

The Museum of Modern Art

MoMA EXPLORES THE PROLIFIC CAREER OF CHARLES WHITE WITH THE ARTIST'S FIRST MAJOR EXHIBITION IN THREE DECADES

Exhibition Brings Together Some 100 Works Illuminating White's Influential Role as Artist and Activist

Charles White: A Retrospective

October 7, 2018–January 13, 2019

Floor Three, The Edward Steichen Galleries

Press Preview: Tuesday, October 2, 9:30–11:30 a.m., with remarks to follow

NEW YORK, August 29, 2018—The Museum of Modern Art's ***Charles White: A Retrospective***, on view from October 7, 2018, through January 13, 2019, is the first major exhibition dedicated to Charles White (1918–1979) in over three decades. Organized chronologically, the retrospective charts the entirety of White's career, illuminating his socially motivated responses to the tumultuous events and cultural episodes that defined 20th-century American history. The exhibition's roughly 100 drawings, paintings, and prints, along with additional ephemera, attest to White's continually developing body of work, and serve as a model for the active role art can play in contemporary society. *Charles White: A Retrospective* is organized by Esther Adler, Associate Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints, MoMA; and Sarah Kelly Oehler, Field-McCormick Chair and Curator of American Art, The Art Institute of Chicago. The exhibition was on view at The Art Institute of Chicago from June 8 through September 3, 2018, and following its MoMA presentation it will travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), where it will be on view from February 17 through June 9, 2019.

The exhibition includes representative work from the three artistic centers in which White lived, created, and taught throughout his life: Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. It begins with early paintings and murals White made for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in Depression-era Chicago, where he grew up. Shortly thereafter, between 1942 and 1956, White lived mainly in New York City, teaching drawing, exhibiting at the progressive ACA Gallery on 57th Street, and supporting the Committee for the Negro in the Arts in Harlem. A selection of White's personal photographs, also on view in the exhibition, capture his life in New York, while the inclusion of his work for album covers, publications, film, and television emphasize his dedication to more accessible distribution outlets for his art. The presentation concludes with the inventive output from his last decades as an internationally established figure and influential teacher in Los Angeles during the 1960s and '70s.

A number of rarely exhibited key works from across White's oeuvre are gathered for the first time, and are included exclusively in MoMA's presentation of the exhibition. White's first

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mural, *Five Great American Negroes* (1939), and the tour-du-force drawing *Native Son No. 2* (1942) are on loan from the Howard University Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Howard President Dr. Wayne A. I. Frederick said of the historic loan, “The Howard University Gallery of Art is honored to loan two significant Charles White works from our collection to The Museum of Modern Art. Mr. White left an indelible mark on Howard University, having served as an artist-in-residence in 1945 and as a distinguished professor in 1978. The two pieces that will be on display demonstrate his ability to capture the mood of a generation.” Two other seldom-seen masterpieces, *Mahalia* (1955) and *Folksinger (Voice of Jericho: Portrait of Harry Belafonte)* (1957), are on loan from the collection of Pamela and Harry Belafonte—the latter of whom was a close friend and collaborator of White’s.

Chicago and the War Years

By the time Charles White graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1938, he was already an active member of a multidisciplinary community of artists practicing on Chicago’s South Side. He began making paintings for the WPA Federal Art Project, a massive government relief measure that hired artists across all media, and helped found the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC), a WPA-sponsored art center that provided formal art education and exhibition space for artists who were denied gallery representation elsewhere. White’s first mural, *Five Great American Negroes*, was created as part of a fundraiser for the SSCAC. A tableau of African American history, it depicts activist Sojourner Truth, educator Booker T. Washington, abolitionist Frederick Douglass, scientist George Washington Carver, and musician Marian Anderson. The mural, intended for public display, also integrated public opinion in its composition: the five central figures were selected by the readers of the *Chicago Defender*, a major African American newspaper.

White painted three other murals during the War Years; these large-scale, widely accessible paintings allowed his celebration of African American contributions to society, as well as his condemnation of the violence and oppression they faced, to reach broad and integrated audiences. The medium perfectly suited his lifelong goal of combatting what he referred to as “a plague of distortions, stereotyped and superficial caricatures of ‘uncles,’ ‘mammies,’ and ‘pickaninnies’” in popular visual culture.

In Chicago, White’s circle of friends included visual artists, writers, and poets, all of whom shared a devotion to improving the lives of African Americans in the city. Their work provided ample source material for his earliest paintings and drawings, rendered in an expressive figurative style. For example, in *Native Son No. 2* White envisioned the main character of his friend Richard Wright’s seminal novel of the same title.

Politics and People

White’s layered political statements of the 1940s and ’50s reflect on the intersectional discrimination against African Americans, women, laborers, and political radicals. During this time, he was commissioned by leftist and Marxist journals like the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses* (later *Masses & Mainstream*), where White was an editor, to illustrate current events; in his independent artistic practice he continued to link African American historical figures with contemporary political and social causes. Images such as *Our Land* (1951), which highlights

the essential cultural and economic role African American women play in the United States, became vehicles for his pro-labor stance.

In keeping with his commitment to making his work available to the largest possible audience, White contributed to many commercial and popular entertainment projects, including book illustrations, album covers, and commissions for television and film. In the 1950s, he produced drawings for Vanguard Records' *Jazz Showcase* series album covers, and in 1965 was nominated for a Grammy Award for "Best Album Cover, Graphic Arts." White was also a prolific photographer, and the photographs on view in the exhibition illustrate his life in New York, including images of family, friends, and fellow artists; documentation of political activism; and snapshots of his students at the New York Workshop School of Advertising and Editorial Art; among other subjects. While White did not consider his photographs part of his formal art practice, and they were never exhibited during his lifetime, many of them became visual references and source material for future drawings, paintings, and prints.

Music and Meaning

Music, always an integral part of White's life, grew increasingly central to his work in the 1950s. Throughout the decade, he took influential musicians as his subjects, creating canonical portraits of figures like Harry Belafonte, Mahalia Jackson, Paul Robeson, and Bessie Smith. *Folksinger (Voice of Jericho: Portrait of Harry Belafonte)* is one such example, depicting White's collaborator and close friend during his time in New York. This drawing featured prominently in the 1959 television special *Tonight with Belafonte*, which also included White's drawings in between changing musical acts.

Powerful images from the 1960s exemplify White's continued political activism and interest in social justice. The exhibition includes four drawings from the *J'Accuse* series—a group of 12 drawings executed between 1965 and 1966 that White retitled with this single moniker just before an exhibition at Heritage Gallery in Los Angeles. The new titles refer to French writer Émile Zola's infamous indictment of his government's anti-Semitism and political persecution; White's adoption of the term applied this universal excoriation of injustice in contemporary race relations and the ongoing fight for civil rights.

White began to teach at Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles in 1965, mentoring students such as Kerry James Marshall, David Hammons, and many others. In the last decade of his career, the artist also pioneered new visual and technical styles, including the development of a layered, multidimensional oil-wash drawing technique. He honed this practice in works from his *Wanted Poster Series* (1969–71), which were modeled after Civil War-era posters that sought the recapture of enslaved people who had escaped.

Black Pope (Sandwich Board Man) (1973) also employs this signature oil-wash style, and a preliminary sketch alongside the finished work demonstrates his innovative technical approach. The drawing's enigmatic "Pope" and sandwich board—which exclaims "NOW" but does not clarify any further meaning—is a departure from the high degree of legibility typical of White's work. Instead, the power of this drawing lies in its ambiguity. White's evolving interpretations of contemporary events throughout his career adapt to changing

sociopolitical conditions and imperatives. His masterful navigation of four tumultuous decades of American history continues to serve as a model for socially conscious artists, activists, and thinkers today.

#CharlesWhite

SPONSORSHIP:

The exhibition is supported at The Museum of Modern Art and at The Art Institute of Chicago by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Major support for the New York presentation is provided by The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art, Kathy and Richard S. Fuld, Jr., and by The Dian Woodner Exhibition Endowment Fund.

Generous funding is provided by The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art.

Additional support is provided by the Annual Exhibition Fund with major contributions from the Estate of Ralph L. Riehle, Alice and Tom Tisch, Mimi and Peter Haas Fund, Brett and Daniel Sundheim, Karen and Gary Winnick, The Marella and Giovanni Agnelli Fund for Exhibitions, and Oya and Bülent Eczacıbaşı.

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The Terra Foundation for American Art is dedicated to fostering exploration, understanding, and enjoyment of the visual arts of the United States for national and international audiences. Recognizing the importance of experiencing original works of art, the foundation provides opportunities for interaction and study, beginning with the presentation and growth of its own art collection in Chicago. To further cross-cultural dialogue on American art, the foundation supports and collaborates on innovative exhibitions, research, and educational programs. Implicit in such activities is the belief that art has the potential both to distinguish cultures and to unite them.

PUBLICATIONS:

Charles White

Edited by Sarah Kelly Oehler and Esther Adler

The accompanying catalogue traces White's career from his emergence in Chicago to his mature work as an artist, activist, and educator in New York and Los Angeles. Essays by curators and scholars provide insights into White's creative process, his work as a photographer, his political activism and interest in history, the relationship between his art and his teaching, and the importance of feminism in his work. A preface by Kerry James Marshall addresses White's significance as a mentor to an entire generation of artists and underlines his contemporary significance. Hardcover, \$50. 248 pages, 203 illustrations. ISBN: 9780300232981. Published by The Art Institute of Chicago and distributed to the trade through Yale University Press.

Grandpa and the Library: How Charles White Learned to Paint

By C. Ian White

Also available is a new children's book, written and illustrated by Charles White's son, C. Ian White. This charming book follows the young Charles White as he goes to the library every day to look at picture books and watch the people around him. Later, he draws what he has seen on scraps of paper, and as he grows up, Charles becomes an artist who creates powerful portraits of the figures he sees and admires—of his family and of African American musicians, thinkers, scientists, and civil rights leaders. This deeply personal story traces the childhood influences that inspired young Charles to become an artist and a teacher. Hardcover, \$19.95. 40 pages, illustrated throughout. ISBN: 978-1-63345-065-3. Spanish edition available. ISBN: 978-1-63345-073-8. Published by The Museum of Modern Art. Distributed to the trade through Abrams in the US and Canada, and through Thames & Hudson outside the US and Canada.

Charles White: Black Pope

By Esther Adler

Charles White was celebrated during his lifetime for depictions of African Americans that acquired the description “Images of Dignity.” His application of his extraordinary draftsmanship to addressing a lifetime of social and political concerns made him a vital influence on both his contemporaries and later generations; visually compelling and intellectually ambitious, his art engages audiences on many levels. Beginning with his early days in Chicago, moving through his time in New York in the late 1940s and ’50s, and closing with his final decades as a revered artist and teacher in Los Angeles, *Charles White: Black Pope* offers a detailed exploration of his practice, focusing in particular on his late masterwork *Black Pope (Sandwich Board Man)*, in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art. 64 pages, 36 color illustrations. Hardcover, \$26.95. ISBN 978-1-63345-027-1. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Available at MoMA stores and online at store.moma.org. Distributed to the trade through ARTBOOK|D.A.P. in the US and Canada. Distributed outside the US and Canada by Thames & Hudson.

AUDIO:

Through commentary on Charles White’s life and art, the audio guide brings together the artist’s own voice and contributions from collaborators, students, and scholars—including Harry Belafonte, Kerry James Marshall, and Ian White—and explores the impact of White’s legacy as an exceptional draftsman, painter, and printmaker, as well as a deeply committed educator and advocate for social justice.

Charles White and Harry Belafonte were friends and collaborators. WQXR radio host Terrance McKnight spoke with the singer and actor about his relationship with White and their commitment to celebrating and advancing black culture. You can listen to the interview [here](#).

McKnight also paired music and other audio with selected works throughout the exhibition. The playlist includes songs by Bessie White, Marian Anderson, and James Brown and spoken word audio from Angela Davis, Langston Hughes, and Hermes Nye. Listen to the full playlist, inspired by White’s works and life, [here](#).

PUBLIC PROGRAMS:

[Charles White: Beyond Images of Dignity](#)

Wed, Nov 7, 6:00 p.m.

Education Center, Mezzanine, Theater 3

Artist Kerry James Marshall has been, in his own words, “a stalwart advocate for the legacy of Charles White,” his former teacher and mentor. Planned in collaboration with Marshall, this program strives to advance our understanding of White’s place in art history through a consideration of his technical virtuosity, visual strategies, and the changing reception of his work. What have his images meant to different audiences, and how do they provide that meaning? Starting with a close examination of selected works from the exhibition, presenters will share their individual perspectives and then participate in a discussion moderated by Marshall and Esther Adler, Associate Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints, The Museum of Modern Art. Presenters include W. J. T Mitchell, Gaylor Donnelley Distinguished Service Professor, University of Chicago, and Courtney J. Martin, Deputy Director and Chief Curator, Dia Art Foundation.

Reception to follow.

Tickets will be available starting on October 7. Tickets (\$15; \$10 members and Corporate members; \$5 students, seniors, and staff of other museums) can be purchased online, at the information desk, or at the Education and Research Building reception desk on the day of the program.

Enter through the Cullman Education and Research Building, 4 W 54 Street.

American Sign Language interpretation and CART captioning is available for any public program, with advance notice. Please email adultprograms@moma.org to request sign language interpretation with two weeks' notice or to request CART with three weeks' notice.

WORKSHOPS:

[Charles White Printmaking Workshops](#)

Classroom B1 & B2

Rie Hasegawa

Sat, Oct 27, 1:30–3:00 p.m.

Michael Kelly Williams,

Tue, Oct 30, 1:30–3:00 p.m.

Michael Kelly Williams,

Sat, Dec 8, 1:30–3:00 p.m.

Jazmine Catusus,

Tue, Dec 11, 1:30–3:00 p.m.

Charles White believed that “art should take its place as one of the necessities of life,” and he used his skill as a printmaker to make images that would reach as many people as possible.

In that spirit, these workshops invite participants to make their own drypoint prints in response to White’s innovative work in this medium. Each session is led by an artist and planned with the [EFA Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop](#), whose founder, Robert Blackburn, was White’s primary printer in New York.

The workshops are free. Space is limited and available on a first-come, first-served basis. Sign-up begins half an hour prior to each workshop. Designed for adult participants, but children ages 12 and above are welcome if accompanied by an adult collaborator.

[Art and Practice with Ulysses Jenkins](#)

Sat, Sep 15, 1:00–3:30 p.m.

Classroom B

Art and Practice is a series of discussion-based seminars that bring together emerging and experienced artists to explore the challenges and possibilities of sustaining a creative life. This season is organized in conjunction with *Charles White: A Retrospective*, to honor White’s legacy as an influential mentor and educator.

For this session, video artist Ulysses Jenkins, who studied with White at Otis, hosts an open discussion about the possibilities of technology as a means of asserting political agency. Participants examine the history of video as a norm-establishing technology, the weaponization of the image in the era of the 24-hour news cycle, and the ways in which video and new media artists can reclaim images to catalyze social change. Throughout the conversation, Jenkins will draw from his practice as an artist and educator to facilitate ideas about utilizing technology to disrupt the social order and promote a just future.

Following the discussion, refreshments will be served from 3:00 to 3:30 p.m.

This program is free but requires the submission of a response form (above). For more information, please contact adultprograms@moma.org.

Press Contacts: Stephanie Katsias: (212) 708-9401 or stephanie.katsias@moma.org

For downloadable high-resolution images, register at moma.org/press.

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Public Information:

The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019, (212) 708-9400, moma.org. Hours: Daily, 10:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 10:30 a.m.–8:00 p.m. Museum Admission: \$25 adults; \$18 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$14 full-time students with current I.D. Free, members and children 16 and under. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs). Free admission during Uniqlo Free Friday Nights: Fridays, 4:00–8:00 p.m. No service charge for tickets ordered on moma.org. Tickets purchased online may be printed out and presented at the Museum without waiting in line. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs). Film and After Hours Program Admission: \$12 adults; \$10 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$8 full-time students with current ID. The price of an After Hours Program Admission ticket may be applied toward the price of a Museum admission ticket or MoMA membership within 30 days.