

The New York Times

A Groundbreaking Show Presents a New, Inclusive Vision of American Art

by Roberta Smith, Feb. 15, 2018

Outliers and American Vanguard Art

Through May 13 at the National Gallery of Art, Washington; 202-737-4215, nga.gov. The show will be at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta from June 24 to Sept. 30, and the Los Angeles County Museum from Nov. 18 to March 18, 2019.

WASHINGTON — Anyone interested in American modernism should see “Outliers and American Vanguard Art” at the National Gallery of Art. Flaws and all, this groundbreaking adventure highlights outstanding, sometimes rarely-seen artworks; revives neglected histories; and reframes the contributions of self-taught artists to this country’s rich visual culture.

In recent decades the greatness of these marginalized artists has become increasingly undeniable — whether you call their work folk, primitive, amateur, naïve or, lately, outsider — and demands have gotten louder to include them in a more flexible integrated version of modernism.

The show’s predecessors include ambitious surveys like “Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1993 and “The Encyclopedic Palace of the World,” at the 2013 Venice Biennale. But “Outliers” is different. Limiting its scope to American art, it tries to map the intersections of taught and untaught over the last century, examining not only the place of self-taught art now but how it got here.



“Milky Way,” a 1945 dripped-paint abstraction by Janet Sobel.
The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA, via Art Resource, NY

1924 to 1943: Folk Aesthetics Reconfigured

The Museum of Modern Art collected and exhibited some of the self-taught artists found here under the leadership of its founding director, Alfred H. Barr Jr. — a folk-art true believer. Perhaps the most surprising is the presence of work by Edward Hicks, the early-19th-century Quaker painter of sentient animals, including a “Peaceable Kingdom,” from about 1834, similar to the one the Modern once owned.

At times the allegiance to chronology curtails chances to surprise. Lonnie Holley’s wonderful 1985 sculpture in carved sandstone is marooned just outside the show; it should have been with its (mostly) 1930s precursors, among the carved stone sculptures of William Edmondson and John B. Flanagan whose pairing is by now a bit tired. And there are strange missed opportunities: “Milky Way,” a luminous dripped-paint abstraction from 1945 by the self-taught Ukrainian-American artist Janet Sobel, should have been paired with one by Jackson Pollock (who was aware of her work).