

The New York Times

Art & Design

Curator, Tear Down These Walls



Metropolitan Museum of Art

"Lake George and the Village of Caldwell," left, by Thomas Chambers, challenges the perspective of John Frederick Kensett's "Hudson River Scene." [More Photos »](#)

By ROBERTA SMITH

Published: January 31, 2013

A MODEST PROPOSAL for this country's great repositories of pre-20th-century American art: Why don't you, as Diana Vreeland might have asked, mix folk art in with the more realistic, academically correct kind that has so dominated museums since the 19th century? Despite rising interest in and scholarship about folk art — and even after the wholesale rethinking of several major American wings on the East Coast — the isolation of folk from academic is still the norm. Given that we live in a time of eroding aesthetic boundaries and categories, when many curators are experimenting with integrative approaches in international biennials and commercial galleries, it seems past time for the folk-academic division to soften. It undoubtedly has at some institutions, especially those with modest collections.

But at some of the country's most influential museums separation remains the rule and has, if anything, been freshly reinforced. Over the past three years four prominent East Coast museums rich in both folk and academic paintings have renovated, expanded and reinstalled their galleries of pre-20th-century American art: the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 2009; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, a year later; the Metropolitan Museum of Art last January; and, in December, the entirely revamped Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven. In each case the folk art is largely relegated to separate quarters and granted only a fraction of the wall space. Whatever the rationale for this segregation, it cannot help conveying a sense that folk art is marginal or inferior.

This is a problem for several reasons. For one thing, pre-20th-century folk art is every bit as good, as a genre, as academic art of the same period, and in some ways far more original and vital. Its strengths lie not in its adherence to reality but in its enlivening deviations from it. For another, the distinction between folk and academic can be blurry, more a matter of degree than either-or. Third, this segregation results in galleries of academic 19th-century American art that are predictable and monotonous, effectively deadening the works on view and shortchanging the viewer.

The quality of folk art has been recognized enough to be heavily collected by most of these four museums, if not heavily shown. In addition to their formal ebullience, so-called naïve efforts convey the raw desire for art that prevailed in the early years of this country, when museums and art academies were virtually nonexistent. They exemplify an insistent sense of American can-do, the instinctive pursuit of art and, in a way, happiness.

As it stands, galleries of 18th- and 19th-century American art proceed in a highly predictable fashion: Hudson River School paintings in one gallery, genre paintings in another, colonial and Revolutionary period portraits in a third. The goal seems to be galleries as homogeneous as possible, so as not to confuse viewers. “You don’t want to shake the snow globe too much,” was how a curator at a fifth East Coast museum put it to me. *Au contraire*. The snow globe definitely needs shaking.

Homogeneity dulls the eye and lulls the brain. It is the discrepancies that grab our attention and make us look more sharply and deeply. Comparing and contrasting noticeably different artworks helps us learn to use our eyes, to look for ourselves rather than depend on labels, to see form itself rather than just subject matter and narrative. The process is reflexive; it works best when distinctions are forced on us, as when markedly unlike works that still speak to one another through echoes in form, subject, color or mood are placed side by side.

It would be illuminating to see how the starchy, starkly lighted landscapes of the nominally trained folk painter Thomas Chambers might rattle the gentle glow and soft leafy vistas of the Hudson River School. Chambers probably painted the Hudson River Valley as often as any painter associated with the school — he was their exact contemporary — but I, at least, have never seen his work beside theirs.

As electrifyingly different as folk and academic works can be, the distinctions between them are by no means as clear cut as the segregationist approach suggests. There are all kinds of gradations of skill and training in pre-20th-century American art, and many degrees of realism between the poles of folk and academic painting. Many artists made work that doesn’t fit cleanly into either category. Among them are Ralph Earl, Winthrop Chandler and Reuben Moulthrop, whose efforts curators in some museums push toward the academic category, even though their perspectives can skew, and their figures can have a folkish stiffness. A touch of this awkwardness distinguishes one of the best Gilbert Stuarts in any of these museums, Boston’s double portrait “[Francis Malbone and His Brother Saunders](#),” executed around 1773, the year Stuart turned 18.

At the National Gallery the distinction between folk and academic very occasionally wavers. For example Joshua Johnson's group portrait "The Westwood Children" from around 1807 hangs in the folk art gallery but is almost as competent as — and visually stronger than — Jacob Eichholtz's 1820 painting "The Ragan Sisters" in the colonial portraits gallery. At Yale it is not entirely clear why Moulthrop's "[Reverend Ammi Ruhamah Robbins](#)" of 1812, with its beautifully carpeted, precariously tilted floor isn't hanging in the folk art gallery, among three splendidly plain portraits by Ammi Phillips and two splendidly fancier ones by the artist known as the Beardsley Limner, except that it is extremely tiny.

Sometimes overarching agendas contribute to the segregation. Rather than show its best paintings to their best advantage the Met has opted to tell American history through the displays in these galleries, with results that are clogged with mediocre genre paintings. Still the Met has done a tiny, tentative bit of mixing in a gallery of portraits just outside its folk art gallery. It includes three Copley portraits, two outstanding works by the in-betweeners Ralph Earl and a small, rather weak work by Joshua Johnson off to one side.

Boston's tactic is a dense, sometimes cluttered orchestration that mixes painting and sculpture with lots of furniture and decorative art. Paintings by Copley hang in galleries dense with appropriately high-style furniture, as if in the homes of Boston Brahmins in the 18th or 19th century.

There are things to be said for narrative-minded and contextualizing curatorial strategies like this, but neither of these museums' approaches actually precludes adding folk art here and there, especially if visual jolts result. Why doesn't Boston hang its well-known painting "Meditation by the Sea" by an unknown folk artist next to Thomas Doughty's "Beach Scene With Rocks II" of 1835? They're nearly identical in size and subject yet illuminatingly different. The "Meditation" portrays the ocean as benign and wondrous; the Doughty, as roiled and powerful.

If the integrative approach I'm proposing seems radical — and I would argue for a pretty radical version, in some cases placing almost equal numbers of folk and academic works in shared galleries — precedents for it exist. For decades the paintings of the great self-taught French painter Henri Rousseau have hung beside early modernist canvases in museums around the globe, and the Met is surely not the only museum that exhibits the self-taught painter [Horace Pippin](#) and Florine Stettheimer — a trained painter who opted for a naïve style — among those by American modernists like Arthur Dove, Georgia O'Keeffe and Marsden Hartley.

It's true there are specific historical reasons for this anomalous approach: All these artists were embraced by, and part of, the art worlds of their times. They lived an early 20th-century moment when art generally tended toward distortions of form, when folk art was admired for its modernity (as was the art of children and the insane) and collected by places like the Museum of Modern Art. But whatever the reasons, these early-20th-century galleries attest to the visual richness that can result when boundaries are flouted.

This mixing of early-20th-century art sets an example for curators focused on the art of the more recent past and the present, as well as for artists trying to shape its future. In particular the curators need to figure out how to integrate the outsider geniuses or near-geniuses whose art has gathered attention during the last several decades. These loners, who translated intense personal visions into extraordinarily compelling artworks, include Martín Ramírez, Bill Traylor, Henry Darger, James Castle, Joseph Yoakum and Morton Bartlett — to name but a few. Most have been the subject of eye-opening retrospectives during the last 20 years, both here and abroad. (Other inroads: Since 1985 Whitney Biennials have included the self-taught sculptor Bessie Harvey, the great American quilt maker Rosie Lee Tompkins and the visionary painter Forrest Bess.)

These names include some of the greatest artists of American art and they have European counterparts. They are widely admired but too often almost a kind of guilty pleasure, even as the quality of their work demands a rewriting of the 20th-century canon. Most museums understand the importance of this work and collect some of it. But few integrate it into their permanent collection displays.

Consequently just as museums need to shake their 19th-century American galleries free of the predictable progressions of like-unto-like works, they also need to break the even tighter stranglehold on their postwar displays — the relentless march of Abstract Expressionism, Color Field, Pop, Minimalism, Conceptualism and its numerous offshoots.

Nowhere does this stranglehold feel more suffocating than in the last several galleries of the permanent collection displays at the Museum of Modern Art, where the art of the 1960s and '70s dwindles down to an attenuated, largely enervated group of Conceptual texts, photographs and monochromatic paintings.

There's nothing wrong with this kind of optically deprived art — much of it interesting or even compelling — but it has a monopoly on these galleries, much as it has on the minds of many artists, curators and critics. The path of art is too broad and diverse for this fiction of dominance.

Obviously narratives like the Modern's omit many worthy insider artists, but outsider art might be the shock to the system that would finally break this linear historical account. Think what might be learned from hanging Bess's small feisty abstractions among the Abstract Expressionists, or Darger's intrepid Vivian girls, traced from magazine images, with Warhol's Marilyns, or one of Ramírez's patchwork collages next to a Rauschenberg.

In a way the art and styles that now dominate so many museums lead a sheltered life. They rarely have to compete on an open, level playing field with the art of their own time occurring outside the system. Folk art and outsider art offer them serious competition. Their integration into the so-called mainstream needs to happen not just so we can better know the richness and diversity of the past, but so the artists of today can have a more real grasp of the competition and the range of possibilities open to them right now, in the present.