

The market for Outsider Art

Jonathan Griffin

NOVEMBER 30, 2018

So-called “outsider” artists, self-taught and on the fringes of the established art world, are increasingly popular in today’s revisionist market, writes Melanie Gerlis. Names such as Henry Darger (1892-1973), a hospital janitor who spent his childhood in an asylum, Bill Traylor (1854-1949), who was born into slavery, and Adolf Wölfli (1864-1930), a Swiss labourer who was later a mental health patient, have recently gained recognition.

Among items sold from the collection of the late actor Robin Williams and his second wife Marsha Garces Williams at Sotheby’s in October was Wölfli’s “Der San Salvathor” (1926), estimated at \$150,000-\$200,000 and which soared to \$795,000 (with fees). “That really surpassed expectations!” says specialist dealer Andrew Edlin, who owns the Outsider Art Fair that has editions in New York and Paris.

Edlin also notes increasing interest through his fairs. The 26th edition of the New York event in January notched up record attendance on its opening day with the Connecticut dealer James Barron recording “a stampede towards our booth”. This fair hosted 32 dealers when Edlin acquired it in 2012 and now boasts 65. Edlin also reports “several new buyers” at the sixth Paris edition held in October, including for works he was offering by the French street sweeper Marcel Storr (1911-76) at about €35,000. A Storr show is currently in Edlin’s New York gallery (Mysterium Tremendum, until December 8).

Outsider artists began to attract the attention of the insider art world in 2013 thanks to some major exhibitions. These included Massimiliano Gioni's *The Encyclopedic Palace* at the Venice Biennale (a title lifted from an unrealised work by a self-taught artist); *Alternative Guide to the Universe* at London's Hayward Gallery and the 2013 Carnegie International show, which highlighted Outsider artists.

The market took note and increasing prices soon followed. Come 2014, Christie's in Paris sold a Henry Darger watercolour for a then record €601,500. According to Artnet, the artist's previous auction record, achieved the year before, was €145,500.

Buyers, mostly in continental Europe and the US, are attracted by the so-called untouched, raw qualities of Outsider art: "It is impossible to get Outsider art that is removed emotionally and personally from its maker," says Christie's specialist Cara Zimmerman. Her next dedicated sale, on January 18, is the largest yet, she says, and will include a Darger from the collectors Eugenie and Lael Johnson (est \$250,000-\$500,000) and a Traylor from the William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation (\$50,000-\$80,000).

But it remains a niche category. Christie's runs its auction just once a year and plans to open an edition of the Outsider Art Fair in Basel fell through this year. Edlin is among those who believes outsider artists belong on the fringes, however. "The works hold their own, but they are also their own thing," he says.