



An art director stumbled upon a stack of drawings in an antique shop. Could she make them the next big thing?

A chance discovery has the Outsider Art world ‘going goo-goo.’”



Claire Iltis, associate director at Philly's Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, flips through drawings by Dorothy F. Foster. She...

Monica Herndon / Staff Photographer

by Zoe Greenberg
Updated Jan 25, 2023

The antique shop was about to close for good when Claire Iltis stumbled upon the drawings inside. They looked like other-worldly collages, or stained glass postcards, all with a maroon-black metallic gleam. Preserved in fading photo albums, each was labeled with a looping, cursive signature: *Dorothy F. Foster*.

The journey that followed, in which Foster's drawings went from dusty storage bins in upstate New York to being featured on the posters of [Outsider Art Fair's](#) annual show this year, is a testament to the powerful reputation of the Philadelphia gallery where Iltis works as an associate director.

But it also highlights how a good story can make people want in on artwork that has long been ignored. That's reflected in the price of the drawings, which the antique shop was selling for roughly \$5 and which now sell for \$1,000 — an almost 20,000% increase.



Foster's work, drawn in old ballpoint pen, shimmer in person.

Monica Herndon / Staff Photographer

Iltis works at [Fleisher/Ollman](#), a North Philadelphia gallery that built its formidable reputation on so-called “outsider art.” A term perhaps as much about marketing as it is descriptive, outsider art is made by self-taught artists, people who didn't show their work professionally and sometimes lived on the fringes of society.

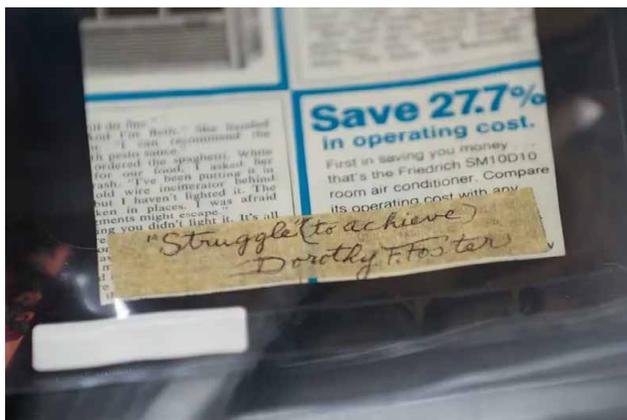
“This work is really fresh-looking and untainted,” said [Andrew Edlin](#), who owns Outsider Art Fair, the industry's biggest trade show, in New York. “They're just not informed by this art world dialogue.”

A classic outsider trope is a body of work discovered as it's on the verge of being lost forever: [Henry Darger's](#) 15,000-page manuscript and hundreds of drawings, crammed into a rented room, were saved by his landlord after Darger died. [Felipe Jesus](#)

Consalvos's cigar label collages were salvaged by a neighbor at a West Philadelphia yard sale. In 1985, Fleisher/Ollman was the first to exhibit the work of the [Philadelphia Wireman](#), an unknown artist whose thousands of intricate wire sculptures were discovered abandoned in an alley near South Street on trash night.

"It's every dealer's dream to be the one that finds the work," Iltis said in an interview. "I can't imagine how many caches like this have been lost to time."

Most of Foster's drawings were on 5-inch-by-6-inch scraps of papers: newspaper ads, women's magazines, comic strips, Christmas cards. They featured elfin characters with red and green pointy hats, alongside repeating patterns of birds and fish. Because Foster drew with old ballpoint pens, along with colored pencils and graphite, the pieces shimmered almost like aluminum foil.



Foster drew on the backs of scraps of paper, labeling each drawing with masking table.

Monica Herndon / Staff Photographer

In the crowded antique shop in Port Jervis, N.Y., Iltis peppered the shop owner, Robert Young, with questions. He turned out to be the artist's grand-nephew.

Aunt Dot, as Young called her, was eccentric. She wore straw hats no matter the weather, brightly printed sundresses, and ribbons or yarn in her hair. She studied interior design at Cooper Union in New York and worked most of her life designing men's silk ties, Young said. She never married or had children before she died in 1986.

When she was bored, she would just start scribbling.

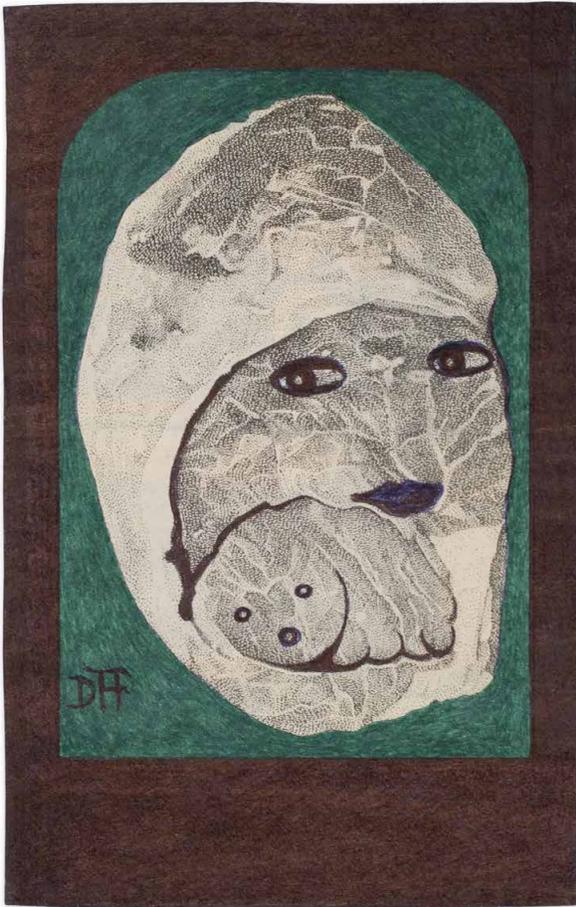
Young had found thousands of Foster's drawings tucked under blankets in a wooden trunk when he was clearing out the family home in 2015. Next to them he found a manilla folder stuffed with typewritten rejection letters from museums and galleries. They all said pretty much the same thing: *thanks, but this isn't what we're looking for.*

Unsure what else to do, Young brought the vast majority to sell at his antique shop on Front Street in Port Jervis.

"I wasn't trying to get rich by any means. I just wanted people to enjoy them," said Young, who now lives in Dallas and installs high-end theaters in people's homes.

Iltis knew she could find an eager audience. She brought a few dozen of Foster's drawings back to Philadelphia and made plans with Young to try to sell the others.

In the past 30 years, the popularity and price of outsider art has soared, said Edlin. Today, such work is exhibited in major museums; an auction of outsider art earlier this month at Christie's fetched a little over \$2 million.



Dorothy F. Foster's drawing, "Abeyance' Held in Activity," made from ballpoint pen on newsprint, is the logo for this...

Courtesy Fleisher/Ollman and the estate of Dorothy Foster

A big part of the field's popularity can be credited to John Ollman, now 80. Among the first gallerists to showcase works by big-name outsider artists like Darger and [Bill Traylor](#), Ollman helped to shape the booming market that exists today.

When Ollman saw Foster's work, he knew it would sell. The ballpoint pen gave the work a visceral quality, and when viewed together, it was clear the pieces were made with a level of intention and consistency that's rare. Though Foster had some formal training at Cooper Union — to some purists a disqualifying fact — “the kind of obsession that she used to make

her work sort of puts her in our field,” Ollman said.

But he also acknowledged that, as one of the grandfathers of the field, he's in a “weird position”: his word goes a long way toward making an artist into a phenomenon.

He and Iltis brought about 30 pieces of Foster's work to Outsider Art Fair in March 2021. Young, the only surviving member of Foster's family, retained ownership of the drawings, and he receives a third of the profits.

“We had people just literally fighting over this material,” Ollman said. (In the mayhem, the gallery accidentally sold one piece twice).

In the fall, Fleisher/Ollman [put on a solo show](#) of Foster's work; it is once again bringing it to Outsider Art Fair in March. The drawings, some of which are professionally framed, will be priced between \$800-\$1,200. One of Foster's ballpoint pen drawings on a scrap of newspaper, titled “[Abeyance' Held in Activity](#),” is the logo for this year's fair, reproduced on posters and pamphlets.

Young, for his part, is bemused by the whole thing.

“Now after she's dead,” he said, “everybody's going goo-goo over all her stuff.”

Published Jan. 25, 2023



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I write about youth culture, gender, sexuality and how people make money and meaning.