

RAWVISION



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NEW GALLERIES OF SELF-TAUGHT AND OUTSIDER ART

Smithsonian American Art Museum,
8th and F Streets, NW
Washington, DC 20004

On October 29, 2016, the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) reopened its galleries dedicated to folk art and the work of self-taught artists after an in-depth reconsideration of its holdings in these fields. Its installation of such works has been completely redesigned and features some notable recent acquisitions. This comprehensive renovation project was overseen by Leslie Umberger, the museum's curator of folk and self-taught art.

As part of the Smithsonian Institution, a network of national museums in the United States, SAAM is a major repository of American visual art and material culture. The barrel-vaulted galleries in the neoclassical museum building, in which folk and other self-taught

artists' works have been reinstalled, feel inviting and intimate. Didactic information on wall texts and artwork-identification labels is clear and illuminating.

Umberger and her design team have made imaginative use of existing architectural details to create bays or vitrines that neatly frame and showcase such compelling works as *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' General Assembly* (c. 1950–64) by **James Hampton** (1909–1964), made of metallic-foil scraps; mixed-media, "healing" sculptures and paintings by the Nebraskan artist **Emery Blagdon** (1907–1986); and *The Beginning of Life in the Yellow Jungle* (2003), a mixed-media, wall-mounted work by **Thornton Dial, Sr** (1928–2016), which explores race in American society. There are many other treasures in these attractive new galleries. Among them: a "housetop"-style quilt crafted by an unidentified artist in the 1920s, and a limestone Crucifixion from the 1930s by the

Tennessee-based stone carver **William Edmondson** (1874–1951).

To encounter such works in a setting that allows them to be seen within the context of the broader history of American art is a valuable experience that cannot be underestimated. As Umberger pointed out on the new galleries' opening day, "Works by self-taught artists can be found not only in these specialised galleries but also in other parts of the museum." In this manner, she noted, visitors may appreciate the many ways in which talented, visionary art-makers who were or are not academically trained have contributed to the shaping of a sense of national cultural identity in the United States.

With the opening of this reinvigorated museum presentation, the work of many of America's most inventive self-taught artists and their resonant creations have been awarded a much-deserved, must-see new home.

Edward M. Gómez