



‘Art Brut in America’ Highlights Outsider Artists, No Longer Looking In

By **ROBERTA SMITH** OCT. 22, 2015

In 1951, Jean Dubuffet decided it was time to introduce his Art Brut collection in the United States. Truthfully — in a combination of altruism and self-interest usual to this mercurial, demanding, semi-polymathic French artist — he also needed to get its 1,200 works off his hands so he could concentrate on his own art.

As a result of this itchiness, the Art Brut holdings of Dubuffet (1901-1985) spent a decade on rotating display in six rooms at the top of the Creeks, the mansion in East Hampton, N.Y., owned by the artist Alfonso Ossorio, scion of a wealthy Filipino family and an active, idiosyncratic collector in his own right, who also entertained frequently. Dubuffet’s finds were seen there by art world luminaries who included prominent artists, critics and museum directors, but they had only a limited impact. In 1962, Dubuffet changed his mind and requested that Ossorio send it all back to Paris. (By then, his files and archive were included.) It was as if the trip over had never happened.

This saga forms a little-known chapter in the history of what Americans now more often call outsider art. But luckily, the American Folk Art Museum has revisited and in part recreated the Ossorio sojourn with the excellent exhibition “Art Brut in America: The Incursion of Jean Dubuffet.”

The show is an invigorating crowd of over 160 pieces by 35 artists — including one stupendous large mixed-media drawing, “The Mother in Pink,” (1951), by Ossorio, which resembles a cloud dwelling pre-Columbian goddess. About three-quarters of the pieces were part of the original shipment to the Creeks; everything is lent by the Collection de L’Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland — an unprecedented gesture for this museum, if not most. It was formed in 1971 when Dubuffet gave his holdings — by then numbering around 5,000 works — to the city of Lausanne, and the museum opened in 1976.

“Art Brut in America” has been organized by Valerie Rousseau, the folk art museum’s curator of self-taught art and Art Brut, who has supplemented the art with Dubuffet’s letters to Ossorio and pamphlets of a few of the exhibitions that Dubuffet staged in Paris — in the basement gallery of his dealer René Drouin — before he sent the collection to the United States. There are also images of its display at the Creeks, one showing Ossorio with a big Pollock painting in the adjacent room.

Dubuffet had been conducting art-finding missions across Western Europe for about six years by the time he proposed the transfer to Ossorio — whose work he admired and who became an unusually tolerant and loyal friend. He visited schools, asylums and prisons, ferreting out works by children, mental patients and prison inmates as well as self-taught eccentrics. He named his trove Art Brut — loosely, raw or crude or perhaps undiluted art. A majority of the works were donated by doctors in asylums, partly in hopes that they would be preserved.

Like many artists before and since, Dubuffet was no stranger to false dichotomies. He had no problem dismissing large chunks of artistic activity as meritless, instead of seeing quality itself as mercurial — and also ultimately personal, determined by each viewer’s own experience. He insisted, sometimes quite vehemently, that Art Brut was superior to established academic and avant-garde strains because it was spontaneous, untutored and innocent, free of self-interest or the profit motive. This romanticizing tendency continues today.

Once the collection was repatriated in 1962, Dubuffet refined his definition of Art Brut and adjudicated what fit in it. (Similarly, André Breton ruled which artists and writers qualified as Surrealists, famously excommunicating Salvador Dalí, an

exemplar of the style.) Dubuffet went so far as to create an “annex” collection, effectively demoting works whose makers he considered too knowing, trained or market-centric to quite qualify as Art Brut. The five large drawings by Ossorio that Dubuffet owned — all in the show — were relegated to this less pure annex group.

It’s a heady experience to move through this exhibition knowing that many of the works on hand were among the first by these artists that Dubuffet saw or exhibited. Talk about the shock of the new. Artists like Adolf Wölfli (1864-1930), Carlo Zinelli (1916-1974), Aloise Corbaz (1886-1964) and Madge Gill (1882-1961) — are now well-known in this country, but they are represented here by works that reinforce their greatness.

A big red masklike face from 1924 by Wölfli, who spent more than half his life in an asylum in Switzerland, is among the best drawings by him I’ve ever seen. The same goes for several of the depictions of historical figures, including Napoleon, by Corbaz, who gave color pencil the brightness and density of pastel, often on an imposing scale.

Less familiar are the sci-fi-esque drawings of robots or maybe former humans connected by snaking conduits and wire by Robert Gie (born 1869), recently seen at the New Museum and the Venice Biennale. Don’t miss the strange creatures conjured in large black-and-white pencil drawings by the great Heinrich Anton Müller (1869-1930), who had a solo show at the Swiss Institute in SoHo in 1995, but has not been seen since. (Müller, by the way, was in the same asylum as Wölfli. The idea of seeing their work in quantity on the same day is somewhat staggering.)

The efforts of quite a few other artists may deliver similar first-time epiphanies. Some of mine came from the color pencil drawings of Berthe Urasco (born 1898), whose promenading women resemble geometric versions of those by the German Expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. The carved-lava heads and figures of an anonymous French artist now known as Barbus Müller exudes the warmth of kindly idols. Similarly bulbous, but not as benign as Barbus’s personages, are the heads that the French tile-setter Pascal-Desir Maisonneuve (1863-1934) devised from cut seashells.

In one vitrine, you’ll find the small but wild wool embroideries of Juliette Elisa

Bataille (born 1896), which have the fractious energy of some of Frank Auerbach's paintings. Nearby are the efforts of Jean Marchand, known as Jean Mar (1828-1911): little reliefs made from plant fiber and other scraps elaborately secured to stiff paper with string. Joseph Cornell might have claimed them as his own.

This show is an undeniable feast, but the boundaries between Art Brut and the more contaminated creations of the larger world often seem quite flexible, if not almost capricious. Several examples partake of the floral patterns usual to peasant art, or present figures only slightly more demonic than those inspired by folk tales. Sometimes the artists' biographies, available in copies of a small handbook throughout the galleries, confuse matters further by indicating that some lived close to normal lives and were well educated.

This seems especially true of one of the show's more intense thrills: a pointy upright sliver of stone that a series of deft additions of paint have transformed into a Picassoid portrait bust. Titled "The Erinye" after the vengeful female deities of Greek mythology, it was made in 1948-49 by Alfred Antonin Juritzky-Warberg (1878-1961), an Austrian prince who called himself Juva, lived in Paris after 1938 and was never institutionalized.

Whether you adhere to the letter of Dubuffet's distinctions or not, this show rewards attention while expanding American understanding of the paths some great outsider artists took to public awareness. Dubuffet's consuming passion has continued to reverberate. Outsider art is gradually being integrated into the widening gyre of 20th-century modernism, and Lausanne's Art Brut museum now contains some 60,000 works from around the world.

It is a wonder that Dubuffet was also able to make great art of his own. It is less surprising that he often ingeniously synthesized aspects of beloved Art Brut. Or that many of his best efforts date from the 1950s, when his obstreperous collection was abroad.

"Art Brut in America: The Incursions of Jean Dubuffet" remains on view through Jan. 10 at the American Folk Art Museum, 2 Lincoln Square, at Columbus Avenue and 66th Street, Manhattan; 212-595-9533, folkartmuseum.org.

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