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# FRINGE ELEMENTS

A PSYCHIATRIST FASCINATED BY OUTSIDER ART BUILDS A MUSEUM-WORTHY COLLECTION OF MAJOR 20TH-CENTURY TALENT.

BY CHRISTOPHER HANN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRIDLEY+GRAVES

Near the entrance to his Civil War-era farmhouse on a pastoral hillside in eastern Pennsylvania, Larry Dumont displays two small drawings by James Castle, a self-taught artist born deaf in Idaho sometime around 1900. Although Castle lived well into his 70s, he never learned to read or write. By some accounts, he rarely left his home, retreating instead to a life of isolation, introspection and incessant drawing—typically scenes depicting everyday rural life. When the cultural cognoscenti took notice of his work about 10 years ago—and dropped its collective jaw—Castle became an overnight star. Today, three decades after his death in 1977, collectors of American outsider art still regard Castle as something of a mythic figure.

Of Dumont's Castle drawings, one portrays a farmer and his family in a small, spartan room; the other shows a modest house and a tree. The unadorned images, absent of affectation, are emblematic of the artist's approach. Castle, for example, was known to use whatever material was available. If no other surface could be found, he would draw on the back of a Quaker Oats cereal box. One of Dumont's drawings was done on the back of an ice cream carton. To achieve just the right color and





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texture in his handmade inks, a brew that might include stove soot and bits of paper, Castle would add his own saliva.

His many idiosyncrasies helped define Castle as the consummate outsider, just the sort of artist for whom Dumont feels a special affinity. What is it about Castle's farm-family rendering that appeals to him? "Its authenticity," Dumont says, "its primitiveness, its folkiness. I'm just amazed that it's a relatively small drawing that has, to me, such amazing power. This individual who had no training was able in a relatively small space to really capture something."

Fortunately for Dumont, a 53-year-old child psychiatrist, he's been afforded more ample space in which to capture a collection of outsider art of stunning breadth. On display in every room of his 5,000-square-foot house—

every hallway, staircase and niche—Dumont's collection represents an impassioned embrace of self-taught outsiders such as Castle. Vagabonds, castoffs and the emotionally disturbed dominate the Dumont gallery. Outsiders all, they rambled through much of their lives as janitors, trash collectors and farm hands long before established art circles came to celebrate their work.

They were overlooked nobodies like Bill Traylor, who was born a slave in Alabama in 1856, didn't leave the plantation until he was 78 and at 83 picked up a pencil stub and began to draw, a practice he continued until his death at 91. In a mere eight years, using mostly lead, charcoal, crayon and colored pencils, Traylor produced a portfolio coveted today by museums, galleries and collectors of a certain bent.



"I buy things because I really love them," says Dumont, who paid \$22,000 for his only work by Traylor, a silhouette of a farmer and his dog, at a Sotheby's sale about 10 years ago. "At the same time, when it comes to my collection of self-taught art, what I try to do is also get a relatively great piece by the biggies."

By Dumont's own reckoning, the highlights of his outsider works are a large, colorful painting of a poodle by William Hawkins (1895–1990); a drawing of a gun-wielding caballero by Mexican artist Martín Ramírez (1895–1963); a large autobiographical work by Howard Finster (1917–2001) that was originally commissioned by Atlanta's High Museum of Art; and a limestone angel bust by William Edmondson (1870–1951).

Each of these practitioners of Art Brut took unorthodox routes to public acclaim. Ramírez, for one, produced hundreds of drawings while spending the last 15 years of his life in a California mental hospital, diagnosed with schizophrenia. Last year he was feted with a retrospective at the American Folk Art Museum in New York, and his works today sell for more than \$100,000. (For more on Ramírez and the outsider art category, see News, page 34, and Critic's Notebook, page 121.)

For all the outsider royalty represented in Dumont's home, his favorite items are a pair of multi-pronged hat racks crafted from rhododendron roots, their tips carved into animal heads. The artist is unknown, though Dumont

**Carnival banner promoting a snake eater, c. 1920, in great room (top, left).**

**Robert Cannon, "The Gauntlet" (top, right). Facing: William Hawkins, white poodle painting, 1985. Previous pages:**

**Alphabet quilt, c. 1920 (p. 62); wooden head with bird house (p. 63, left), c. 1930; the remains of a ventriloquist's dummy (right), c. 1920.**







suspects they were made in Pennsylvania's Lancaster County (Amish country) in the 19th century. "I just think they are incredible and beautiful and whimsical," he says.

Surely the choice says something about the collector. Tall and broad-shouldered, with a prominent chin and a full head of white hair, Dumont approaches his art collecting with a child's wide-eyed wonder. Maybe this has something to do with his day job: Dumont is the director of inpatient psychiatry for children and pre-adolescents at KidsPeace Hospital, a facility for kids from 3 to 18 in Orefield, Pennsylvania. When Dumont comes across a piece of art that moves him, he can barely contain himself. "Most dealers like me because I don't have a very good poker face," he says. "If someone has something that's really great, I'll go, 'Oh my God!' I just sort of lose it."

That Dumont may favor self-taught artists should come as no surprise, as he considers himself a self-taught collector. He started with folk art slowly 20 years ago, when he was living in Manhattan, then kicked it up a notch in 1991, when he and Martin Gould, his partner of 21 years, bought a weekend home in New Hope, Pennsylvania, an art-rich town on the Delaware River. "Once I moved to Pennsylvania and I had access to all these great dealers in this area, then I think it really helped the passion blossom," Dumont says.

He began to explore local flea markets and galleries, honing his taste. He got to know the owners of a local shop, Olde Hope Antiques, where he bought the rhododendron hat racks and many other items. "He was starting to see this whole new world of outsider art opening



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—Dealer Frank Maresca**

up," says co-owner Edwin Hild. "The Folk Art Museum in New York City started to focus on outsider art. This was the direction that Larry was going. He was a little bit ahead of them in that regard."

Dumont generally stays away from auctions—too rich for his budget, he says—trusting instead in select dealers, such as John Ollman at Fleisher/Ollman Gallery in Philadelphia and Frank Maresca of Ricco/Maresca Gallery in New York. He also relies on voracious research; impulse buys are not his style. He says the most he's ever spent on a single item was \$75,000, for the Edmondson sculpture, purchased from Ricco/Maresca. "The truth is, even though I make a good living, I'm not a trust fund baby and I'm not a hedge fund operator," Dumont says. "So part of my hunt is always saying, 'Okay, what's out there that's really great that's also within my budget?'"

For Dumont, the purchase of his country house in 1999 was part of a natural progression. The collection simply needed room to



**Clockwise from top, left: William Edmondson, limestone angel bust. Martín Ramírez, "Caballero" (wall) and mountain lion carving, c. 1930. Ken Grimes, untitled piece (left), c. 1985, and a hooked rug (right), 1930s. Facing: Calvin and Ruby Black, "Possum Trot" figure of a child, 1960-70, reclaimed redwood.**



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grow. “This type of house also allowed me access,” he says. “I wanted to create a house that was beautiful but at the same time allowed me a place to display my passion.”

Then, in 2003, Dumont and Gould embarked on the sort of renovation project for which the timid need not apply. With architect John Franklin of nearby Quakertown, they added a 1,500-square-foot, loft-style great room with a 25-foot-high ceiling and massive wooden staircase whose weathered paneling was salvaged from a Philadelphia church. Although it anchors the house at one end, overlooking a small pond principally populated by a bellowing bullfrog, the great room is clearly the centerpiece of an impressive home.

“Larry has very much created an environment for himself, and he prides himself on that

environment,” Maresca says. “It’s not just a question of finding a bare piece of floor space or a bare spot on the wall. One thing needs to lead to another and create an almost filmic narrative as you walk through the house. If you want to know who Larry is, just walk around his home.”

Dumont may favor American folk and outsider art, but taken as a whole his collection reflects an artistic eye that spans continents, centuries and sometimes sensibilities. In 20 years of searching he’s gathered quilts, masks, weathervanes, walking sticks and all manner of whirligig. In a niche in the fully outfitted basement, a Keith Haring “subway” painting hangs next to a farm scene by 20th-century Pennsylvania impressionist Walter Bahm, which hangs next to a 19th-century portrait (artist



unknown) that resembles the work of 19th-century portraitist John James Trumbull Arnold (two of whose portraits, in fact, are displayed side-by-side in an upstairs hallway).

In an adjacent room, the former summer kitchen, a pair of traditional hats worn by the hill people of Thailand’s Chang Mai region sit atop an American-made wooden table, crafted in 1876 to celebrate the nation’s centennial, each of its 13 sides inscribed with the name of one of the original colonies. And there in a corner sits an industrial cheese strainer, some four feet in diameter, a stout, muscular contraption at once so incongruous and so perfectly at home that a visitor might come away wondering what art collection could possibly be complete without one. Purchase price: \$500. “I just think it’s a beautiful object,” Dumont says, sounding not at all defensive. “Do I need a cheese strainer? No.”

And then he laughs a big, deep, extended laugh, a reminder that even the most sober pursuit of great art can on occasion indulge in unabashed silliness. 🗨️

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**Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia**  
215.545.7562 fleisher-ollmangallery.com

**Olde Hope Antiques, New Hope, Pa.**  
215.297.0200 oldehopeantiques.com

**Ricco/Maresca Gallery, New York**  
212.627.4819 riccomaresca.com

**Howard Finster, autobiographical work (top, left). Willie Birch, “Twins” (top, right), 1991. Facing: Alphabet quilt, c. 1920; clown dumbbells, 19th century; female figure, possibly an advertising piece, 19th century.**

