

# The New York Times

## Arts

### Art in Review

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'Outsider Art Fair' Puck Building Lafayette and Houston Streets SoHo Today, tomorrow and Sunday

Outsider art, or art by untrained artists, has become big business. The Rev. Howard Finster, an artist in Georgia who is well-known for his densely allegorical paintings, has set up a cottage industry in which he and his family turn out art objects, and potential clients can now reach him by dialing (800) FINSTER.

Viewers interested in sampling a wider selection of work in this genre can visit the Outsider Art Fair this weekend. The third edition of this annual event features dozens of dealers from the United States and Europe offering work by many of the field's old masters, including Martin Ramirez, Minnie Evans, William Hawkins and Bill Traylor, along with less familiar figures.

Critical questions remain about the nature and meaning of Outsider art, but there is no denying that many works presented under the heading have enormous appeal. The stories behind the art add to its interest, and, in fact, the work often illustrates the artist's life, as in the case of Grandma Moses, who painted scenes of her Vermont childhood.

Outsiders often make art as a way to work out passionately held beliefs or obsessions, and their pieces frequently have a strong narrative bent. Some produce work in response to voices (like Madge Gill, an English artist who drew flapper girls in tight patterns of ballpoint-pen lines) or to explicate complex personal mythologies (like August Walla, a resident in the Gugging mental institution outside Vienna).

Many of the artists employ color, composition and materials in remarkably unconventional ways. Johann Hauser, another patient at Gugging, paints nude women in bright shades of red, and tops them with hairdos that look like steel-wool beehives; Raymond Matison, an inmate in a Connecticut prison, makes tiny allegorical needlepoints out of unraveled socks stitched onto cotton boxer shorts.

But untrained doesn't necessarily mean good, at least as far as artists are concerned. Even in this highly distilled selection of work, more than a few pieces teeter on the line between art and kitsch. Overall, though, the fair offers a host of fascinating treasures, bursting with energy and a sense of urgency too often missing in more conventional shows. (Hours: Preview 5:30 to 8:30 P.M. today, with a \$45 admission, which permits entrance to the fair all weekend; 11 A.M. to 7 P.M. tomorrow, and 11 A.M. to 6 P.M. on Sunday, with \$10 admission each day.)