



## Museums for America

Sample Application MA-253388-OMS-23  
Project Category: Collections Stewardship and Access

### American Folk Art Museum

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$152,205
Amount of cost share:	\$152,674

The American Folk Art Museum will work with neurodiverse artists whose artwork is part of the museum's collection and create an online resource with information about neurodiverse artists. A collections associate hired for the project will receive training on the collections management system and assist with digitization and collections photography. The project will also include a convening of industry experts to develop a white paper that will serve as a guide for museums collecting and exhibiting works of art by neurodiverse artists.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion
- Digital Product Plan

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the current Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category to which you are applying.

### **Project Justification**

The Neurodiversity Project aligns with Goal 3, Collections Stewardship and Access. It will significantly advance the management and care for AFAM's 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> collection of self-taught art and art brut and its associated documentation. It will also support collections information management, database management, and enhance access to this collection through the digitization of previously unphotographed works.

### **How the Project Relates to AFAM's Strategic Plan**

The Neurodiversity Project aligns with nearly all of the key commitments of the AFAM 2021 Strategic Plan.

- 1) Collections: Increase accessibility by making the entire collection available online by 2026.
- 2) Profile: Position AFAM as a key leader, on-the-record institutional voice advocating for and interpreting the works associated with folk art, self-taught art, and art brut.
- 3) Education: Enhance the Museum's online scholarship.
- 4) Audience: Deepening ties to the neurodiversity and academic communities, as well as reaching out to a new audience in the medical, psychiatric, and social work fields.
- 5) DEAI: Prioritize diverse voices in our projects, research, programs, and exhibitions.

### **AFAM's Commitments at the Intersection of Art, Health, and Psychiatry**

In addition to alignment with the Strategic Plan, The Neurodiversity Project is another step in a series of recent commitments and critical actions taken by the Museum towards understanding self-taught art and art brut, specifically when the works and their makers are situated at the intersection of art, health, and psychiatry.

In 2021, AFAM's Curatorial Chair for Exhibitions & Senior Curator, Dr. Valérie Rousseau, completed a State of the Art Collection, reviewing all works in the Museum collection associated with self-taught art and art brut. The resulting report identified areas of strength and improvement in the collection, as well as an overview of the field and AFAM's role in shaping future initiatives of this vast artistic spectrum. She stressed the importance for a new research-based collecting spirit in which the Museum would gather as much contextual information as possible on artists and artworks, and acquire larger inventories, including studies, manuscripts, archival documents, oral histories, as well as details about artistic techniques and processes. In her summary, Dr. Rousseau identifies a pressing need to produce new interpretation for these works and increase their accessibility, notably by supporting photography of the works, digitization initiatives, and enhancing catalog records.

In January 2022, AFAM received the artistic archives of the Healing Arts Initiative (H.A.I.) composed of artworks and institutional archives accumulated over five decades. H.A.I. was a community artmaking space (permanently closed in 2016) for some of New York City's most culturally underserved residents, specifically the elderly, individuals with low-income, and people living with a mental illness. Through its workshops and studio programs, H.A.I. supported and encouraged the talents of hundreds of artists, some of whom are now widely recognized. AFAM has committed to conserving and processing this collection, as well as making it accessible to artists, students, researchers, curators, and the broader public.

In June 2023, AFAM will present *Francesc Tosquelles: Curing the Institutions*, an ambitious exhibition situated at the intersection of art, history, and psychiatry. Touring four international venues—among them the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia—the only American iteration of this project at AFAM will provide a close look at the legacy of the eponymous Catalan psychiatrist. Francesc Tosquelles was a central figure in the development of institutional psychotherapy, which burgeoned at St. Alban Psychiatric Hospital, France, during the Second World War. During the German occupation, the hospital became a strategic site for the Resistance, both a refuge and a meeting place for political dissidents, Jews, and intellectuals associated with the artistic avant-garde. It is also at St. Alban Hospital that French artist Jean Dubuffet

started in 1945 to collect works made by psychiatric patients. The exhibition will attest to the relevance of Tosquelles' attempt to "cure the institutions" for current political, economic and mental health crises pertaining to US institutions.

Earlier in 2020, AFAM received a Save America's Treasures grant to digitize the manuscripts of Henry Darger, one of the most important art brut artists in our collection and one in which we hold more materials—artworks, manuscripts, archival materials—than anyone else in the world. Upon the project completion in 2023, we are committed to making this material available online for further scholarship on this beloved and enigmatic artist.

The Neurodiversity Project will take the questions raised in these major initiatives to the next level, establishing AFAM's leadership in this artistic area, and continuing the arc of the investigation of neurodiversity in our own collections and with outside collaborators.

### **The Need for the Project**

The term neurodiverse or neurodiversity is a relatively new concept that was coined by Judy Singer in 1998 in a contribution to a publication on disability, human rights, and society. She writes: "For me, the key significance of the "autistic spectrum" lies in its call for and anticipation of a politics of neurological diversity, of 'neurodiversity.' The 'neurologically different' represent a new addition to the familiar political categories of class/gender/race and will augment the insights of the social model of disability." ("Why can't you be normal for once in your life? From a 'problem with no name' to the emergence of a new category of difference," in *Disability Discourse*, Open University Press, 1998, 64.) Singer's work, and subsequent writings such as *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity* by Steve Silberman heralded the disability rights movement that started in earnest with the acceptance of the Autistic Spectrum (AS), which recognized a new form of invisible disability. The AS recognized that individuals were "hardwired" differently, that their behavior was not their own fault, caused by bad parenting, toxic environments, or other outside factors. This idea brought to light people—previously marginalized as eccentrics and social outcasts—starting to fight back against exclusion and mistreatment through collective internet platforms capable of offering them a public voice.

Given the spaces from which neurodiverse individuals have been historically excluded, it's no surprise that so many turned to solitary forms of artmaking and self-expressions that were frequently dismissed and overlooked by the art history canon. French artist Jean Dubuffet began collecting works by patients in psychiatric hospitals in the mid-1940s, and soon turned his attention towards highly creative individuals experiencing various forms of marginalization and exclusion. He coined the term art brut (roughly translated to "raw art"), in parallel to building a reference collection. Art brut was not presented as a new art category, but as a concept meant to challenge the notion of art itself—an ambition that still resonates in AFAM's explorations of terminology and collecting horizons of living artists.

AFAM's art collection, composed of over 7,500 works, represents a significant number of artists who would self-identify as neurodiverse, or who were historically associated to self-taught art and art brut. We estimate that approximately 30% or roughly 2,130 works fall into this area, of which only 60% are currently available to view online with partial entries. Over the past 60 years, works that came into the collection were inconsistently cataloged, and some have incomplete captions. For instance, titles of works and media could have been added by third parties (rarely by artists, who are often remote from the art mainstream and its vocabularies—as in the case of nearly all works by Bill Traylor, among others). In order to create context for the works to be more broadly understood, it is necessary at this point to develop and expand our "artist profiles," as well as supplement details about provenance, ownership, condition, technique, and exhibition/publication history. Some of the work is not photographed—and we know that works without

photography suffer from being “out of sight, out of mind,” preventing opportunities for them to be exhibited and studied by AFAM curators and outside the Museum.

AFAM’s Neurodiversity Project proposes to address these urgent needs, in two phases: Firstly, create exemplary internal records and establish future templates for AFAM’s collection records on such artists that can be shared online. Secondly, the Museum wishes to develop guidelines—seeking the collaboration of experts—in a white paper by which details how museums should consider acquiring, describing, cataloguing, displaying, and interpreting these works.

To give some context on this second phase, here are some of the anchoring intellectual reflections for our research:

1. In *NeuroTribes*, Seve Silverman asks, “What is autism? A lifelong disability, or a naturally occurring form of cognitive differences akin to certain forms of genius?” Today, disability advocates are embracing the terminology and proudly identifying neurodiverse as a badge of honor. Owning the terms in which they are described and breaking out of roles they have been prescribed is an act of reclamation, agency, and power. Such an assertion brings a broader ethical questioning: If many artists associated to self-taught art and art brut in AFAM’s collection could be identified as neurodiverse as we understand it today, we also recognize the very challenge of creating a new category that would “tag” artists and contribute to either their re-marginalization or a problematic normalization. The project will be addressing the core issue of language and cataloguing.
2. Founded in 1974, modern day ateliers such as Creative Growth in San Francisco are places where individuals with disabilities can create and find support to have professional exhibitions of their works. Museums from around the world have collected works from this organization, such as Judith Scott and Dan Miller. The proceeds from sales go to support the nonprofit’s mission and provide direct services to artists. But as these works accelerate in value, and are sold and resold at auction for staggering sums, ethical questions about how the artists are and are not involved in the process are inevitable. Similar workshops have since sprung up in nearly every city and state in the United States, in Europe, in Asia, and in South America. These are valued and necessary community spaces that thousands of people rely on each day. However, each center owns exponentially growing volumes of artworks whose future is undetermined. A set of field-wide guidelines with best practices is necessary in the collection and acquisition of such works and archives.
3. Today, a growing number of museums in the United States welcome works by such artists in their collection. An ethical issue plaguing museums is the question of ownership: in which context have they been acquired? Were they offered and sold by the artists themselves? Who benefited from their circulation? What is the responsibility of the institutions who became the custodians of this material? What is the role of the artists’ families and heirs?
4. Similarly, we currently see an exponential number of exhibitions of this material, and consequently its interpretation. The general discourse often denies specificities to these works or overemphasizes unrelated biographical details that often eclipse the artist’s agency, which perpetuates the stigma of mental illness. There is no current standard of best practices for presenting and exhibiting such works. A rigorous approach applied to museum practice that would frame complex questions regarding the makers and their works remains to be achieved.

### **Specific Target Group for the Project**

The target group that will be most immediately and positively affected by the project are AFAM curators, scholars, curators at large, researchers, academics, living artists who self-identify or not as neurodiverse

represented in our collection, relatives of artists included in AFAM's collection, and individuals who collect works by these artists.

Target for the white paper are museums, collectives, and non-profits that run arts programs for people with neurodiversity such as Creative Growth and Fountain House, auction houses, and collectors of works associated to self-taught and art brut.

### **Beneficiaries for this Project**

An increase in awareness of the term neurodiversity and the impressive contributions of creative individuals associated to self-taught and art brut will benefit the larger general public. Neurodiversity touches everyone, it is simply too prevalent in our society to ignore or suppress. We hope that AFAM's Neurodiversity Project will bring new appreciation to the contributions and value these artists have provided and help other institutions make empathetic changes to the way in which they present and collect these complex artistic practices.

Individuals served by our project include: people who visit our website (240,000/year from every continent); people who are part of online forums for neurodiversity, where we plan to promote our project and seek feedback, such as the Autism Network International, and Living Listserv (InLv), among others; and AFAM visitors (130,000/year, pre-pandemic levels).

### **Project Work Plan**

The Neurodiversity Project Team:

- Valérie Rousseau, PhD, Curatorial Chair for Exhibitions & Senior Curator
- Anna Schwartz, Director of Collections and Exhibitions
- Regina Carra, Rapaport Archivist
- Andreane Balconi, Digital Asset Manager
- Collections Associate (to be hired)
- Research Associate (to be hired)

The Neurodiversity Project aims to improve our management and care of our 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> collection of self-taught art and art brut by:

- 1) Identifying artists in the AFAM collection database with metadata tags related to artistic content, artist's statements, and historical references.
- 2) Evaluating photography needs and updating the captions and information associated with each work.
- 3) Creating a profile for each artist that incorporates first hand sources and the artist's own words in as many instances as possible, creating a robust and scholarly resource.
- 4) Creating a page on the AFAM website where information about The Neurodiversity Project and artists' work can be viewed and studied.
- 5) Convening a panel of experts and conduct one-on-one meetings with various informants to develop a set of guidelines in a white paper for the collection, description, acquisition, interpretation, and display of such artistic practices.

We anticipate hiring two individuals—a Collections Associate and a Research Associate—to implement the project. They will both be overseen by Valérie Rousseau, although the Collections Associate will also work closely with the Director of Collections and Exhibitions, Anna Schwartz. The project is estimated to take two years, starting September 1, 2023 – August 30, 2025. Progress will be tracked in quarterly meetings, organized by Dr. Rousseau.

The work breaks down as follows:

- 1) Identifying artists in the AFAM collection database with metadata tags related to artistic content, artist's statements, and historical references.

It is a risky endeavor to place a label on artists without their consent. While some artists in AFAM's collection self-identified as neurodiverse, many others are long deceased and no contact has been established with heirs or people who knew them personally. For this reason, we will carefully and thoughtfully develop a set of criteria that meet these concerns. In the same way that the LGBTQ+ movement has taken ownership of the way in which they are described, so to must we endeavor to create a local vocabulary that respects individuals, removes stigma or fetishization of illness, and most importantly does not ignore the role that the differences in the way in which we function in the world matter.

To that end, the Project Team has created a set of draft criteria in which to evaluate works in our collection that will receive metadata tags related to related to artistic content, artist's statements, and historical references, including collecting history:

- Artists who self-identify as neurodiverse, either using that term or other language (i.e., historical) that is related.
- Artists whose works were made within creative art centers such as Healing Arts Initiative, Creative Growth, Fountain House, etc.
- Artists whose life history intersected/was impacted by systems of psychiatry and mental health, institutionalization, criminal justice, etc.
- Artists whose works were collected and entered AFAM's collections by virtue of being named as or adjacent to self-taught art and art brut. This is perhaps the most difficult to conceptualize but important to responsibly acknowledge.

While this is not a fixed set of criteria, it will give us a place to start. These guidelines will be made public and we will welcome further refinement or expansion. The artists will be identified by Valérie Rousseau and the Research Associate (to be hired), and the metadata tag application will be overseen by the Collections Associate in the collections database (TMS The Museum System). The work can start immediately, and will be mostly completed in the first 8 months as the entire collection has been reviewed. We do envision this to be a dynamic and fluid group, with individuals moving in or out of The Neurodiversity Project as we do more research, more information comes to light, new works come into the collection, or our criteria evolve.

- 2) Evaluating photography needs and updating the captions and information associated with each work.

As soon as the metadata tag is applied, the Collections Associate can start the process of evaluating the photography needs and current captions. Items with no photography will be prioritized. Items with poor or low-resolution photography will be rephotographed as time and budget allows and flagged for a second round of photography. This work will be done by the Collections Associate, with oversight by Anna Schwartz, and Andreane Balconi, who manages the creation, storage, and proper coding of all digital assets. Updated captions will be proposed by the Collections Associate and Research Associate, with review by Valérie Rousseau. Completing object files will be done by Research Associate and Dr. Rousseau, while their digitization will be overviewed by the Collections Associate. Materials from the collection are made available on the AFAM's collections page, here: <http://collection.folkartmuseum.org/>

- 3) Creating a profile for each artist that incorporates first hand sources and the artist's own words in as many instances as possible, creating a robust and scholarly resource.

This is the most time-consuming part of the project and will be the remit of the Research Associate. We estimate that at 30 hours per week, the research Associate can create 2 to 3 profiles a week. Over a two-year period, this will result in more than 250 updated or new artists profiles. Their work will be overseen by Valérie Rousseau, while some aspects will be done in collaboration with Archivist Regina Carra, and will take place over the entire grant period.

- 4) Creating a page on the AFAM website where information about The Neurodiversity Project and artists' work can be viewed and studied.

The Museum's website [www.folkartmuseum.org](http://www.folkartmuseum.org) is a rich repository of more than 60 years of exhibitions, hundreds of hours of recorded programs, thousands of tombstone labels, educational materials, original research, a library and archives database, and nearly 4,000 images from the AFAM's collection. It is part of our strategic plan to have images of the entire collection available on our website by 2026. To this we will add a page called The Neurodiversity Project. This page will explain the project, how we determined who was included, a searchable list of artist names, sample works and links to images on the Collections page, the white paper described below, information about past and upcoming exhibitions of artists associated to self-taught art and art brut at AFAM, and more.

The website content will be developed by Valérie Rousseau and the Research Associate and created by our in-house web team with some outside technical support. It will be published at the end of the project, no later than July 2025 for beta-testing.

- 5) Convening a panel of experts in the neurodiversity field and conduct one-on-one meetings with various informants to develop a set of guidelines in a white paper for the collection, description, acquisition, interpretation, and display of such artistic practices.

In the fall of 2024, we will convene a Zoom panel of eight experts, with some subsequent individual follow-up meetings, to discuss industry-wide standards for collecting and exhibiting such practices at the junction of art and health. Dr. Rousseau and the Research Associate will visit Creative Growth and one other organization, psychiatric archive, or museum elsewhere in the US, to develop their research on existing grounds. Findings from the resulting white paper will be shared on our website and presented at conferences such as CAA, AAM, and AAMD.

Proposed panelists for the white paper include Tom di Maria, Director of the Creative Growth Art Center in San Francisco, CA from 2000-2022; Jamieson Webster, psychoanalyst, recent author of "Teenagers Are Telling Us That Something is Wrong With America" in *The New York Times* special issue on mental health and society in America, October 2022; Camile Robcis, Columbia University professor and scholar who has written extensively about the history of psychiatry and mental institutions; Joana Maso, professor at Barcelona University and co-curator of *Francesc Tosquelles: Curing the Institutions*; Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, bioethicist, author, educator, humanities scholar, and thought leader in disability justice and culture, author of the 2016 op-ed "Becoming Disabled" which was the inaugural article in the ongoing weekly series in the New York Times; Sophie Duplaix, Conservatrice en chef des Collections contemporaines, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou; and Barbara Safarova, PhD, Program Director at the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris, film producer, independent curator, and president of the abcd association in Paris.

The panel and meetings will be coordinated by the Project Research Associate with oversight by Valérie Rousseau. The resulting white paper will be drafted by Dr. Rousseau and the Research Associate, with parts of the reports from Regina Carra. Input will come from all the Project Team members, and shared with all

panelists for their review. The report will be published on the AFAM website's new The Neurodiversity Project web page no later than July 2025, and distributed to various organizations.

### **Project Results**

The results of The Neurodiversity Project will be groundbreaking and significant, both internally at AFAM and externally as we take the lead in the national and international conversation about how museums define, collect, exhibit, and fully contextualize the works associated to self-taught art and art brut, including artists who self-identify as neurodiverse.

Internally, it will significantly advance the management and care for this collection and its associated documentation, increasing public access. For the first time, a collections-wide evaluation of these artists will be identified, photographed and published online, tagged with metadata that associates the work with this project, and a significant amount of new artist profiles will be created. In as many cases as possible, the artist's own words will be included, first hand sources will be prioritized.

By creating metadata tag and a local vocabulary to describe these artists and their artworks, we are joining with leading institutions who are doing the work of reparative cataloging—revising descriptions, metadata management, and systems environments. Organizations such as the NYU Libraries are addressing such collections related to Native American materials, Japanese American wartime incarceration, and Black lives. See also the Harvard Guidelines for Inclusive and Conscientious Descriptions and the National Archives Reparative Description Appendix. When creating our local vocabulary for The Neurodiversity Project, we will rely heavily on the 2015 publication *Keywords for Disability Studies* edited by Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reill and David Serlin.

The public-facing tangible results will include the new web space created for The Neurodiversity Project that will be a go-to resource, continuing to grow beyond the lifespan of the grant. It will be a clearinghouse for information, research, new publications and articles (both AFAM generated and beyond), and a place for both the serious researcher and the curious browser and a living and evolving resource for people who are interested in this burgeoning field.

The Neurodiversity Project White Paper has the potential to make significant changes to the way institutions think about, collect, acquire, display, and research these artists in their collection. We will endeavor to reshape how institutions understand the meaning, function, and implications of neurodiversity in the museum sphere. It will also serve to position AFAM as the leading voice in this initiative. Presenting the white paper at such conferences as CAA, AAM, AAMD and more will bring these important topics to a wider audience of museum professionals.

### **Sustaining the Benefits of the Project**

AFAM acknowledges that The Neurodiversity Project will only remain a vital resource if the work is ongoing and incorporated into our regular cataloging practices and procedures. To that end, as we add new works to the collection, it will be standard to include artist profiles that are part of the acquisition research on any new artists or enhancing biographies by existing artists in the collection. Metadata tagging will be part of the regular cataloging practice and be folded into standard metadata tagging.

Presentations on the white paper will spur new and ongoing conversations far into the future. Valérie Rousseau is currently planning a symposium on “Art, Health, and Museum Practices” in 2026. The Neurodiversity Project will anchor upcoming, fundamental conversations and provide support to best practices in museums, the effects of which will reverberate with AFAM and throughout the field for years to come.



## **Type**

The new digital content we are creating will be high resolution digital photographs of objects from our collection. The hired photographer will provide both TIFF and JPEG format images that are at least 8x10 at 300 dpi.

Each digital file has a MD5 checksum embedded generated either by Fixity or by the outside source. Those files with a checksum generated by the outsourced digitization lab will be validated on ingest. Checksums for all digital files are validated once a month. High resolution files also have metadata embedded upon file creation and ingest.

The current standards for metadata include technical metadata, descriptive metadata and administrative metadata. More specific metadata fields may vary different formats. Most of the technical metadata is created upon the image creation. Other fields are manually added by the Digital Asset Manager. The following are the minimum metadata standards that may be created by the Digital Asset Manager:

### Image files

- Digital Creator
- Original Creator
- Headline
- Description
- Keywords
- Date created
- Credit Line
- Source
- Copyright Notice
- Copyright Status

Additional metadata in all formats may be added as information is available or as required. Metadata is added and reviewed in Adobe Bridge. Image files metadata is based on IPTC standards.

Digital materials generally adhere to the FAGDI standards with the exception of scanned files, which are done at a slightly lower resolution for storage space concerns and also based on our experience of use of the images but still allow for at least an 8x10 at 300 dpi.

## **Availability**

Using the TIFF files, the digital asset manager will create JPEG web copies which will be 125 dpi. Low resolution files (web copies) are currently used for the Museum's website. Using eMuseum (an extension of TMS) the public can view a collection of images on the website along with corresponding object information. Low resolution files are also used for social media posts, press releases, and internally generated reports or checklists.

Images of the collection are available here: <http://collection.folkartmuseum.org> from any web browser.

### **Access**

All images are available for public viewing on the Museum's collections page, <http://collection.folkartmuseum.org/>. By clicking on an image, it can be enlarged and downloaded for personal use. These are low resolution images suitable for social media platforms, educational purposes, and for personal enjoyment.

High resolution files are shared on a case by case basis for image requests for publishing which are processed by Art Resource. Currently they are also made available, on demand, to staff when needed.

### **Sustainability**

Currently high resolution files are uploaded onto cloud based storage and backed up on two external hard drives. Files are placed onto external hard drives and uploaded to TMS (in Gallery Systems cloud storage), the Museum's collection management system. These images are used to create TMS media rendition records which are added onto TMS object records.

All master TIFF, working TIFF and JPG files are backed up onto two hard drives and cloud based storage (Dropbox) for redundancy. The hard drives are 8 Terabyte Seagate external desktop drives, one of which is onsite at the museum's Collection and Education Center in Queens, and another is off-site allow for maximum security.

Hard drives are checked at least once a month to ensure they are readable. For all the files on the drives and on Dropbox, the Digital Asset Manager runs monthly checksum reports which lets her know if any of the files have degraded or changed.