

### **‘We Are Made of Stories’**

It makes us human to tell stories, which not only can be passed down generationally, but gives narrators and listeners a feeling of belonging and accomplishment. Stories can be embedded into works of art too. Today’s aesthetic canon embraces art made for decoration, practical usage or containing a socio-political message. While many people-of-color, including Alaska Natives, hold advanced art degrees, artists with little formal education are being recognized. The Smithsonian American Art Museum, DC (SAAM) recently exhibited the Margaret Z. Robson (self-taught artist) collection--‘We Are Made of Stories’.

Backstory: It begins with Margaret Zuehlke (1932- 2014) a Midwesterner growing up in the Great Depression. After graduating from the University of Minnesota in 1954, she became an executive in Chicago banking, marrying John Edwin Robson, a lawyer. In 1966, Margaret and John moved to DC, so he could join the Johnson Administration. While becoming a DC power-couple they began buying bric-a-brac, ‘furniture, quilts, and weathervanes’. Their collecting

expanded to purchasing outsider-art, having been influenced by the 1982 Corcoran Gallery of Art exhibition ‘Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1980.’ A friend remarked, “[Margaret] had a great deal of empathy for people who stood outside society (31).”

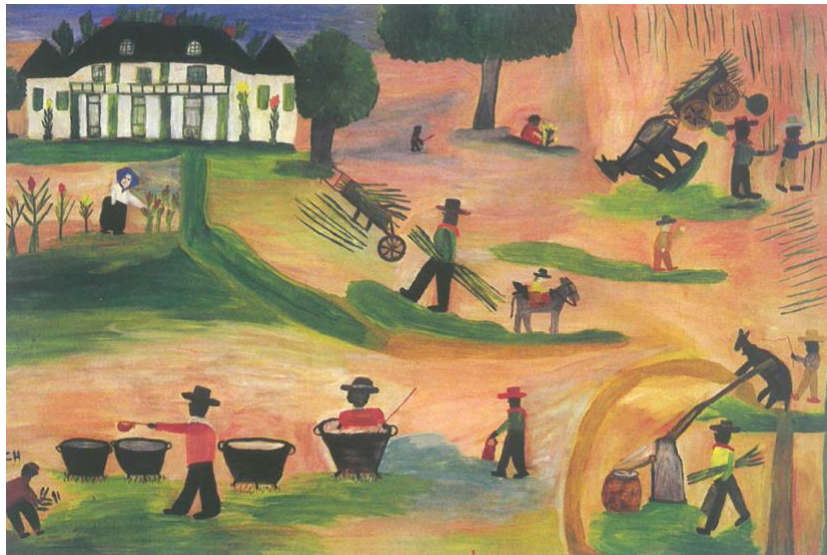
Although Margaret had gifted to the Art Institute of Chicago and Atlanta’s High Museum, and curated at the American Folk Art Museum, New York City, she left over a hundred pieces to her sportswriter son, Douglas. He gave the collection to SAAM, which since 1970 has specialized in untrained and marginalized artists (34).

The exhibition catalog’s author, Leslie Umberger writes, “Margaret’s collecting journey mirrors, in many ways, the dawning of a larger awareness and acceptance in the United States, particularly between the late 1980s and early twenty-first century, that the role of self-taught artists was not insignificant or passing but reflected the soul of the nation in real and meaningful ways (48).” Umberger continues, “The colonial era reveals certain roots but occludes the fuller picture—for the fabrication of an “American” identity required that European immigrants be united in shaping idealistic narratives that overwrote and displaced Indigenous nations and prospered at the expense of enslaved human beings, whose works play a major role in an encompassing picture of American Art (55).”

### **Artists from ‘We Are Made of Stories’ Catalog**



William Edmondson (1874-1949) was born on a Tennessee plantation, where his father had been enslaved. In 1937, he was the first person of African descent to have a solo show at MoMA. Edmondson worked on the rail lines and was thought to have trained/worked as a stone mason, because he opened his own stonecutting business around 1932. Edmondson's 'Untitled (Bird)' 1937, reflects his respect for Nature and the importance of religion in his life. This piece is similar to the work of Romanian/French sculptor Constantin Brâncuși (1876-1957) who also carved delicacy and balance out of rocks, leaving minimal markings. Studying this stone bird, you feel Edmondson's spirituality, while the roughness of the off-white limestone conjures the absent coloration of a live bird. (81).



Clementine Hunter (ca. 1886/7-1988) was African-American with Irish and Native American ancestry, who lived on Louisiana's Hidden Hill and Melrose plantations with her sharecropper parents. Although Hunter briefly attended Catholic school, she mainly picked cotton, hoed rows of corn, and harvested sugar cane, eventually moving into the 'Big House' as

maid and cook. Hunter's 'Sugar Plantation' n.d. (oil on board, 48 x 72 in.) in reds and greens shows the laborious undertaking of refining sugar. In the painting, the white plantation house dominates the background as does a white woman tending her garden. A beleaguered animal in the lower right labors in the refining process. His master's whip is a metaphor for the plight of Jim Crow Black migrant workers, who were abused mentally and physically. Note: red and green are complementary colors, and when placed together set off vibrations, which Hunter must have self-discovered (87).



Ulysses Davis, 1913-1990, grew up on the South Carolina coast. As a child he gravitated to carving, making his own toys. As a youth Davis worked as a railroad blacksmith. Self-taught, he opened his own barber shop. Woodworking began as a side hobby. Davis' 'Sputnik' ca. 1957, sports a head atop a cage of vertical columns, which contains a large ball, carved by removing all the surrounding wood. Apparently, it's a whittler's obsession to render a work from a single piece of wood. Whether Davis alluded to the 1957 Russian space craft is unknown.

In 1978, at the Library of Congress exhibition, ‘Missing Pieces: Georgia Folk Art, 1770-1976’, Davis gave First Lady Rosalynn Carter a bust of her husband. His art appeared in the 1982 ‘Black Folk in America, 1930-1980’ exhibition at the Corcoran (121). Sputnik translates to co-wayfarer, which all artists become.



Judith Scott (1943-2005) was born with Down syndrome in an era lacking appreciation for difference. (As a dyslexic art critic, I can relate; at age eleven I was dismissed from Boston’s Winsor School, having been diagnosed—imbecilic). Although the Civil Rights Act, 1964 “ended segregation in public places and banned discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, and national origin,” Congress “ignored the plight of Americans with disabilities.”

In 1974, Oakland, California psychologist Elias Katz and artist wife Florence founded Creative Growth Art Center (still open) “where artistic activity could help people with developmental, mental, or physical disabilities adjust and flourish.” Scott enrolled in this unique program and initially rebelled against ‘painting, sewing or sculpture’. She eventually gravitated

to fiber arts. Umberger writes, “She started wrapping. Yarn disappeared. Magazines disappeared. Even chairs and bike wheels disappeared.” Scott’s ‘Untitled (Medicine Bottle)’ 1996, reveals red, green and white strings wound tightly around fabric, which elucidates her understating of color, design, and layering of different textures. A Brooklyn Museum exhibition 2014, and the Venice Biennale 2017, presented Scott’s work (186).

Art-- functional, decorative or contextual, made by people who were once admonished and ignored, is now being valued. It’s about time! The point of all art is to give pleasure and insight, not only to the creators (trained and untrained) but to museumgoers as well.

Thank you, Jodi Price at Princeton University Press for contributing materials. Images and text were taken from the ‘We Are Made of Stories’ catalog by Leslie Umberger, which is available on Amazon.

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I am an art critic and painter living in Alaska, showing work at Pictor Gallery, New York City (serving on their board). I serve as a VP of AICA-International and Awards Chair. I’m Editor of the *AICA-E-MAG*. I’ve reported on conferences in Alaska and Scandinavia, about Alaska Natives and Sámi culture. I’ve presented papers on Climate Change at College Art Association, and AICA: Chile/Argentina, S. Korea, Taiwan and Turkey. I write for the *Alaska Native Quarterly* and review art books for Princeton University Press. I hold degrees from the University of Alaska, University of Chicago, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts. Whether painting or writing, I look for the unusual and overlooked employing rhythms and color with a brush or metaphorically.