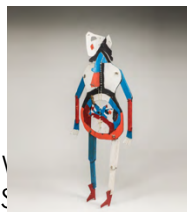
Untitled (Three Wise Men and a Goat)
1965
paint on cut sheet metal



Untitled (Reindeer)
1965
paint on cut and pieced sheet metal

Butler's embellished home and property manifested practices that, by way of Africa, survived in the Americas. One such Black Atlantic tradition was the "yard show," a personal place where benevolent spirits are welcomed, evil spirits are rebuffed, and ancestors are honored. Into metal panels of various sizes, Butler incised silhouetted forms, painted them, and affixed some of them over the windows of his home. As the sun's light traveled across the yard, it reached through the cut-out patterns, creating a reverse shadow puppet-like effect. Within the house, the illuminated shapes appeared bright against the darkened negative spaces, and a sunlit narrative crawled across the shadowed walls as the day went on. Butler often depicted Christian themes, but he also reached into his dreams and imagination, and found the unexpected.

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David Butler
Untitled (Mary with Baby Jesus)
ca. 1970–80
paint on articulated cut sheet metal

David Butler fashioned a garden of shaped metal forms on and around his Louisiana home. His sculptures are an interplay of representation and abstraction, rooted in biblical stories and Butler's dream life in equal measure. As he often did, he made the figure—in this case the Virgin Mary, carrying the baby Jesus within her—with articulated, adjustable parts, so she could move in the wind or be positioned differently. By creating an environment wherein things looked, sounded, and felt alive, Butler felt assured that the spirits were present and protective.

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Elijah Pierce
Elephant
ca. 1978
painted and carved wood, pebbles, plastic, and rhinestone

Elijah Pierce was a lay preacher who understood the power of making his sermons visible, which he did by carving parables, moral tales, and tributes into bas-relief wood panels and small sculptures. One year he carved this small elephant as a gift for his wife's birthday. She was so taken with it, he promised her an entire zoo. For Pierce, the carved and painted animals evoked stories, sometimes beasts from the Book of Genesis, other times creatures from the folktales of his youth.

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Stephan W. Polaha
Green Eyed Dog
ca. 1975

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carved and painted wood and glass

Stephan Polaha was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and later moved to Reading, Pennsylvania. He became regionally celebrated for painted woodcarvings of animals. Polaha especially loved dogs and made carvings of them with sweet comical faces, such as this bright-eyed canine, and sometimes gave them angel-like wings, showing the artist's abiding reverence for these loyal companions.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.61

END ROOM #1-GALLERY 2

Wall label, Gallery 2:



Peter "Charlie" Attie Besharo
Untitled (From Earth to Haven/From Haven to Earth)
ca. 1950–60
oil on paper

Peter "Charlie" Attie Besharo made paintings about intergalactic travel and strange beings. Besharo immigrated to the United States around 1912, from Syria. He was a Catholic, but being an ethnic Arab in predominantly white Leechburg, Pennsylvania, created a lasting feeling that he didn't belong. His imagery was never straightforward and conveys alienation and searching, the artist's quest to feel at home in a foreign land. Into these semi-narrative, otherworldly spaces, Besharo layered symbols of spirituality, patriotism, divine protection, and his hopes for peace on earth. In this painting, the artist writes the word "heaven" as "haven"—connecting—even if unintentionally—the spiritual cosmos and an earthly place of refuge.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.2

Wall label, Gallery 2:



William Hawkins
Demolition of St. Mary's Church, Boston
1986
enamel paint on Masonite and collaged elements

William Hawkins became known for large bold paintings with collaged imagery. The artist routinely emblazoned his works with his name, birthdate, and “KY” for his home state of Kentucky, indicating his pride in who he was and where he had come from. He researched a wide array of topics, and collected photographs and printed illustrations as food for thought. Hawkins may be most recognized for his larger-than-life animal renderings, but the urban landscape was a topic he explored in depth. In *Demolition of St. Mary's*, Hawkins chronicles the destruction of a historic nineteenth-century Catholic church, a North End community hub that was demolished in 1977 to make way for apartments. In his portrait-like depictions, buildings become vessels of human experience, taking on the collective character of their community.

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Text Panel, Gallery 2, Gamechanger panel:

William Edmondson (1874–1951)

William Edmondson was born on a plantation near Nashville, the same part of rural Tennessee where his parents had been enslaved. Edmondson was among the first African American generation born as free citizens and one of the first Black self-taught artists to attract art-world attention during his lifetime. He may have discovered his love of the region's native limestone while working for a stonemason, but by 1932 Edmondson had started his own business. Using scrap pieces of stone and rudimentary tools, Edmondson shaped tombstones and yard ornaments to sell. He learned to cut and carve rectangular and three-dimensional forms and to incise patterns and words in relief. His skill grew organically; he became known for grave markers, elegant birdbaths, animal forms, and works depicting people he knew or admired.

Edmondson gained acclaim ahead of his forefather Bill Traylor when, in 1937, he became the first person of African descent—trained or untrained—to receive a solo exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Edmondson attributed his work to divine guidance, rejecting ideas of personal vision or artistry. The art world praised the spare elegance of his forms, likening Edmondson to modern artists. Although Edmondson's Southern Black community and museum audiences in New York appreciated his work for profoundly different reasons, the appeal of his softly poetic sculptures has deepened and become more widespread over time.

Wall label, Gallery 2:



William Edmondson
Untitled (Teacher)
ca. 1932–40
carved limestone

William Edmondson began making gravestones for the African American community of Nashville, Tennessee, around 1927. Using a railroad spike as his chisel, he hammered local limestone into geometric headstones and sculptural forms of animals and people. His figural works are among his most poignant, tributes to everyday heroes, including Black teachers, signaling their elevated status with books in hand, subtly carved into the figure's side as an inherent part of their identity.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.88

Wall label, Gallery 2:

William Edmondson



Untitled (Bird)
ca. 1937
carved limestone



Untitled (Bird Bath with Figures)
ca. 1932–40
carved limestone

Edmondson's carved sculptures often reflect his deep spirituality. Birds and birdbaths were forms he revisited frequently, signaling his affinity for the creatures who kept him company as he worked. His birds appear dovelike, metaphorically conveying the Holy Spirit or themes of peace, but also evoking feelings of mourning, for the haunting cooing sound they make.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.87A-C, .89

Wall label, Gallery 2:

Ernest "Popeye" Reed



Woman and Child
ca. 1980–85
carved sandstone



Venus
1980
carved sandstone

Reed grew up in the Appalachian hill country of southeastern Ohio, earning the nickname "Popeye" for the strong arms he built working with wood and stone. He carved native hardwoods like walnut, and stone including flint, limestone, and sandstone, and over time made

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thousands of artworks. He was best known for figural works, particularly characters from legend or myth, such as this rendering of Venus, the Roman goddess of beauty, fertility, and prosperity. Reed earned a loyal local and regional following, but wider recognition of his carvings did not come during his lifetime.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.63, .64

Wall label, Gallery 2:

Justin McCarthy



Jack Dempsey Loses Heavyweight Title to Gene Tunney 1926 / James Braddock 1937 Is Defeated by Joe Louis
ca. 1930–60
ink and pencil on paper



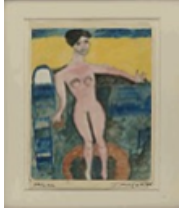
Pancho Segura
ca. 1930–60
ink and pencil on paper

Justin McCarthy drew and painted a wide range of subjects, from animals and biblical imagery to famous people and sporting events. His drawing of 1940s tennis star Pancho Segura reveals the artist's ability to capture motion and gestural force, while in the double depiction of boxing matches from the 1920s and 1930s, McCarthy ably conveyed the physical and emotional intensity of these momentous duels.

Collection of Douglas O. Robson, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Wall label, Gallery 2:

Justin McCarthy



Original
ca. 1930–70
watercolor and ink on paper mounted on manila folder



Marie Prevost
ca. 1930–60
watercolor, ink, and graphite on paper mounted on manila folder

McCarthy made a large, richly sourced body of work inspired by magazine pictures and popular culture. He lived his whole life in Waverly, Pennsylvania, although his art suggests a far more glamorous purview. McCarthy began painting while hospitalized for mental health issues in an era when even minor concerns prompted stigmatization and institutionalization, but rarely resulted in effective medical care. His fondness for saturated color predated American pop art, and his dynamic, emotive style drew comparisons to Expressionist artists, including German Danish painter Emil Nolde (1867–1956). He found looking at press photos of movie stars and celebrity athletes mentally transporting, and painting images of vibrant people and fanciful places helped him cope with trauma and isolation. McCarthy had a knack for capturing an individual's likeness, as he did in this painting of silent-film star Marie Prevost, whose large almond-shaped eyes were a standout feature.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.40, .41

ROOM #2

Wall label, Gallery 2:



Eddie Arning
Untitled (American Flag)
ca. 1964
crayon and graphite on paper

Between 1964 and 1974, Texas artist Eddie Arning made an expansive body of drawings that re-envisioned images found in printed media like magazines. He was introduced to art by an occupational therapist, while living and being treated at a hospital in Austin for a mental condition that may have been schizophrenia. Disregarding realism, Arning distilled the detailed nature of photographic images into stark, stylized drawings that retain only the most essential components of forms and coloration. He often depicted the American flag in his drawings, perhaps reflecting both patriotic pride and his well-known affinity for bright colors and bold graphic design.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.1



Ulysses Davis
Uncle Sam
1976
painted and carved wood

Lifelong Georgian Ulysses Davis settled in Savannah in 1942. There, he ran his own barbershop, but made furniture and carved wood when he wasn't cutting hair. His topics are wide-ranging; many works reveal deeply felt patriotism or spirituality. Some draw on African themes; others are utterly fantastic or entirely abstract. Celebrating America's bicentennial, Davis made the extraordinary *Uncle Sam*. The artist detailed the regal, racially ambiguous bust with spherical beadwork, texturing, and painted highlights. One particular detail gives a nod to the Black vernacular aesthetic: by setting the bust atop a "footed" pedestal, Davis used a visual pun in which the structure's feet are shaped like animal feet.

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Wall label, Gallery 2:

Ulysses Davis



George Washington
ca. 1940s
carved and stained wood



Lincoln
1940
carved and stained wood

In the early 1970s, Davis embarked on his most ambitious undertaking: bust portraits of all the US presidents. Several decades earlier, he made individual busts of revered historical figures including George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Frederick Douglass. These earlier representations show an elegant but developing style, unpainted and spare, with key details highlighted in dark varnish. The later series, with painted features and carved details such as the dates of presidential tenure, remains intact as a group, held in the collection of the Beach Institute African-American Cultural Center in Savannah, Georgia. Collection of Douglas O. Robson from the Robson Family Collection, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Ulysses Davis



Strong Man
ca. 1950–90
carved and stained wood

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Headhunter
ca. 1950–90
carved and painted wood and rhinestones



Untitled
ca. 1950–90
carved and painted wood and rhinestones

Davis often explored African and African-inspired subjects—kings and queens, warriors, and tribesmen, whose images he reportedly studied at the local library. A number of African-inspired but imaginatively rendered figures draw loosely on the theme of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. According to legend, they were banished from the Holy Land by conquering Assyrians. A number of African tribes trace their lineage to the Lost Tribes, whose stories of exile resonate throughout the Black African diaspora for the connections they offer between biblical figures and people uprooted or displaced from their ancestral lands.

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Ulysses Davis



Sputnik
ca. 1957
carved and stained wood



Where Life Comes From
ca. 1950–90
carved and stained wood

Davis often fashioned his own tools, and learning on his own, he became a highly skilled carver. He tackled time-honored challenges of whittling, from the common walking cane to more flashy endeavors like the “ball in cage,” an esteemed technique among whittlers that demonstrates painstakingly acquired skills. The carver removes wood from a solid block bit by bit, until it results in a sort of visual magic trick: a sphere trapped inside a rectangular cage. Davis carved *Sputnik* just after the Soviet Union launched the first Earth-orbiting satellite—Sputnik 1—beating the United States to this space age feat and deepening Cold War tensions between these nation-rivals.

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Wall label, Gallery 2:

Ulysses Davis



Untitled (Cane)
ca. 1950–90
carved and stained wood



Untitled
1942
carved and painted wood, inlaid with sand

Davis made utilitarian items such as tables and canes, imaginative sculptures, and decorative pieces that defy easy description, like this untitled scene of houses and trees—part hanging picture, part carved box. The cane seen here shows a serpent crawling toward a bearded man with dark, wavy hair and thick eyebrows: a Moses figure portrayed with distinctly Black features. In the Book of Exodus, God sends poisonous snakes to punish those who complained about his judgment of their sins with a fatal bite. Yet he also showed mercy, by giving Moses the power to heal the bitten: “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a snake image and mount it on a pole. When anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will recover.’ So Moses made a bronze snake and mounted it on a pole. Whenever someone was bitten, and he looked at the bronze snake, he recovered.”

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.21, .24

Text Panel, Gallery 2, Gamechanger panel:

Nellie Mae Rowe (1900–1982)

Nellie Mae Rowe was born in Georgia, in the last year of the nineteenth century—to a once-enslaved father and mother born the year of Emancipation. Rowe labored as a child, married young, was widowed twice, and worked much of her adult life as a uniformed “domestic” in white households. Although her early life was shaped by segregation and oppression, Rowe’s desire to define herself sparked a joyful and colorful body of art that suffused her home and yard. This undeniable and contagious positivity made Rowe one of the first Black self-taught women to be celebrated for her art.

Rowe saw art-making as a God-given way to convey gratitude and recover a girlhood lost to labor and poverty. She transformed her property into an enriched realm she called her “Playhouse,” embellished with artworks and found objects that brought a heightened animation to her surroundings. Amid a society that rarely featured Black women in works of art and cast them as demeaning stereotypes in popular culture, Rowe took control of the narrative. She depicted friends, neighbors, and herself in drawings and hand-colored photographs, confident images of Black beauty and free-spirited joy. In a radical act of reclamation, she crafted a world where cultural pride, personal style, and a bit of the unexpected embody the richness of life.

Wall label, Gallery 2:

Nellie Mae Rowe



Nellie Mae Seated on Bench
ca. 1980
mixed media on photograph



Nellie on Blue
ca. 1978–82
paint and pastel on mounted photograph

Georgia artist Nellie Mae Rowe responded to the hardships of being a Black woman in the early twentieth-century American South by creating artwork grounded in joy, playfulness, and pride. She pushed back against the racism and sexism she experienced by depicting herself as an independent woman with a bright, creative, and self-determined identity.

Collection of Douglas O. Robson, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Text Panel, Gallery 2, Gamechanger panel:

James Castle (1899–1977)

We Are Made of Stories: Self-Taught Artists in the Robson Family Collection
Smithsonian American Art Museum | 6/29/22 KH

James Castle lived his whole life in the Boise Basin of Idaho. He was deaf from birth, and despite some schooling, never became fluent in alternative forms of communication such as lipreading, signing, reading, or writing. Castle began drawing as a child and continued to do so his entire life, but the primary body of his surviving work was made between 1931 and his death in 1977.

Castle's parents both farmed and served as local postmasters; printed English texts inundated the family home and Castle studied them at length. His artworks drew almost equally on the physical landscape of his life and the text-based materials that prompted conversation for others, but remained, for him, impenetrable. Castle made as unique a body of art as any. He also brought the thorny issue of difference to the fore in a very particular way, underscoring the ways in which personal experience and challenge can shape an artistic path.

Castle's sophisticated and enigmatic imagery didn't align with the art world's preconceived notions for a neurodivergent person of unconventional literacy. Ultimately, Castle revealed critical faults in the way collectors and institutions categorized art and artists. He prompted important questions surrounding "ability" and "disability," challenged conventional wisdom about the benefits and limitations of formal artistic training, and catalyzed meaningful change in the way museums feature and interpret the work of differently abled artists.

Wall label, Gallery 2:

James Castle



Untitled
ca. 1931–77
color of unknown origin and soot on found paper



Untitled
ca. 1931–77
color of unknown origin and soot on found paper



Untitled
ca. 1931–77
soot on found paper

Castle's favored painting media was wood soot, which created a soft black pigment when diluted. He gathered mail and printed ephemera and used these materials in various ways. Sometimes the text, illustrations, or photographs inspired Castle to make closely related images, and at times he painted directly on cast-off envelopes or fragments of commercial cartons. When Castle obtained colorful printed materials or bits of crepe paper, he leached their dyes by saturating them in water, extracting his own water-based paints. He roughed up the surfaces he worked on so they would better absorb the diluted colors.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.12, .13R-V, .16

Wall label, Gallery 2:

James Castle



Untitled
ca. 1932
crayon on found paper



Untitled
ca. 1931–77
soot on found paper



Untitled
ca. 1931–77
soot on found paper

Castle began using art as a means of communicating when he was young, but artworks he made before 1931 went largely unsaved. He drew scenes from his family's farm in Idaho and the stuff of life such as garments, furniture, and household goods. He also constructed objects—animals, people, or everyday items—from paperboard. Some of his drawings show these small paper figures standing in attendance, as if keeping the artist company.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.14, .15, .17

Text Panel, Gallery 2, Gamechanger panel:

Henry Darger (1892–1973)

Chicagoan Henry Darger gained posthumous acclaim as one of the city's most recognized artists, but during his lifetime, he experienced tremendous hardship. Darger suffered the loss of his family, institutionalization, abuse and neglect across his formative years, and an adulthood defined by isolation and mental health challenges. These experiences drove a body of work in which war and survival were prevailing themes. Darger was a devout Catholic, although his writings reveal ongoing grief for his lost family and confusion about why God allowed such suffering. Over many decades, Darger made an extensive body of work that was scarcely known of until shortly before his death at age 81.

In many ways, Darger became the ultimate icon of the American “outsider” artist, a societal non-belonger on multiple fronts. When his art was first shown publicly, in 1977, his traumatic life story, the epic scale of his vision, and imagery seen as disturbed and disturbing typecast Darger as a deranged outcast. Neither the artist nor the art was easily described, but debates about both Darger's character and content fueled a sensationalized presentation of the artist that was as condemning as it was celebratory. Today, scholars agree that by narrating and depicting an epic child-slave rebellion saga, Darger was processing the duality of good and evil in the world and using art as a tool of transformation, self-definition, and endurance.

Object Label, Gallery 2:

Henry Darger



137 *At Jennie Richee*
(verso: 136 *At Jennie Richee*)
ca. 1950–70
watercolor, carbon transfer, and graphite on pieced paper

Henry Darger lived in relative isolation and made an extensive body of work that came fully to light only after his death. It included two epic novels, a five-thousand-page autobiography, journals, scrapbooks, and three giant albums of painted narratives. Darger's paintings play out scenes from his fifteen-thousand-page novel, *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known As the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*.

At Jennie Richee imagines a battle scene. The Vivian Girls are shown as angel-faced children who are also fearsome warriors, seven sisters battling the evil child-enslaver Glandelinians. Here, they are seen being aided by the fairy-like Blengigomeneans (also called Blengins), their horned and winged allies.

Darger's provocative imagery has invited an array of interpretations. Only the artist knew why he depicted the Vivians as he did—comprehensively female in gender but with male genitalia—but his writings suggest it was his way of conveying the girls' tremendous bravery. Darger asks us to set aside conventional ideas about binaries, including female/male, child/adult, warrior/innocent, righteous/evil. His fantastical images propose a world in which things are not always as they appear, and in which adaptability and fluidity are tools of survival.

Collection of Douglas O. Robson from the Robson Family Collection, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Section 2: Secondary text panel

Text Panel, Gallery 2:

Changing the Game

Through artworks rooted in personal journeys and independent learning paths, the artists in *We Are Made of Stories* convey art's transformative power, its ability to reveal the world through the eyes of another, and to catalyze empathy.

In the late twentieth century, museums and audiences responded to a groundswell of creativity from artists once regarded as inferior. While differences in social class and education became a common means of grouping such artists, layered factors of race, sex, belief, and ability marked deeper, more fraught divides between the mainstream art world and those it excluded. A growing societal interest in and respect for untrained creativity reflected a long-brewing change

for artists who had been born many decades earlier, working for lifetimes, often in solitude, before their efforts were embraced by the art world.

Individually, self-taught artists all played a part in what became a collective march toward equity. Certain artists who moved the needle in profound and lasting ways are examined as “Gamechangers.” Although many others altered the artistic landscape as well, the fourteen artists highlighted here exemplify a slowly but markedly evolving America. Their experiences reveal a matrix of time, place, culture, and personal vision, and drove unique bodies of work that resulted in momentous change, in the art world and beyond.

Wall label, Gallery 2:

Joseph E. Yoakum



Mt Jemel in Medicen Mtn Range Near Cheyenne Wyoming on Larime River
ca. 1960

ballpoint pen ink, colored pencil, and pastel on paper



Mt. Baden Powell Near Pasadena California.
1969

ballpoint pen ink, colored pencil, and pastel on paper

Yoakum referred to his stylized, imaginative landscapes as “a spiritual unfoldment.” Locations like this one, loosely based on the Medicine Bow Mountains in Wyoming, were inspired by real places. But Yoakum’s geography, consistently depicted with a disorienting flatness and a surreal color palette, more specifically maps a landscape of longing and aspiration. Yoakum claimed mixed ancestry but wanted recognition beyond his racial identity. His mythologized imagery reflects a desire for both spiritual transcendence in an oppressive society, and the ability to roam freely in a country that put serious limits on Black travelers.

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Wall label, Gallery 2:

Joseph E. Yoakum



Devils Back Bone, in Mt Messa Near Trinidad Colorado
1966

ballpoint pen ink, colored pencil, and pastel on paper



West Face Grand Prairy Near McCook Nebraska
1966

ballpoint pen ink, colored pencil, and pastel on paper

Joseph Yoakum was born in Missouri and traveled extensively while working with the circus, before settling in Chicago around 1930. In the early 1960s he began making drawings and displaying them in the windows of his South Side home. In western frontiers like *West Face Grand Prairy* and *Devils Back Bone*, Yoakum makes no attempt at a realistic depiction of a regional terrain; he invites travelers to take a surrealistic journey in the mind. Yoakum's knack for transporting viewers into an imaginative space captured the attention of prominent Chicago artists, including the Hairy Who, or the Chicago Imagists, who collected his art, supported the artist, and variously channeled Yoakum's vision into their own.

Collection of Douglas O. Robson from the Robson Family Collection, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Wall label, Gallery 2:



Jon Serl
Texas Scene
1975
oil on board

Jon Serl was born in upstate New York into a large family of itinerant vaudeville performers. He spent his youth performing and traveling, often playing female roles. He settled in the California desert south of Los Angeles and began an engagement with painting that consumed him for

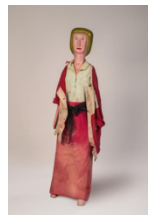
over forty years. Serl's surreal imagery recalls his theatrical upbringing, flexible notions of family, views on gender binaries and fluid identities, and his own experience of low-income struggle and marginalization. Semi-narrative paintings like *Texas Scene* show a diverse array of characters, presented in a palette that favors emotion and psychological states of mind over realism. As the artist himself once explained, "You don't see my paintings, you feel them."

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.68

Calvin Black
Ruby Black



Gladys (Possum Trot Doll)
ca. 1953–72
carved and painted wood, fabric, sequins, and foil bow



Untitled (Possum Trot Doll)
ca. 1953–72
carved and painted wood, fabric

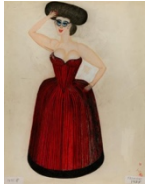
In the 1950s and '60s, husband and wife team Calvin and Ruby Black created "Possum Trot," a desert roadside attraction/art environment in Yermo, California, along the route to Calico Ghost Town.

At the heart of the attraction were eighty large-scale dolls, modeled on friends and celebrities; Calvin carved and painted the figures, and Ruby made their costumes. Calvin later built the Birdcage Theater for their "Fantasy Doll Show"; they staged animated displays, complete with audio tracks Calvin recorded for the dolls. Between the time Calvin died and the end of Ruby's life, the site deteriorated and was ultimately dismantled. Today, photographs, film footage, audio recordings, painted signs, and the remaining dolls themselves reveal the unique richness and vitality of a lived art environment.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.3, .4

Wall label, Gallery 2:

Edwin Lawson



Fashion 1955

1973

colored pencil and graphite on paper



Fashions 1899

1974

colored pencil and graphite on paper

Little is known about Edwin Lawson, but his images invite questions about the stories that live within artworks after an artist is gone. Lawson's widow found a cache of artworks showing a masculine-looking figure presented in glamorous feminine attire, hairstyles, and makeup. Despite the difference between her husband's everyday appearance and that shown in the drawings, she understood them to be self-portraits. Lawson's self-reimaginings present a moment in which empathy becomes an imaginative act, a foray into the soul-searching of a person whose physical body and interior identity remained at odds in a society that stigmatized and punished alternative gender identities.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.37, .38

ROOM #3

Text Panel, Gallery 3, Gamechanger panel:

Martín Ramírez (1895–1963)

A native of Mexico, Martín Ramírez's American experience began in 1925, when he left his home in Los Altos de Jalisco and traveled to Texas, then California, in search of work. Ramírez came from a Catholic family of farm laborers and was only rudimentarily literate. A series of traumatic events, among them a Mexican civil war, family strife, and the American Great Depression, led to permanent institutionalization in a California mental hospital. There, Ramírez was declared a "catatonic schizophrenic," despite his insistence that he did not speak English and was not insane; he never returned to his family. While institutionalized, Ramírez made large, expressive drawings that speak of a yearned-for homeland, and seemingly chart the personal identity he feared losing, in a place that had stripped him of everything.

Ramírez became known for images of mounted vaqueros, the Virgin of Guadalupe, the flora and fauna of Jalisco, and northbound snaking trains marking the migrant's journey and a consequential national border. In the late 1960s, amid growing international interest in the art of the mentally ill, the enthusiasm of mainstream artists and commercial advocacy propelled Ramírez from unknown patient to "outsider" icon. His art was always extraordinary, but it wasn't until long after Ramírez's death that it was understood as being grounded in his native home and identity, and read in the context of racial inequity and injustice in America.

Wall label, Gallery 3:



Martín Ramírez

Untitled (Semi-Abstract Landscape with Birds, Tunnels, and Blue Teardrop Clusters)

ca. 1960–63

mixed media on paper

Ramírez was held in California psychiatric hospitals between 1931 and 1963. His incarceration coincided with an era in which arts and crafts activities were increasingly offered as therapy, and institutions facilitated interactions with art teachers or therapists. Ramírez's earliest surviving artworks are inventive yet representational, but over time his style became increasingly abstract. In this unconventional landscape, ghostlike forms echoing birds, stages, plant forms, and tunnels melt into the surreal reality of the artist's hospitalized life. Formal repetition suggests the monotony of this experience, as well as the sense that Ramírez used drawing to hold on to his memories, and to who he understood himself to be.

Collection of Douglas O. Robson from the Robson Family Collection, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Wall label, Gallery 3:



Martín Ramírez
Untitled (Vertical Landscape)
ca. 1948–63
pencil and crayon on pieced paper

Ramírez’s incarceration in two different California mental hospitals reveals the extreme vulnerability of being a non-English-speaking transnational migrant in the United States during the Great Depression. Ramírez felt alienated from the homeland he had left behind, and paradoxically unwelcome and trapped in the very place he had sought to improve his fate and fortune. A number of Ramírez’s drawings show an abstracted northbound road, perhaps a symbolic representation of the journey that led to unimaginable consequences, a journey he could never “untake,” other than in his mind.

Collection of Douglas O. Robson from the Robson Family Collection, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Wall label, Gallery 3:



Albert "Kid" Mertz
Untitled
ca. 1980
painted railroad spikes

After retiring from a career as an automotive die cutter, Albert “Kid” Mertz turned to painting and sculpting. He covered his modest Michigan home—which he variously called “Owl’s Rest,” “Owl’s Roost,” and “Al’s Roost”—with polka dots, stripes, and colorful embellishments. He painted objects as well, including hundreds, possibly thousands of railroad spikes he had collected from tracks near his property, giving each spike a cheerful face. Unlike some art environments, Mertz’s space was not intended for performance, protection, or preaching; it was simply a place for the artist to creatively transform, and for visitors to delight in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.42



Philadelphia Wireman
Untitled (15 individual artworks)
ca. 1970–75
mixed media and found objects

Within the record of artists whose identities were lost over time, one known only by an assigned label, the “Philadelphia Wireman,” remains among the most enigmatic. In the late 1970s, about one thousand bundles of wire, wrappers, reflectors, lost possessions, trash-treasures—intentionally encompassed and shaped—were found in a South Philadelphia alley.

Each cocooned sculpture is unique and roughly fits in the palm of a human hand, more specifically that of their maker. These objects have no designated front, back, top, or bottom, no title, and in and of themselves raise questions about both art and artist. Scholars’ observations and anecdotal accounts, together with where the objects were found, suggest an African American male maker working predominantly with his hands. Additionally, the small works are not unlike protective charms or power bundle objects that trace back over a thousand years across Africa and its diaspora. Such bundles, clusters of objects or materials that are inherently meaningful or symbolic, may be imbued with a protective force that can help the holder feel safe, healed, or empowered.

These works describe a maker who went unnoticed and unappreciated in his lifetime, and who may have faced insecurities on a number of fronts. But they also point to an artist who created a

body of work chronicling reclamation and transformation, and used the ritualized acts of gathering, seeing, and making as a way to survive, day by day.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.45–.59

Text Panel, Gallery 3:

Sister Gertrude Morgan (1900–1980)

Sister Gertrude Morgan saw art as way to convey her faith and spread the Word of God. In her home in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, she created the Everlasting Gospel Mission, with a bright white prayer room and a front-porch gallery where she shared her hand-painted signs and biblical imagery. Morgan’s art visualized scripture from the Old and New Testaments, depicted herself as a bride of Christ, and helped bring her gospel services to life. She hosted Bible readings and meetings, and since the space had no air conditioning, made paper fans to help congregants bear the heat. Morgan often portrayed herself as a bride in white, but the garments she wore looked more like nurse’s attire. About this Morgan commented, “Nurse? That’s right! When I go to people’s bedsides, I’m there to nurse their spirits. Amen!”

Morgan was equal parts musician, painter, and poet, expressions that both energized and helped share her sanctified journey. She fascinated people for the “non-artist” ways of her artistry, and like Reverend Howard Finster, became central to late-twentieth-century debates about whether a practice so fully enmeshed in spirituality was really “art” or something less easily defined. For Morgan, these concerns were beside the point; it was the mission that mattered.



Sister Gertrude Morgan
Fan (recto/verso)
ca. 1970
paint and ink on card

Sister Gertrude Morgan fashioned paper fans like this one for people to use during prayer meetings at her Everlasting Gospel Mission. During her services, Morgan sang, played guitar or tambourine, and encouraged a call-and-response singing style among attendees. On one side of this fan, Morgan painted a scene of New Jerusalem, a symbolic, heavenly city for the devout, described in the Book of Revelation. On the front-facing side, Morgan depicted herself in nurse’s clothing, conveying her self-chosen role as a spiritual healer of the soul.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.43R-V

Wall label, Gallery 3:



Simon Sparrow

Untitled

ca. 1968–83

glitter, molded plastic, jewelry, shell, beads, and found objects on wood; artist-made painted wood frame

Simon Sparrow was born in West Africa to a Yoruban father and Native American mother, and raised in the Great Smoky Mountains, where his maternal grandfather lived among the Eastern Band of Cherokees. Sparrow felt a deep connection to the natural world and began a spiritual journey when he was just a boy. He preached the Pentecost and called himself a child of God, noting: “You is saved by God, by the Son, by the Holy Ghost. Not by no religion. Religion is man-made.” Sparrow’s shimmering works center on faces and creatures surrounded with geometric forms conveying, as he explained, the spiritual essences of the ancestors.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.69

Wall label, Gallery 3:



Sam Doyle

Bull Dager

ca. 1980

paint on sheet metal

Doyle and his Gullah community on South Carolina’s St. Helena Island embraced personal choice amid the changing society they lived in, understanding that oppression came in many forms. The title of this piece reflects what is now understood as demeaning slang for an African American, masculine lesbian, but Doyle regarded the sexual inclinations, gender identities, and self-presentations of individuals as part of what made them unique, and his aims were to

celebrate individuality. About paintings exploring this theme, Doyle noted: “That’s two in one, a man and a woman, oh yes, a natural.”

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.26

Wall label, Gallery 3:



Sam Doyle
F. Capers
ca. 1970–83
paint on repurposed tin siding

Sam Doyle lived most of his life on the Sea Island of St. Helena, off the South Carolina coast. He was born into the Gullah culture, a mix of African and Caribbean peoples shaped by enslaved rice farmers and, later, freed slaves. Understanding that African American histories were too rarely recorded by white historians, Doyle painted portraits of local people and historic figures, documenting the accomplishments of his fellow Black Americans and displaying the pieces in his yard. Notably he celebrated the “First Blacks,” community members who blazed a trail. Frank Capers worked as a barber, attended the local Penn school, and was among the island’s first openly gay residents.

Collection of Douglas O. Robson, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Text Panel, Gallery 3, Gamechanger panel:

Clementine Hunter (ca. 1886/7–1988)

On a Louisiana plantation built on the labor of enslaved workers and reinvented, in the twentieth century, as an artists’ and writers’ retreat, Clementine Hunter painted everyday scenes she felt historians overlooked. Black Americans in her Cane River community dominate narrative images in which the artist reclaimed cultural pride and conveyed her multifaceted spiritual and ethnic identity. Hunter made pictorial quilts and small paintings, but her most iconic works include nine room-size murals painted in 1955, inside a building at Melrose Plantation called African House. The paintings reflect on personal memories but carry persistent undertones of protest regarding both race and gender. Particularly noteworthy in Hunter’s work are her portrayals of Black women as strong, caring, capable people who give foundation to their entire community. In the last decade of her life, Hunter’s dreams of independence were realized, when the sales from her art enabled her to buy a house trailer and depict that place—humble but hers—as home.

Wall label, Gallery 3:

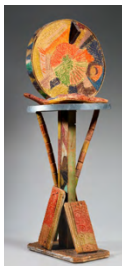


Clementine Hunter
Untitled (Magi Bearing Gifts)
ca. 1970–80
paint on Albany slip whiskey jug

In this painted jug, Hunter portrays the Three Wise Men bearing gifts to the newborn Jesus, as well as their accompanying angel, as people of color. By depicting the figures in the biblical tale with dark skin, Hunter proposes an alternative worldview—one that places Black Christianity and history at the center of storied narratives and important events.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.36

Object label, Gallery 3, Platform label:



Leroy Person
Untitled
ca. 1975
polychrome carved wood and metal

Leroy Person lived near Albemarle Sound in North Carolina. He built his own home, and to decorate its windowsills and doorways, developed a distinctive style of saw-blade cuts into wood. He rubbed the wood with crayon, giving it a waxy sheen and color. He subsequently made an array of grooved and crosscut sculptural objects and home furnishings, including a fence from carved tree limbs. Person became known for unique chairs, small tables such as the one seen here, and carvings of woodland creatures such as snakes and birds. Some of his works are incised with a partially legible, code-like script, which Person devised to record his own views, beyond the boundaries of his limited formal education.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.44

Text Panel, Gallery 3, Gamechanger panel:

Howard Finster (1916–2001)

Howard Finster grew up in a large family of meager means in Appalachian Alabama and Georgia. Trauma was ever present in Finster's childhood, during which he suffered the death of five of his twelve siblings. His eclectic beliefs came to include extraterrestrial life and the idea that he had been reincarnated on earth to help save the doomed. In 1976, after some four decades of preaching, Finster responded to a vision in which God directed him to "paint sacred art." He spent his subsequent years building Paradise Garden, a sprawling art-environment, on his Georgia property near Summerville. Before he died, Finster made more than 47,000 artworks.

Finster was charismatic, but the sheer number of artworks he produced prompted critics to question his standing as an artist, and his intense religiosity marginalized him still further. But he considered himself a missionary, the message was always the point. By the 1980s, Finster had become the most highly visible and celebrated self-taught artist of his era, in large part thanks to his buoyant, larger-than-life persona. Ultimately, Finster highlighted flaws in an art world that was ill-equipped for understanding artists that didn't conform to mainstream norms. He bent art to his unique vision, and epitomized the ways in which tradition, folk culture, and personal spirituality transform and become transformative through creative practice.

"I took the pieces you threw away and put them together by night and day, washed by rain, dried by sun, a million pieces all in one."

—Howard Finster, *Poem for the Garden*



Howard Finster

Untitled

1988

paint and marker on glass bottles

Howard Finster often recounted how his callings as preacher and artist converged. "One day I was workin' on a patch job on a bicycle, and I was rubbin' some white paint on that patch with this finger here, and I looked at the round tip o' my finger, and there was a human face on it," he said. "Then a warm feelin' come over my body, and a voice spoke to me and said, 'Paint sacred

art.” Many of Finster’s artworks evoke this memory through tiny faces interspersed with the Word of God, combining the artist’s visual evangelism and creative practice.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.27, .28

Wall label, Gallery 3:



Howard Finster

Self-Portrait

1975

paint on cut plywood; ink on foamcore

In this outsized self-portrait, Howard Finster acknowledges that the world is a difficult place, and that you must believe in yourself and cut your own path. The sign he gives himself to carry reads:

“THE ONLY WAY HOWARD FINSTER COULD GET TALL IN THIS OLD WORLD WAS TO MAKE MY SELF TALL. 8 FEET AND IF YOU EVER EXPECT TO BE TALL IN THIS OLD WORLD. YOU WILL HAFTO DO IT FOR YOUR SELF. YOU WILL MAKE YOUR OWN CHARETER AND BUILD YOUR OWN HEIGHTH FOR NO ONE BUT YOU CAN DO THAT MAKE UP YOUR OWN MIND. –Howard”

Collection of Douglas O. Robson from the Robson Family Collection, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

ROOM #4

Text Panel, Gallery 4, Gamechanger panel:

Bessie Harvey (1929–1994)

Bessie Harvey used branches, roots, and found objects in sculptures that embody personal spirituality and speak about life’s challenges. She was born in Georgia as the Great Depression dawned, but lived most of her life in rural Tennessee, where her family knew intense poverty.

We Are Made of Stories: Self-Taught Artists in the Robson Family Collection
Smithsonian American Art Museum | 6/29/22 KH

She explained that her art came out of struggle and became her tool for surviving it. As a girl, Harvey made toys and dolls from twigs. She became attuned to the twisted, humanlike shapes of branches and roots, and believed that it was God who allowed her to see their spiritual essence. Over time, Harvey's dolls morphed into complex sculptures. By adding paint and found objects to organic forms, she awakened dormant characters from within.

Harvey experienced oppression on multiple frontiers, but abidingly belongs to an artistic sisterhood determined to articulate a powerful, personal vision. In the 1980s and 1990s, her art attracted attention, but it was not all positive. Her sculptures were emotive and unapologetically "peculiar," as she described them. Harvey maintained that God was the artist, not her. Still, many viewed her work as animalistic and primitive, and positioned her creativity as something threatening, related to dark magic or folk religion. Harvey's practice signified her creativity, spirituality, and survival skills in equal measure. She believed that perseverance was a Black woman's test, and her vision never wavered.

Wall label, Gallery 4:



Bessie Harvey

Untitled (Root Figures)

1988

painted root, beads, turkey bones, metal, plastic, and fabric

Bessie Harvey saw her sculptural forms as revelations of the spirits that dwelled within roots and branches, identities she brought to life with found objects and paint. Harvey believed that she was creating artworks as God directed her to, listening and responding to the natural materials she used. She often painted her abstracted figures in dark colors, expressing the emotional or spiritual anguish of her own struggles. About her work, Harvey said: "I know that my art is a peculiar kind of art. What I do is what He lets me see."

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.34–.35

Text Panel, Gallery 4, Gamechanger panel:

Thornton Dial Sr. (1928–2016)

Thornton Dial was born into a sharecropping family in rural Alabama, on the eve of the Great Depression. He experienced the trauma and tumult of both Jim Crow segregation and the civil rights movement. Profoundly influenced by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Dial used art to confront issues of racial oppression in the United States, developing an allegorical style that was

abstracted but narrative, conveying concerns both personal and universal. His large, bold works, with incisive titles and themes of race and class, captivated the art world through sophisticated content and an aesthetic that defied stereotypes of “folk.” Dial bridged the worlds of Black vernacular self-taught artists and the contemporary mainstream. He was a conduit between nineteenth-century-born artists like Bill Traylor; African American quilters who had, for too long, gone unrecognized as artists; and a younger generation of Black creatives seeking a way forward.

Dial lived to see his work acquired by some of the most revered museums in the United States and became relevant to the mainstream art world in unprecedented ways. As the art world increasingly embraced him, Dial used his voice to raise serious questions about its long-standing hierarchies and inequities. He became emblematic of a shifting southern landscape in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—as the deeply rooted vision of Black Americans revealed its tremendous power.

Wall label, Gallery 4:



Thornton Dial Sr.
Recalling the Pain
2011

charred wood, metal, corrugated tin, plastic, nails, and enamel on wood

Thornton Dial crafted a visual language that combined Depression-era modes of creating something from nothing with the allegory and folktales of African American culture and the Black experience of rural Alabama in the twentieth century. He became best known for artworks that explore issues of race and class in America. In *Recalling the Pain*, made a decade after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, Dial memorializes a dark moment when Americans were united in grief.

Collection of Douglas O. Robson, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Wall label, Gallery 4:



Thornton Dial Sr.
Tiger Colored Lady
1994

charcoal, graphite, chalk, and pastel on paper

“I always had the idea to draw,” Thornton Dial once explained. “Put time at something like that you get better at it. I put more time with drawing than I did with my lessons.” He made an expansive body of drawings that convey an easy energy and comfort with the medium, and a personalized use of abstraction and symbolism as ways of telling stories beyond the bounds of language. Dial’s frenetic yet fluid lines describe his views about politics, race, class, sex, and more—the complex web of human interactions the artist referred to as “the strategy of the world.”

Collection of Douglas O. Robson, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Wall label, Gallery 4:



Thornton Dial Sr.
The Movie Star and the Tiger Need One Another
March 1992

charcoal, graphite, and watercolor on paper

The tiger became Dial’s trademark symbol for African Americans—fierce, nimble, and regal but also feared, maligned, and hunted. Their jungle environment was a metaphor for America, a place as bountiful and beautiful as it was treacherous. Here Dial considers the power of relationships and unlikely alliances. He contrasts the social power and privilege of celebrity with the instincts and ferocity of the tiger, suggesting that each has unique strengths, and that teamwork is the ultimate tool for survival.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.25

Wall label, Gallery 4:



Purvis Young
On the March
1996
paint and pencil on paper

Young lived his entire life in a segregated district of Miami known as Overtown, commonly called “Colored Town” until the late 1960s, when a highway overpass was constructed straight through the historic heart of the city’s Black community—forcing residents out. Young witnessed the ways in which neighborhoods of immigrants and people of color came last in the United States. Inspired by the African American activist murals in Chicago and Detroit, he began painting the boarded-up facades of shops along a once thriving baker’s row, referred to by locals as Goodbread Alley. Young’s themes, captured here in *On the March*, focus on the perils of being poor and Black in the United States, and the particular challenges experienced by immigrants and displaced persons and communities.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.85

Text Panel, Gallery 4, Gamechanger panel:

Judith Scott (1943–2005)

Against the odds, Judith Scott became an artist of great renown, making fiber and mixed-media sculptures that encase forever-softened objects. Scott and her twin sister were born in Ohio. She experienced debilitating physical and mental challenges from birth, but it was arguably the severe stigma and inhumane handling of the mentally disabled in midcentury America that had the most profound impact on Scott’s early life. She spent almost four decades institutionalized, before medical advances and more enlightened models of family integration made such places and treatments outmoded.

Judith joined family in California in 1985, when Scott’s sister became her legal guardian. She began attending Oakland’s Creative Growth Art Center, a nonprofit studio designed to help the differently abled flourish through artistic practice. Scott found her medium of fiber in 1988. Her sculptures drew international attention for their visual power and sense of mystery, but her personal story was almost equally compelling. Although her works are not autobiographical in a traditional sense, they embody an alternate language sought and found, an extralinguistic way of conveying emotion and outwardly describing who she was. Scott paved a path for neurodivergent artists being appreciated on their own terms; her complex practice prompted art institutions to reevaluate art as a tool for survival and connection, and today her work resides in museum collections worldwide.

Wall label, Gallery 4:

Judith Scott



Untitled (JS 39)

1997

mixed media

Collection of Douglas O. Robson, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum



Untitled (Medicine Bottle)

1996

mixed media and string

Collection of Douglas O. Robson from the Robson Family Collection, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum



Untitled

ca. 1990–2005

mixed media, shoe section, and thread

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.66



Untitled
1994
mixed media and string

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Margaret Z. Robson Collection, Gift of John E. and Douglas O. Robson, 2016.38.67

At the heart of Judith Scott's sculptures are found objects from the everyday world, nestled and enshrouded within colored fibers—yarn, string, ribbon—which are not simply woven or wrapped to form the object's exterior, but are intricately webbed and bound in what became the artist's signature style. While Scott's intentions and meanings were known only to her, the artworks she made silently but steadfastly telegraph messages about what is visible on the surface and what remains hidden within, and the notion that the depths of one soul can never be fully known to another.

Text Panel, Gallery 4, Gamechanger panel:

Dan Miller (b. 1961)

Miller was born in California's Castro Valley in 1961 and joined Creative Growth, the same art studio where Judith Scott worked, in 1992. There he began making large, abstracted graphic works that function as communiqués in a self-shaped language. Miller is on the autism spectrum, significantly impacted by a syndrome in which communication challenges are central. His art draws on deeply embedded memories—linguistic and physical—and provides a means of conveying what he is unable to express verbally. Miller, like Scott before him, has become an iconic artist in the increasingly recognized sector of neurodivergent creativity.

When Miller was born, the autism spectrum was ill-understood and effective childhood interventions had yet to exist. His grandmother, a schoolteacher, was nevertheless determined to help Dan develop language, repeating to him the sounds and forms of words, time and again. Her efforts revealed their impact much later, when he began making artworks that overlay and repeat words, letters, names, and numbers, conveying, uniquely but effectively, his ideas and memories. Miller's complex experience is mirrored in the emotionally enveloping drawings and sculptures he makes. His artworks stand on their own, but his extraordinary story offers a critically enriching context. Miller solidifies the idea that art is as unique as the maker, that labels for people can't meaningfully describe art, and that creative practice is a vehicle for connecting with family and the world.

Wall label, Gallery 4:



Dan Miller
Untitled (DM 847 and DM 848)
2016
papier-mâché and tin cans

Most widely recognized for his works on paper, Dan Miller sometimes works with other media, exploring how materials such as ceramic, textiles, and wood can activate his ideas. Regardless of what form they take, Miller's themes draw on his memories. Light bulbs are among his recurring subjects, related to a childhood experience of having unexpectedly shattered one. In this pair made from papier-mâché, Miller covered his handmade forms with painted script, merging the verbal associations and physical forms that, together, shape that memory in his mind.

Collection of Douglas O. Robson, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Wall label, Gallery 4:



Dan Miller
Untitled (239_2016)
2016
acrylic and ink on paper

Miller's imagery runs from the easily legible to the entirely abstract. His family has offered context for pieces with readable passages: the names of significant people, objects with a particular resonance, memories from his uncle's hardware store—recollections tucked into visual nests for safekeeping. But overall, Miller's paintings don't need interpretation. They powerfully convey a creative practice rooted in the daily effort to chart a visual record of experience. Miller and his art reveal the humanity in valuing uniquely personal languages and the exchanges they enable.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Robson Family Collection, Gift of Douglas O. Robson, 2022.3

Wall labels, Gallery 4:

Laura Craig McNellis



Untitled (Fudgesicles)

ca. 1982

mixed media on newsprint

Collection of Douglas O. Robson, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum



Untitled (White Plate with Sandwich)

ca. 1982

mixed media on newsprint

Laura Craig McNellis began painting when she was young, finding a creative engagement that empowered her to communicate through images. When McNellis, who is autistic, was born in 1957, Americans with disabilities remained excluded from civil rights progress that prohibited discrimination based on race, sex, religion, or national origin. Against that era's norms, McNellis's parents refused to institutionalize her, caring for her at home and nurturing her creativity as a vehicle for sharing observations, memories, and her personal worldview. McNellis's uniquely evocative imagery describes items or events that hold personal significance and sustain the artist's ongoing connection to family.

Collection of Douglas O. Robson, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

FINAL CORRIDOR-GALLERY 5

Wall labels, Gallery 5:



Dan Miller

Untitled (283_2016)

2016

acrylic and ink on paper

Collection of Douglas O. Robson, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum



Dan Miller

Untitled (DM 1024)

2018

acrylic and embroidery on fabric, mixed media

Dan Miller's drawings, paintings, and mixed-media works range from intensely rich color weavings to monotone hurricanes of marks. They vary in format from skyward-reaching scrolls to horizontal expanses to sheets of paper that fit on a table or in a typewriter. Miller's art is a graphic communication made in the moment. Thoughts are drawn and overdrawn, coalescing into a hovering, visual cloud that manifests a stream-of-consciousness way of experiencing time, emotion, and the fluctuating state of being. Miller's abstracted memories remind us that language is both personalized and shared, and that communication is always a subjective volley between sender and receiver.

Collection of Douglas O. Robson, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

"We're all made of stories. We carry our stories with us everywhere we go. We introduce our stories to other people's stories and all the stories all get mixed up and everything, but that's ultimately what we're all made of."

—George Tamihana Nuku, artist

"In the measurable distance between facts is an immeasurable truth: We are made of stories. It's the story that matters, the story that reveals, and the story that evolves. . . . What is more interesting is the truth that the conflicting narratives and memories reveal."

—Ruchi Mital, filmmaker