

CHICAGO

By the time White graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, in 1938, he was already an active member of a community of artists practicing on Chicago's South Side. He began making paintings for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project, a massive government relief measure that employed visual artists, and helped found the South Side Community Art Center, a WPA-sponsored institution that provided formal art education and exhibition space for artists who were denied gallery representation elsewhere. His circle of friends included artists, writers, and poets, all of whom were devoted to improving the lives of African Americans in Chicago. Their work provided ample source material for White's earliest paintings and drawings, which were rendered in an expressive figurative style. *Kitchenette Debutantes* responds to the studies of inadequate "kitchenette" housing on the South Side by the sociologist Horace Cayton, who once owned this work, while *Native Son No. 2* depicts the central character of Richard Wright's novel, whose actions and ultimate demise are profoundly shaped by racial injustice. White was also attuned to the strength and resiliency of people in his community, and works like *Preacher* and *Spiritual* honor their faith.

THE WAR YEARS

White actively contributed to American art during World War II. He painted four murals between 1939 and 1943: three in Chicago (including *Five Great American Negroes*, on view at the entrance to this exhibition) and one at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), in Virginia. These large-scale paintings are represented here by full-scale black-and-white studies and overall color sketches. They allowed White's imagery of African Americans' critical roles in the history of the United States, and his condemnation of the legacy of violence and oppression that they faced, to reach broad audiences. Like many American artists, he was influenced by Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera and adapted their strategies for educating and inspiring viewers.

White moved to New York in 1942 with his first wife, the artist Elizabeth Catlett, and was drafted into the United States Army in 1944. He contracted tuberculosis during his service in the flood-stricken South and returned to the city after a lengthy hospitalization. Much of his work from this period reflects his experiences as both a black civilian and a soldier, as well as the injustices facing African American veterans and their families on the home front.

POLITICS AND PEOPLE

White recognized the shared struggles of oppressed peoples across race and gender lines, and his layered political statements of the 1940s and '50s reflect on the discrimination against African Americans, women, laborers, and political radicals. His talent as a savvy visual strategist led to high demand for his images about current events, such as *The Return of the Soldier (Dixie Comes to New York)* and *Can a Negro Study Law in Texas*, made for the leftist journals *Daily Worker* and *New Masses* (later *Masses & Mainstream*), respectively. He continued to invoke historical African Americans and their successes in his advocacy for contemporary causes, envisioning the abolitionist Harriet Tubman as a young labor leader and Frederick Douglass as a defender of men imprisoned for their political views.

White celebrated the triumph and self-sufficiency of workers through inspirational images like *O Freedom* and *Our Land*, which served as vehicles for his pro-labor political stance. The cultural heritage of African Americans in the South also unlocked a wellspring of subject matter for White: "I began to understand the beauty of my people's speech, their poetry, their folklore, their dance and their music as well as their staunchness, morality and courage. Here was the source of the Negro people's contribution to American culture."

COMMERCIAL AND PERSONAL PRACTICES

In keeping with his commitment to making his work available to the largest possible audience, White collaborated with friends and patrons on commercial and popular entertainment projects. He frequently drew book illustrations, creating a cover image for Howard Fast's novel *Spartacus* (1951) and oil-wash drawings for Lerone Bennett Jr.'s historical study *The Shaping of Black America* (1975). In the 1950s, he also produced numerous drawings for Vanguard Records' Jazz Showcase series, and he was nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Album Cover (Graphic Arts) when one of his drawings was reproduced on a recording of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1965. His work appeared on television and in films, as seen on the monitor nearby.

Apart from his practice as a draftsman, painter, and printmaker, White also experimented with a wide variety of other mediums. An avid photographer, he took hundreds of snapshots as a way of recording and processing the world around him. He also made ceramics, using the facilities at the Otis Art Institute, where he began teaching in 1965. The two sculptures on view here are known affectionately by White's family and friends as "the king and queen."

MUSIC AND MEANING

Music, an ever-present element in White's life, became increasingly central to his practice in the 1950s, and musicians including Harry Belafonte, Mahalia Jackson, Paul Robeson, and Bessie Smith became his subjects. Speaking in 1955, he said, "It is not that I have ever tried to translate the music directly into pictorial art. But the music expressed so perfectly, in a way that touched the heart more directly than any other art, the dignity, the outpourings of tenderness, the social and comradely feelings, and humanity of the people. It is this that has helped in my efforts, in paintings and drawings, to present a feeling of universal humanity."

But this feeling of "universal humanity" did not hide White's anger at the ongoing injustice and violence facing African Americans. In November 1966, he unveiled a series of twelve drawings executed between 1965 and 1966, retitling them all *J'Accuse*, after the nineteenth-century French writer Émile Zola's open letter accusing his government of anti-Semitism and political persecution. Zola's indictment became a universal excoriation of injustice, and White applied it to contemporary events and the ongoing fight for civil rights.

THE LAST DECADE

In the last decade of his career, White charted new visual and technical terrain. This included developing a layered, multi-dimensional oil-wash drawing style, seen in his Wanted Poster Series from 1969–71. Modeled after posters seeking the recapture of enslaved people who had escaped, the drawings—which include stenciled letters, fragments of text, and images of women and children—link the trials of contemporary African Americans with those of their enslaved ancestors. In a departure from the increasingly abstract style of this series, White also drew monumental figures starkly set within a field of blank paper, as in *Mississippi* and *Harriet*. The figure remains equally central in lithographs like *Sound of Silence* but is surrounded by colors that recall psychedelic posters.

While pushing himself artistically, White continued to prioritize his subject matter, vigorously examining social conditions and addressing injustice: “For me, the thing that matters most is not the form per se, but the depth of the content. I may experiment with new compositional forms, but my chief concern is always with expressing a particular feeling or emotion.” This was a value he imparted to his students at Otis Art Institute. As his former student, the artist Kerry James Marshall, attested, “Under Charles White’s influence, I always knew I wanted to make work that was about *something*.”