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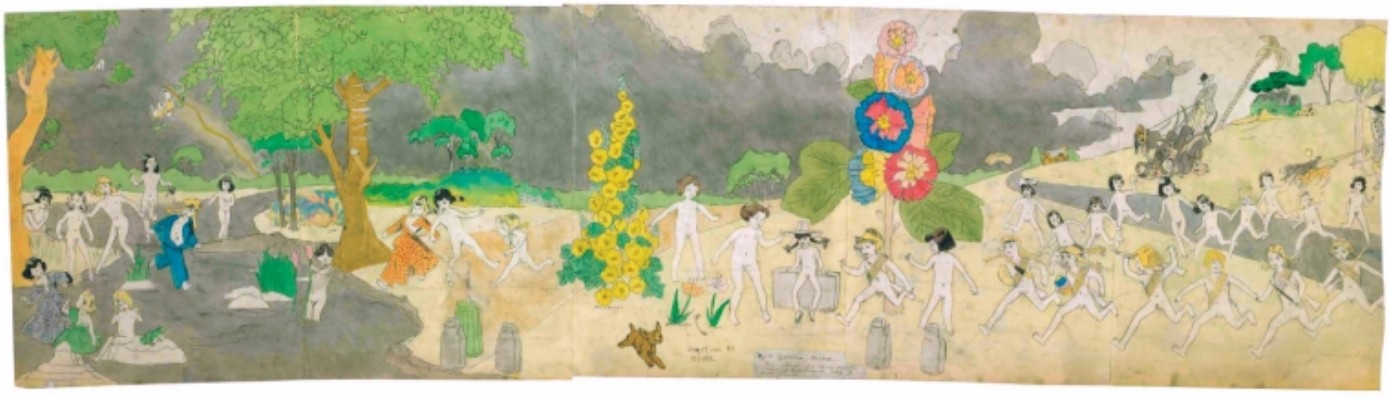
Outsider art pioneers cashing out

Two of the biggest collectors of the genre have put or are putting their pieces up for auction, raising the question: Will Chicago continue to lead this corner of the art world?

CHRIS LAMORTE



This double-sided work by Henry Darger, above and at bottom, sold for $672,000 at auction last January.

Outsiders are in. Very in.

Prices for outsider art (also called self-taught, others, raw, visionary, intuitive or naive) by the likes of Henry Darger, an eccentric janitor who left behind a trove of surrealist work in his Lincoln Park home in the early '70s, continue to trend ever upward.

Chicago's art community has been a leader in recognizing and championing this genre from the start—in part because its most recognizable artists were from here.

But now Chicago's pioneering collectors and gallerists are beginning to retire, downsize or head off to that big art gallery in the sky. In fact, a second major Chicago collection in as many years is about to head to a New York auction block. The question becomes: Will Chicago continue to lead this little corner of the art world?

"Well, it isn't our little secret anymore," says Eugenie Johnson, one of the pioneering members of Chicago's Intuit: The Center for Intuitive & Outsider Art. "That is, if it ever was."

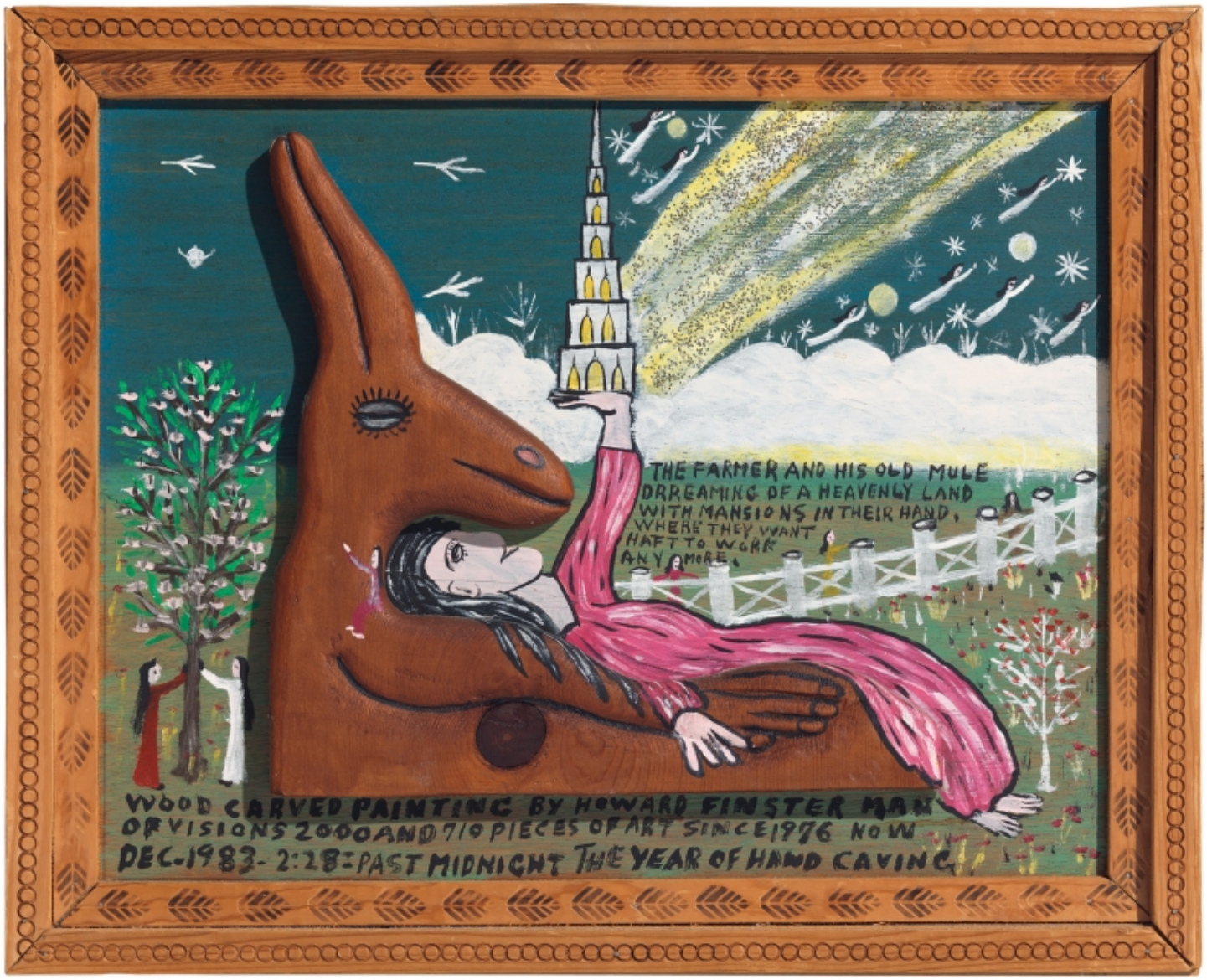
In January, Christie's auction house in New York will put 28 pieces from the collection of Johnson and her husband, Lael, both retired Chicago attorneys, under the hammer. Among the lots: a Darger that art experts are estimating to fetch nearly $1 million.

The Johnson sale follows Christie's auction of the Chicago outsider art collection of Marjorie and Harvey Freed last January, which included a Darger that sold for $672,000. The entire collection retailed for about $1 million.

The Johnsons and Freeds were among the first serious—and seriously voracious—collectors of this art. Starting from the mid-1970s, they took chances with their purchases, championing work that mainstream galleries and museums snubbed. The Freeds were co-founders of Intuit, a museum dedicated to the work of outsiders. Marjorie Freed was the owner of Nonpareil, a home goods shop on Clark Street; her husband was a psychiatrist before he retired.

Carl Hammer, who sold the Darger to the Johnsons in 1990 for what he says was about $50,000, thinks it's the piece de resistance of their collection. "It's just remarkable. It's one of the best ones I ever sold."

Public auction records show that in the early 2000s, the largest Darger pieces might fetch between $40,000 and almost $90,000. Today, similar-size pieces have sold for $400,000 to nearly $745,000.



This Howard Finster piece will be auctioned in January.

THE CHICAGO CONNECTION

Why is Chicago so associated with the oddball genre in the first place? The roots of the city's connection to self-taught artists trace back to a hugely influential 1951 lecture given at the opening of the Three Arts Club by renowned artist Jean Dubuffet called "Anticultural Positions." Dubuffet cajoled the art world to broaden the boundaries of who was considered a "real artist."

Later, professors at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago took up the cause, inspiring students like Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, Roger Brown and

the other artists who showed their work as part of the Hairy Who collective to do the same. For instance, you can see the influence of Chicago self-taught surrealist landscape artist Joseph Yoakum in their work.

By the late '70s and early '80s, legendary gallery owners like Phyllis Kind, who died in October, Ann Nathan, who recently retired, and Hammer were selling works by Yoakum and irascible Michigan Avenue "bag lady" painter and photographer Lee Godie, as well as works by Martin Ramirez, a Mexican immigrant who created works while confined to a California psychiatric hospital, and Alabama's Bill Traylor, a freed slave whose work is enjoying a major exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Eugenie Johnson remembers the first Traylor show at Hammer's gallery in 1982. "I walked in and thought, "Wow. I can't spend $500 or $1,000 for a work on cardboard. And, of course, they're worth $50,000 or $100,000 now. You regret more the things you didn't buy more than the things you did."

The 1970s were an exciting time for collectors, says Marjorie Freed. "New York has always been a leader in everything. But not this thing," she says. "There was an underground of new things one could see right here in Chicago. And it wasn't going on in New York."

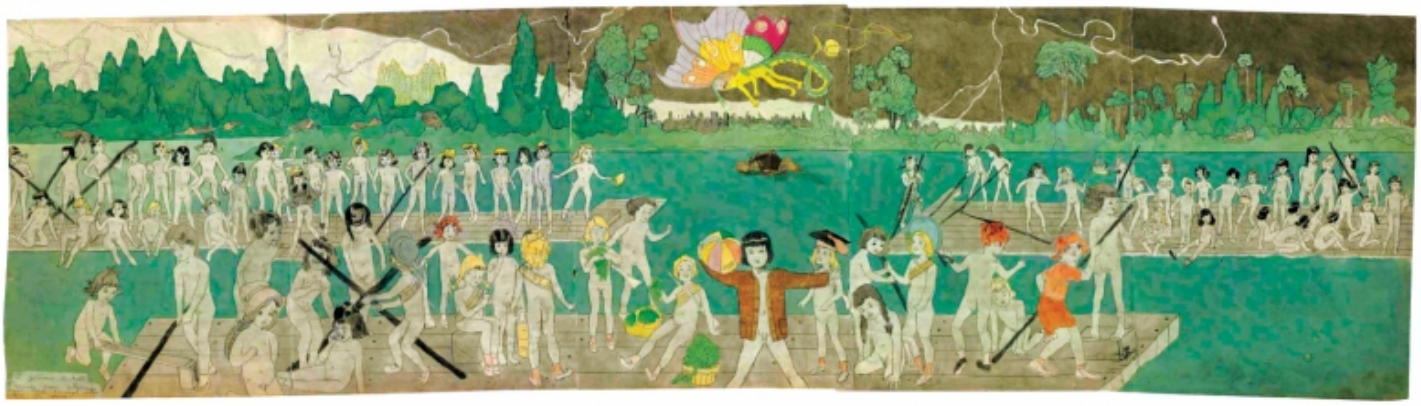
But now it's time to sell. The Freeds, both in their 80s, were ready to downsize. Eugenie and Lael Johnson, who are in their late 70s and early 80s, respectively, say that now that the work has increased in value so dramatically and they look to spend more time at their Santa Fe, N.M., home, keeping the work in their River North condo made them nervous. "It's sort of scary to have it hanging there," says Eugenie Johnson. "It's very fragile. God forbid the sprinkler goes off in our building or something."

That's a boon for Christie's. "The fact that the pioneering collections were in Chicago is very relevant to new collectors," says Cara Zimmerman, a specialist in folk and outsider art at Christie's, which has carefully crafted relationships with prominent Chicago art collectors. "People see these

Chicago collectors as people who bought the best pieces at the earliest opportunities. There is a cachet for current and new collectors knowing that these pieces came from their collections," she says.

What do other pioneers like Hammer think when they see the work leave town? "It hurts a little bit, but it's not as if they're trying to sell something to build a better collection," he says.

Chicago's not ceding its position of authority in the area yet. One of Intuit's current exhibits, "Chicago Calling: Art Against the Flow," a greatest hits of Chicago's self-taught artists, closes Feb. 10 before doing a two-year tour of Europe: Paris; Heidelberg, Germany; Lausanne, Switzerland; and Amsterdam.



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