

Charles White
Extended Labels

Curatorial Asst.
Megan Kincaid

Straight Edged

**Five Great
American
Negroes,
1939**

White painted *Five Great American Negroes*, his first mural, when he was just twenty-one years old. The work was created in Chicago as part of a fundraiser for the South Side Community Art Center, located in the city's Bronzeville neighborhood, a largely African American community. The "great Americans" depicted here were chosen by the readers of the *Chicago Defender*, a major black newspaper, and are (from left to right) activist Sojourner Truth, educator Booker T. Washington, abolitionist Frederick Douglass, scientist George Washington Carver, and musician Marian Anderson, who had performed on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., just months prior to the painting's completion. Murals perfectly suited White's lifelong goal of promoting African American history to combat what he referred to as "a plague of distortions, stereotyped and superficial caricatures of 'uncles,' 'mammies,' and 'pickaninnies'" in popular visual culture. Because of their size and placement in public settings, murals were also readily available to audiences that might not have access to art museums. White's mural practice is further explored in the exhibition.

Charles White 1950s

Walter Rosenblum Collection, Photograph
Archives, Smithsonian American Art Museum

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Sketchbook

Numerous figure studies like this one appear in White's sketchbook from his time at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which he attended from 1937 to 1938 on a full merit scholarship. His fluency with charcoal and his use of shading and line to articulate form demonstrate his remarkable technical skill even at this early moment in his career. Equally striking is the warmth and empathy present in this image of a young woman, cradling her head in her hands, perhaps caught in a moment of personal reflection. Expressing emotion through his work was a lifelong priority for White: "With the use of drawing express something personal, something meaningful—some event, a love affair, some experience. Let's see you dig down and say something about it using drawing techniques."

See additional images from this sketchbook on the adjacent screen.

The two women pictured here are framed by the window of a “kitchenette,” the term used to describe a type of ill-equipped and overcrowded tenement apartment that many African Americans in Chicago were forced to tolerate as a result of the city’s exclusionary housing codes. For White and his artistic community, these dangerous living conditions became a symbol of broader inequality and oppression. The presentation of these two scantily dressed women as high-society “debutantes” is pointed—their attire (or lack thereof) suggests that they are, in fact, sex workers.

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**Kitchenette
Debutantes,
1939**

This painting is titled after the leftist writer and sculptor John Rood’s 1936 novel, which follows the life of the Appalachian miner Robert McGregor, who, after a series of tumultuous events, undergoes a political awakening and joins his fellow laborers to strike against their employer. White’s painting captures the character at a moment of revelation, emerging from a demolished structure with arms outstretched toward the viewer. Workers’ rights and labor unions interested White throughout his career, both as subject matter and in practice; he was a member of The Artists Union while working for the government-sponsored Works Progress Administration in Chicago.

**This, My
Brother,
1942**

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This color sketch is the only complete record of the mural *Struggle for Liberation (Chaotic Stage of the Negro, Past and Present)*, which White began but only partially executed for the Chicago Public Library. The left side of the mural, seen in progress in the picture below, features historical figures including the abolitionist John Brown (lower left corner) and blues singer Lead Belly (holding a guitar at left) alongside a man in shackles and a lynching victim. The right-hand panel, never completed, would have by contrast depicted distinctly contemporary issues: corrupt politicians, picketing workers, and police brutality. Linking past oppression with present circumstances, White's dense composition conveys a sense of physical struggle.



Charles White working on the left panel of *Struggle for Liberation (Chaotic Stage of the Negro, Past and Present)*, 1940–41. Chicago Public Library

**Native Son
No. 2**

**Study for
the Chaotic
Stage of the
Negro, Past
and Present,
1940**

This image of Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of the novel *Native Son* (1940), written by White's friend Richard Wright, shows him in a moment of tension. White created a massive and powerful figure with muscles clenched, his hand grasping a piece of splintered wood. The image alludes to the violence in Wright's story, in which the circumstances of Thomas's unjust life lead him to commit murder, without resorting to caricature. Wright and White were part of a dynamic and multidisciplinary community of black artists in Chicago during the 1930s, and this drawing is an example of their exchange and shared dedication to exposing the oppression of African Americans.

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In 1942 White received a fellowship from the Julius Rosenwald Fund to paint a mural at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), a historically black college in Virginia. He described his subject as “the role of the Negro in the development of a democratic America,” and the final work includes likenesses of fourteen historic figures. In preparation for the mural White conducted extensive research and made numerous drawings, including a double portrait of the abolitionist Sojourner Truth and the educator Booker T. Washington and sketches of the slave revolt leader Denmark Vesey and the performer and activist Paul Robeson (all on view nearby). White also mentored students during his time at Hampton; while there, he taught a young John Biggers, who would go on to have a significant career making his own murals, including one at Hampton in the early 1990s.

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**Study for the
Contribution of
the Negro to
Democracy in
America, 1943**

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Soldier, 1944

Anxiously clutching his musket, the figure in *Soldier* captures the fears of servicemen at the height of World War II. In works like this, White revealed the hypocrisy of wartime America, which denied liberties to black Americans at home while asking them to fight and die for those same freedoms abroad. Elsewhere he depicted subjects struggling with the impact of the war in the States, including a fear-stricken mother in *Mother (Awaiting His Return)* and a downtrodden laborer in *War Worker*. White was acutely aware of the lot of the black soldier—he was drafted in 1944 and contracted tuberculosis while trying to control floodwaters in Missouri.

**Black Sorrow
(Dolor Negro),
1946**

In 1946 White accompanied his first wife, the sculptor Elizabeth Catlett, to Mexico. Although he had been influenced by Mexican painters like Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros for some time, working with the printmaking collective Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP; Workshop of Popular Graphics) was a revelation to him: “Their studio was in the streets, their studios were in the homes of the people, their studio was where life was taking place.” White became an honorary member of the TGP, where he produced lithographs like this one. Compositionally similar to the nearby painting *Two Alone*, it reflects his commitment to using prints, which can be made in multiple copies, as a more democratic and accessible art form.

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**The Ghost of
Frederick
Douglass, 1949
(both)**

These two drawings appear incredibly similar: both depict the abolitionist Frederick Douglass freeing a group of men entrapped by barbed wire, led by Benjamin Davis Jr., the New York City councilman who ran on the Communist Party ticket and was elected to represent Harlem from 1943 to 1949. While Davis's communist affiliation is undetectable in the first drawing, in the later work the surrounding figures illuminate his political milieu: they are the other men who were arrested in July 1948 on charges of conspiring to overthrow the United States government, an event that marked the beginning of the McCarthy era, when suspected communists were subjected to inquisition. White scrupulously replicates the indicted men's features, even including eyeglasses on John Williamson.



Eleven accused communists at their trial, c. 1949.
Photo: Getty Images

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Framed by a doorway, one massive hand on her hip and the other grasping a pitchfork, White's female farmer asserts ownership over the landscape before her, even before we learn the title of the painting, *Our Land*. Her choice of tool connects her with the couple in Grant Wood's iconic painting *American Gothic* (1930), which White would have seen at the Art Institute of Chicago. But the similarities end there: White's self-reliant woman suggests the essential cultural and economic role that African American women have played in the United States, one of the artist's most enduring themes.

Our Land, 1951



Grant Wood (American, 1891–1942). *American Gothic*. 1930. Oil on beaverboard, 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (78 × 65.3 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago. Friends of American Art Collection

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**Gospel Singers,
1951**

The composition of *Gospel Singers* is based on a series of photographs White took of a young woman playing the guitar in Washington Square Park, in New York, on view nearby. The back of the photographs are coated with fingerprints and handling marks, revealing that White actively referred to his source images as he painted. Personal photography like this linked White's lived experience with his formal practice. The painting, however, invests the scene with an additional religious charge—by adding a stained glass window to the background, the artist relocates this gospel performance to a church.

Preacher, 1952

The Whitney Museum of American Art acquired *Preacher* in 1952, making it the first work by the artist to enter a major museum collection. In a questionnaire he completed for the Whitney, White explained, "Too often the Negro minister has been portrayed as a buffoon and not reflecting the dignity, strength, and concern for the basic problems of living that face his congregation." *Preacher* emphasizes these qualities through the meticulous depiction of this formidable man and his eloquent oratory gesture. However, White did not disclose that this drawing is a portrait of the singer-turned-activist Paul Robeson, whose affiliation with the Communist Party had led to persecution by the United States government: his passport was suspended and he was banned from appearing on American television. With this drawing, White celebrated Robeson's fight for racial equality and social justice while subtly navigating contested political terrain.

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White's move to Los Angeles, and his position in an active creative community there, resulted in Hollywood commissions, including this triptych of drawings made for the major motion picture *Anna Lucasta* (1958). The film—adapted from a play produced in 1944 by the American Negro Theatre in Harlem—follows the story of Anna, cast out of her home by her father and forced into prostitution but eventually redeemed through love and welcomed back by her family. White spent several weeks on the film set, documenting the actors as they rehearsed, and consulted popular photographs of Eartha Kitt, Sammy Davis Jr., and other cast members. The drawings ultimately appeared at the end of the film prior to the credits, which, according to a reviewer, “would send audiences away certain that they had seen a masterwork in the fine arts.”

A clip of the film *Anna Lucasta* that includes White's drawings is on view in this gallery.

**Anna Lucasta,
1958**

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**Photograph
case, c. 1950**

White was a prolific photographer, capturing hundreds of images over his lifetime, especially during the years he spent in New York. Though he did not consider his photographs part of his formal art practice, and they were never exhibited while he was alive, they reflect both his artistry and his “hunger to understand the complexities of the life of my people.” The photographs shown here reveal White’s richly textured life in New York; they include images of family, friends, and fellow artists, documentation of political activism across a spectrum of issues, snapshots of his students at the New York Workshop School, and encounters with strangers. Some of these snapshots, together with published images by other photographers, became inspiration and references for White’s future drawings, paintings, and prints.

Ceramics

The artist’s second wife, Frances White, attributed his interest in ceramics to the example set by modernists like Pablo Picasso, whom the artist visited in Paris in 1951: “He was very impressed with the facility of an artist who could do so many different things and do them so well. And he may have been trying to say, ‘I can add these other dimensions to my work, too.’” White’s ceramics draw from a variety of visual sources; the preliminary designs for the two works on view nearby, for example, were discovered in his personal copy of the exhibition catalogue for *Arts of the South Seas*, organized by The Museum of Modern Art in 1946. The artist was likely further influenced by reproductions of handmade African vessels he encountered in René Gardi’s books of documentary photography in Africa.

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**Folksinger
(Voice of
Jericho: Portrait
of Harry
Belafonte), 1957**

White and the performer Harry Belafonte met through the Committee for the Negro in the Arts, established in Harlem in 1947 to cultivate African American talent across artistic disciplines and to challenge stereotypes in popular visual culture. They became close friends as well as collaborators. In this portrait of Belafonte, White highlights his spirited performance through his thrown-back head and expressive gesture. Writing on White's achievements as an artist, Belafonte applauded his ability to transform ordinary subjects into monumental icons: "His portraits are real, but they are oftentimes much bigger than life, as if the artist were saying to us, 'Life is much more than this. Life is big and broad and deep.'" This drawing featured prominently in the 1959 television special "Tonight with Belafonte," which interspersed other drawings by White between musical acts.

See a clip from "Tonight with Belafonte" in the previous gallery.

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**J'Accuse #7,
1966**

This drawing includes an interpretation of a Kworo mask included in the 1963 exhibition *Senoufo Sculpture from West Africa*, organized by the Museum of Primitive Art, in New York. White may have been working from a picture published in the exhibition catalogue, and he added elements of other masks produced by different cultural groups. The inclusion of African masks, a novel motif for the artist, is explained by a note on the back of the drawing, which indicates that it, together with several other drawings in the J'Accuse series, was intended as an illustration for the "African Heritage" section of Harry Belafonte's anthology *History of Negro Music*. The anthology was only realized in 2001, as *The Long Road to Freedom: An Anthology of Black Music*.



Poro Headdress (Kworo). Nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Northern Côte d'Ivoire, Bandama River region, Senoufo peoples. Wood, cloth, cane, and mud, 29 1/8 x 22 x 6 1/2" (74 x 55.9 x 16.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Allan Frumkin, 1962. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, New York

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Birmingham Totem is an elegy for the four young girls who were killed in the Klu Klux Klan's bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. White depicts a pyramid of rubble that includes signs of church furniture like altars and pews. The drawing meditates on a past trauma but also points toward the future—a young boy sitting atop the ruins holds a plumb line, an architectural tool that suggests rebuilding. For White, the plumb line promised a way forward: "The symbol and the statement were intended to suggest that perhaps destiny has chosen blacks to be the catalyst for change in our society. The crouched figure was symbolic of the architect who would help to do the planning in creating a new society."

**Birmingham
Totem, 1964**

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**Elmina Castle,
1969**

Built by the Portuguese in Ghana in 1482, Elmina Castle gained notoriety in the seventeenth century as a place where enslaved peoples from across Africa were gathered before being transported across the Atlantic Ocean to “New World” colonies in the Americas. In this drawing, White depicts the “Door of No Return,” the symbolic passageway that marked the beginning of this horrific journey. The figure peering out at viewers communicates the human cost of slavery, while the marks that fill the majority of the drawing, superficially similar to the abstract paintings of White’s own time, suggest violence and inhumanity.

**Golden State
Mutual Life
Insurance
Company
Calendars**

From 1968 to 1971, White’s works were reproduced in the complimentary calendars distributed by Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company in Los Angeles. The calendars made his masterly drawings available to large audiences in diverse contexts, beyond museums and art galleries. The company, owned and managed by African Americans, had a vested interest in supporting black artists and financed a number of black cultural initiatives in Los Angeles. The drawing *General Moses (Harriet Tubman)*, for example, was commissioned by Golden State as one of the first drawings to enter the company’s corporate collection, established in 1965. Built by William Pajaud, a painter, curator, and friend of White’s, the collection held significant works by African American artists from across the United States.

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**She Does Not
Know Her
Beauty, 1969**

This drawing includes the first stanza of the Harlem Renaissance poet Waring Cuney's poem *No Images*:

She does not know
her beauty,
she thinks her brown body
has no glory

If she could dance
naked
under palm trees
and see her image in the river,
she would know

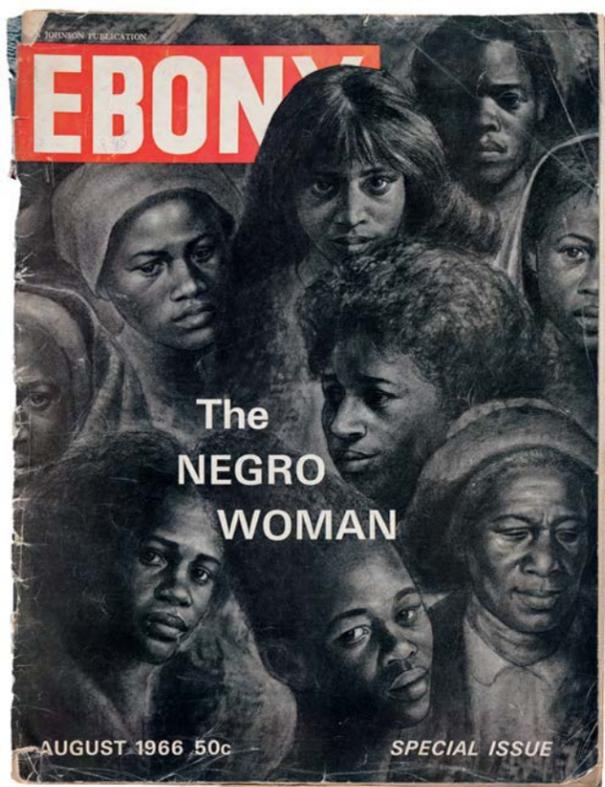
But there are no palm trees
on the street,
and dish water gives back
no images.

White's inclusion of an unborn child in this composition links motherhood with the beauty Cuney describes, a recognition of the centrality of black women in American society.

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Cover of *Ebony*. "The Negro Woman," special issue, August 1966.
Photo: Robert Gerhardt, The Museum of Modern Art Imaging Services

At the end of his career, White completed a number of commemorative portraits, including this painting memorializing his cousin Willy J., who was killed as an innocent bystander during a bar robbery. Using a rounded portrait format that recalls historic paintings of nobility, and including a rose, often used to symbolize beauty and innocence, White creates a positive image of his cousin, a young black man. Only the text included at the bottom of the painting—“BANG”—refers to the violence that resulted in Willy J.’s senseless death.

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The enigmatic “Pope” at the center of this oil-wash drawing flashes viewers a gesture that is both a papal blessing and a peace sign. Wearing a sandwich board that exclaims “NOW” but doesn’t list any specific demands, the heavily draped man moves through an undefined space, in front of a hanging banner that shows the lower half of a skeleton, but is trapped beneath ruled lines that recall a camera’s viewfinder. The word “CHICAGO,” at the top, suggests a link with the artist’s hometown, but little else about the meaning of this work can be definitively stated. The ambiguity at the center of *Black Pope (Sandwich Board Man)* is the key to its power.

**Black Pope
Sandwich Board
Man**

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Case Label
78%

Straight Edged

In the early 1940s, fresh out of art school and just beginning his career, White captured the attention of the legendary MoMA curator Dorothy Miller. Miller was keenly interested in the work of WPA artists—her husband, Holger Cahill, was the director of the Federal Art Project. Excited by White’s drawings for his mural *Five Great American Negroes* (1939), which she saw at the South Side Community Art Center, in Chicago, Miller hoped to exhibit another mural White was working on, *Struggle for Liberation (Chaotic Stage of the Negro, Past and Present)* (c. 1940–41), as part of the exhibition *Americans 1942: 18 Artists from 9 States*. Though the mural was never completed, White would sustain a relationship with MoMA. In 1943, he and his first wife, the artist Elizabeth Catlett, joined Miller and the Museum’s founding director, Alfred Barr, Jr., for tea in MoMA’s penthouse for the opening celebration of the exhibition *Young Negro Art*. In the photo documenting the occasion, White and Miller are seen in deep conversation.

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Steadfast in his belief that “art was meant to belong to people, not to be a single person’s possession,” White partnered with publishers to make his images affordable and accessible. In 1953, *Masses & Mainstream*, a Marxist journal where White was also an editor, produced *Charles White: Six Drawings*, a folio of lithographs based on six drawings (three of which are on view in this gallery). The folios were sold for three dollars, via mail order as well as in book stores. As White would recall, “When I heard a group of share-croppers and factory workers in Alabama had combined whatever coins they had to buy a portfolio, had shared the pictures among themselves, and passed them from home to home, I felt that I had made a ‘success.’”

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The source image for *Black Pope (Sandwich Board Man)* came from the photographer Leonard Freed's book *Black in White America* (1968), which documents African American life in the United States after World War II. In White's personal copy of the book, seen here, the brown stains and fingerprints on the page are remnants of his trademark oil-wash medium. White replicated the street preacher's draped coat, scarf, and unmistakable cruciform headdress, but added elements like aviator sunglasses to clearly position the figure in 1973.

The sketch for the drawing demonstrates White's working process. After rendering the figure's head and upper body in graphite on translucent paper, White applied a dark pastel to the back of the sheet. He then laid this sheet on top of the final drawing, and retraced key elements. This process transferred his drawing from the study to the final work, providing White with guidance but allowing him to change and develop the drawing further. He applied the thinned umber oil wash that became his signature medium using a variety of tools, building up tone from light to dark.