

NAÏVE ART

By

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It is difficult to say with any degree of accuracy, just when the term *Naïve* came to be internationally accepted as a means of classifying certain types of twentieth century painting, but most conservative sources would place its origins in the works of Henri Rousseau, whose particular view of life, and style of representing it on canvas, were ‘discovered’ in 1885 by the painter Paul Signac.

Signac’s enthusiastic promotion of ‘le Douanier’ exposed the art world to a new set of visual experiences which typically needed examination, analysis and inevitable classification, and when six of his works were published in ‘Der Blau Reiter’ (The Blue Rider) in 1912, Naïve art became established in Western art history.

During the last hundred years, however, the term Naïve Art has come to mean different things to many people, and today a great deal of confusion and argument surrounds any attempt to clarify its boundaries, and thus distinguish it as something distinctly different from *Primitive Art*, *Folk Art*, *Art Brut*, *Self-Taught Art*, and *Outsider Art*.

Sheltering under the broad Naïve umbrella, there is a formidable amount of material to sift through, and some of it is little more than dross. To compound the problem further, even the dross is now being collected and marketed, ironically, as fine examples of *Bad Art* in the USA, and the Internet is adding to the volume, almost on a daily basis.

In spite of the confusion, however, two undisputed facts stand out: Naïve Art is big business on the international scene, and serious collectors are investing in the genre, and willing to pay healthy sums of money for the genuine article.

Identifying the genuine article from the other categories, and indeed from Faux work, is all part of the confusion, and makes the business of investment that much more difficult. Notwithstanding this, the American interest in anything with a ‘*self-taught*’ label on it seems destined to continue to gather momentum, regardless of how dubious much of its substance is, or how sustainable the supply chain remains before it slips into factory production to satisfy demand.

What then *is* Naïve art? What makes it so attractive, understandable and accessible to so many people, and why is it so collectable? What drives a Naïve artist to paint away in isolation, and what forces keep him or her going when the physical pressures and time constraints of modern life seem to increase exponentially?

To help answer the first of these questions, it’s perhaps worthwhile attempting to define what Naïve art is *not*.

To begin with, Naïve art is *not* Primitive Art. Primitive art, in general terms, is a visual representation of a people’s mystic beliefs and cultural influences. In its various forms it plays an important role in their social practices, both today, as it has in the past. The symbols that are used, and the colours and materials that are employed to present them

are localised, and tend to remain so. But Primitive Art should not be confused with Child Art.

Child Art delights us with its forthright images, technical imperfections and symbolic representations, but attractive and fresh as these are, they result largely from a lack of experience in reproducing the object that is being observed, or imagined, and rely to some extent on the early imprinting of the simplistic images which illustrate their literature.

The fact that the majority of the Western world's population never derives long-term creative benefit from the formal process of the art curriculum at school, speaks volumes about the way in which it is taught towards national examination criteria. It is also a disturbing fact that by the age of fourteen, most pupils have already decided for themselves that they are no good at art, and lamentably carry this legacy into adulthood.

Folk Art is not Naïve, either. Folk art is a manifest part of a people's customs and its traditions. Its intrinsic styles, colour arrangements and use of materials are handed down through generations, and are often used decoratively in the adornment of buildings and artefacts. It has an important *usage* factor, following prescribed traditions, and there are countless examples in places as geographically distanced from each other as Austria, Africa, Mexico and Polynesia.

The insatiable demands of international tourism have, however, intruded into many areas of the world where folk art has always been an integral part of local life, and what was once a proud expression of genuine folk culture, has frequently evolved into garish, portable kitsch, produced without soul or community relevance – except perhaps for the relevance of economic gain.

Art Brut, or 'Raw Art', on the other hand, was a term originated by Jean Dubuffet to classify the paintings and drawings of mental patients suffering from severe schizophrenic psychoses in secure psychiatric clinics in Switzerland, around 1945. Dubuffet viewed the extreme individualism of the works of Adolf Wolfli, Aloise Corbaz, Heinrich Muller *et al*, as only being possible because of their lifetime isolation from social constraints and cultural art influences.

Dubuffet devoted himself to bringing this artwork into the public arena, and by collecting it, exhibiting it widely and publishing it, he succeeded. His 'Collection de l'Art Brut', further helped establish a genre that now finds a distinctive position in the world's Fine Art marketplaces.

Believing that cultural conditioning is responsible for repressing equally powerful artistic forces in each of us, Dubuffet maintained that it is possible for non-psychotics to produce Art Brut outside of such institutions, provided that the artist is culturally and socially isolated to a significant extent; is mentally challenged, or is on the very fringe of society.

Few people can genuinely satisfy these rigorous criteria, of course, and certainly would not advertise themselves at large, even if they were capable of doing so.

Then in 1972, thirteen years before the death of Dubuffet in 1985, Roger Cardinal renamed Art Brut, 'Outsider Art', in his book of the same name. This inadvertently shifted the goalposts significantly, allowing just about any untutored fringe creations to find themselves an acceptable label, and thus work their way into the marketplace by

one promotional means or another. And they do, with increasing commercial ingenuity and hype.

Hardly surprising then, that over the last thirty years or so, the boundaries between Outsider (self-taught) art, and Naïve (self-taught) art have become somewhat blurred. So blurred in fact, that the paintings of Grandma Moses, by definition, almost find themselves cheek-by-jowl with the encrusted ‘art cars’ of Uri Geller and Harrold Blank, and under the same self-taught/outsider mantle as Nek Chand’s massive rock garden environment in Chandigarh, India.

They are all *outside* of the mainstream.

No amount of fancy wordplay and intellectual sleight-of-hand, however, will convince Mr and Mrs Average that an old Cadillac covered in bent spoons is of equal aesthetic appeal and lasting importance as, ‘*Sugaring Off*’, by Grandma Moses; or that an assemblage of domestic waste is as preferable to have around on a daily basis, as a view of ‘*St.Ives*’, by Alfred Wallace.

They would probably tell you it is naïve to think so, whilst at the same time acknowledging the value of exploring new art directions outside the main stream of daily life. And herein lies the crux of the issue in attempting to define Naïve art.

Mr and Mrs Average *are* the main stream of life, and Naïve art arises from it. It’s an art form that records and celebrates the ordinariness of what they do, and what their families have done in the past.

They work hard and have an innate sense of human decency. They uphold what is right, and deplore what is wrong. They are willing to help each other, and bounce back when personal or national tragedy strikes. They love their children, and are proud of their national identity. Above all, they are not stupid, and instinctively know what they like.

Couple these qualities with an irrepressible urge to create a lasting visual memory of who they are, and what they have achieved in life, and we arrive at the basis of Naïve painting as being an important form of human expression. It also helps identify those special attributes that separate it from other self-taught art genres.

Naïve artists are *of* the people, and qualify on all the counts above. They have no motivating ambition to stand out from the crowd, and are usually embarrassed when their artistic achievements are flagged up as being *extra* ordinary. Like most of us, they have lived through all sorts of personal trials and tribulations, and have had moments of intense passion and success, not least of which is the raising of a family.

Although each of us views the world from a different standpoint, there is usually a consensus about what we see, and we are able to talk about the human condition with some degree of agreement and understanding. But what the Naïve artist does, to a greater or lesser extent, is to record the minutia of ordinary life in a way that strikes a chord of empathy with the viewer, and makes the viewing experience an accessible, comfortable, and non-challenging one.

If the state of a nation’s health can be said to be reflected in its art, then what is reflected in the content of Naïve Art would seem to indicate that all is reasonably well, in spite of the mass media’s daily focus on things that are sensationally wrong in society.

Naïve paintings abound with honesty, joy, humour, colour and unabashed decent human activity. They do not have to be exhibited with polemic justification, nor rely on the sensational activities of their creators to draw attention to themselves – they are simply there to be enjoyed, and the human stories they present are timelessly enjoyable.

We have all been children, and played; we have all passed into adulthood and found or lost love; we have all dreamed; we have all celebrated events we consider important. And we all grow old. This is the very stuff of life, and the Naïve artist captures his or her experiences of it in a way that makes sense to the rest of the family, and the extended community.

Since there is a marked lack of social or political axe-grinding in Naïve painting, nomatter where in the world it comes from, we don't have to align ourselves under a minority banner in order to appreciate it. Neither are we liable to be confronted by images of sex or violence, or the depraved excesses of the minority.

On the contrary, the excitement and colours of a street carnival in Holland have all the same innocent and whimsical ingredients as one in South America, and a snowbound rural scene in Croatia has the same magical appeal as one in England. Only the faces and costumes change, and we have no problems in taking these on board, and identifying with them.

This is part of the international charm and attraction of Naïve art. It is all so eminently *understandable* - and collectable for the same reasons.

Although Naïve artists come from every walk of life, they are driven by the same human desire to record their particular passages through it, and there are several elements of universality that flow down through the paintbrush onto the canvas, creating almost a common language (but never a *school*).

For example, the artist appears less concerned about issues of perspective, scale or realism, and is more concerned with the story or event that is being told. Hence the characteristic attention to the minutest of painstaking detail. Drawing skills are largely unimportant – it doesn't much matter if they're not very good, because the lines get covered with paint anyway.

Colour does not present an academic challenge to be wrestled with either. It is all there in the tube to help celebrate the events of the painting, and frequently goes onto the canvas unadulterated. Similarly, formal composition becomes less a matter of balance and order, and more a question of fitting everything into the space available.

It may be true that all the accepted painterly rules are broken in Naïve painting, but somehow or other, the end result works in a way that sets it apart from all other self-taught genres. We can return to the pieces time and again, discovering new details at each visit, and recognising elements of our own lives as we do so.

If this phenomenon has arisen unbidden, and without the benefit of formal training, then long may it continue to do so. We all stand enriched.

It is a fact that the majority of contemporary Naïve artists throughout the world come from a generation born in the 1940's and 50's. We all began painting in complete

isolation from each other, and share a common experience of a childhood moulded before the advent of mass communications technology.

My own background and rather adventurous passage through life is no different, in essence, to that of millions of others throughout history. I've simply enjoyed the immense humour and mystery of everything along the way, and managed to find a personal way of recording it in paint, and writing about it in a manner that gives pleasure to others. That's all.

Collectively, however, Naïve artists around the world are producing a vital historic legacy of ordinary human activity. In the fullness of time this will provide a far more accurate (and I would suggest enjoyable) insight into what went on in the lives of the masses, moreso than any amount of academic political analysis.

I wonder, however, if the next generation will feel as motivated to record aspects of their own lives in a similar way, or will the technology they have inherited, and are developing so rapidly, have removed the primal drive and need to do so?

I sincerely hope not.

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