RICCO/MARESCA

Morris Hirshfield (1872-1946): Brooklyn Tailor

September 18 – November 8, 2025

Opening Reception: Thursday, September 18: 6 – 8 PM

Gallery One

On a distant day in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, a 17-year-old Frank Maresca, then a fledgling photographer, lingered at the library at Lafayette High School, waiting for the keys to the darkroom. On the table, like a premonition, lay a book: *They Taught Themselves* by Sidney Janis. He opened it by reflex, the way one might leaf through a stranger's photo album—and felt the air shift upon encountering the work of an artist by the name of Morris Hirshfield—most strikingly the luminous *Nude at the Window*, its ivory-pink figure emerging from the dark like a vision opposite the introduction.

Hirshfield's story progressed like a clock set to its own tempo. Born in 1872 in a small town on the Russian-Polish border, he showed early skill in carving and decorative woodwork—making a noisemaker for Purim (the Jewish holiday known for costumes, storytelling, and theatrical celebration) and, at fourteen, an elaborate prayer stand for his local synagogue. At eighteen, he left Europe for America, eventually settling in Brooklyn. His early years were spent working in garment factories before founding, with his brother, a company that manufactured orthopedic products, including ankle straighteners and arch supports. That gave way to a thriving boudoir-slipper company, the E.Z. Walk Manufacturing Co., which at its height employed over 300 people and was the largest of its kind in New York.

After ill health forced his retirement in 1935, Hirshfield—by then in his mid-sixties—finally answered the quiet, persistent urge to make art. He began painting in 1937, working in a room of his Brooklyn home, often without an easel and sometimes propping his canvases on furniture. He approached each composition with painstaking deliberation, frequently preparing full-scale outline drawings that he would transfer to canvas, much as he had once traced garment patterns. He built up form with a jeweler's care for detail and a tailor's instinct for symmetry and surface. His backgrounds shimmered with textile-like texture; his figures were rendered with an uncanny stillness and curvilinear grace.

In 1939, *Beach Girl* and *Angora Cat*—two of Hirshfield's earliest works—were submitted to the Brooklyn Museum for consideration, likely by the artist himself. While the museum did not exhibit them, these works somehow came to the attention of Sidney Janis, who was at the time advising

Alfred H. Barr Jr.—founding director of the Museum of Modern Art. Janis, struck by Hirshfield's style and imagery, selected both paintings for MoMA's landmark exhibition *Contemporary Unknown American Painters* that same year. He went on to devote a full chapter to Hirshfield in *They Taught Themselves* (1942), the first comprehensive study of self-taught American artists. Just one year later, in 1943, MoMA mounted a full-scale Hirshfield retrospective—an unprecedented honor for an artist who had only begun painting a few years prior. In his writing, Janis traced the psychological undercurrents, tactile fixations, and ornamental logic that made Hirshfield's work so distinct.

It is a coincidence both charming and strange that Hirshfield and Maresca's lives touched the same stretch of Brooklyn geography. In the 1910s and 1920s, as Hirshfield built his business, Bensonhurst was a distinctly working-class enclave defined by its bustling mix of Italian and Jewish families—what Maresca would later call a "pizza-matzo" neighborhood. By the late 1960s, the population was largely middle class, but the cultural mosaic remained vibrantly intact. Hirshfield would have known the same Bensonhurst that Maresca remembered: rows of two-family brick houses with laundry lines looping across narrow yards, the scent of fresh bread drifting from corner bakeries, and shop windows crowded with both challah and cannoli.

Hirshfield's career was brief but intense; in just six years, he produced an oeuvre of 78 meticulously wrought works. He repeated motifs obsessively (stylized female nudes, splendid animals, domestic and religious scenes) employing mirrored forms, bisymmetry, and lavish textile-like surfaces—stylistic choices that reflected not only an idiosyncratic vision but also his years in garment manufacturing. While most critics of his era regarded self-taught artists with skepticism or condescension, Janis and Barr recognized that Hirshfield's achievement could stand on equal footing with the leading figures of modernism.

Central to Sidney Janis's legacy was the conviction that the so-called "mainstream" and "non-academic" belonged to a single continuum. From his role on MoMA's advisory board in the 1930s to his gallery program from 1948 onward, he refused to segregate self-taught artists from contemporary masters—exhibiting Rousseau with Picasso, Hirshfield with Pollock. This spirit of crossover became a model for generations of dealers and curators, including Maresca decades later. This exhibition, presented in collaboration with Carroll Janis, Sidney's son, is less a tribute than a magnetic convergence: Hirshfield returned to view in the very spirit that first brought him into the light—a light that has only grown stronger in recent years, most notably with the American Folk Art Museum's 2022 retrospective *Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered*, curated by Richard Meyer and accompanied by the MIT Press monograph *Master of the Two Left Feet*.

Morris Hirshfield: Brooklyn Tailor centers on *Nude at the Window* (1941), a painting that marks a decisive turn in the artist's practice—when his early caution toward the nude gave way to a startling clarity and command. In this work, the female figure and her ornamental surroundings are no longer separate elements but locked in a mutual enchantment. The brilliant red-and-yellow striped drapes curve protectively around her body, echoing its contours with hypnotic cadence, as if the room itself had been drawn into orbit.

Other highlights include *Basket of Flowers* (ca.1946), bursting with botanical abundance—arching fronds and jewel-like blooms in rhythmic profusion—and *Garden Stand and Birds* (1945), where a lush vase of foliage shares the frame with four stylized birds whose striped plumage

echoes the plant's feathery leaves. In *White Tree with Birds* (1945), a pale, fan-like tree dominates, its golden branches alive with six brilliantly patterned birds in harmonious counterpoint. *Nude with Vase* (1946) presents a statuesque female figure before an ornate vessel, drapery and floral motifs alive with tactile energy. *Landscape with House I* (1940) conjures a fantastical terrain where stacked greenery frames angular, stage-like architecture; *College Ground* (1941) sets its lawns and pathways in a crisp, deliberate arrangement, the scene poised between formality and calm. In *Dog and Pups* (ca. 1944), a tender yet stylized canine tableau brims with ornamental detail, while *Waterfall* (1940) transforms plunging streams into vertical ribbons, turning nature into pure pattern. Together, these works crystallize Hirshfield's gift for uniting compositional discipline with a spellbinding orchestration of shape, color, and surface.

This exhibition also presents four rare works on paper—precious survivals from a process that usually left no trace. Among them are the study for *Inseparable Friends* (1941) in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, and the study for *The Artist and His Model* (1945) in the American Folk Art Museum's collection. In the former, two hieratic nudes command the composition—one looking outward, the other gazing at its reflection within a tiled mirror—while below, a neat procession of jewel-toned boudoir slippers marches across the scene with a touch of theatrical precision—a sly reminder of Hirshfield's years in footwear design. In the latter, a serene, almond-eyed nude shares the stage with a dapper painter distinguished by a neat moustache; behind them, a framed vignette—like a miniature Hirshfield painting within the painting—shows a cat pouncing at a butterfly, collapsing intimate detail and fantasy into the same plane. Encountered today, these works feel less like preliminary sketches than complete, self-contained worlds—snapshots of Hirshfield's imagination in its most distilled form, the bridge between conception and completion laid bare.

And so the circle closes. A teenage Frank Maresca, waiting for his turn in the darkroom, chances upon a book that names and celebrates an improbable painter from his own Brooklyn backyard. Decades later, having built a gallery on the very principles Sidney Janis embodied, Ricco/Maresca brings Hirshfield forward again; past and present meet on the same plane, and the work becomes the through-line—timeless, unflinching, and newly alive in the room.