A Little Higher

CHARLES WHITE

Large Print Labels

Gonna walk and never get tired
Gonna fly, Lord, and never falter
I'm gonna move up a little higher

– Rev. William Herbert Brewster,
"Move On Up A Little Higher"

Charles White (1918–1979) created "images of dignity" that elevated and ennobled his subjects without shying away from the realities of systemic racism and oppression. The work of this Chicago-born artist bears witness to his lived experience as a Black man in America who faced poverty, discrimination, denigration, and violence. It also reflects his steadfast belief in a better tomorrow. This same spirit of gracious activism resonated in his devotion to teaching. White touched the lives of an entire generation of students in Los Angeles at Otis College of Art and Design, including Kerry James Marshall and David Hammons.

This belief in a new day informs the show's title, an allusion to the above-quoted gospel song that the Rev. William Herbert Brewster composed in 1941

and singer Mahalia Jackson made famous. The inspiring, yet sobering, exhortation in Brewster's lyrics resonates in White's art, in which he urges us all to aspire to be better. Rooted in the Social Realist and Regionalist movements of the 1930s and 40s, his virtuoso drawings, prints, and paintings express powerful social critique tempered by a genuine love for humanity.

This exhibition weaves together the complex threads of White's compelling life and work. It culminates with the twelve paintings commissioned to illustrate Lerone Bennett Jr.'s 1975 landmark publication, *The Shaping of Black America.*

All works in this exhibition are from the Primas Family Collection.

The Life of Charles Wilbert White

Adapted from John Murphy and Ashley James, "Chronology" in *Charles White: A Retrospective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

April 2, 1918
Born in Chicago to Southerners who made the "Great Migration" north. His mother, Ethelene Gary, was a domestic worker from rural Mississippi whose grandmother was the enslaved daughter of a white owner. His father, Charles White Sr., a railroad porter and steel worker, was an Indigenous American of Creek heritage.

1920s
Spends hours at the Chicago Public Library while his mother works, opening his eyes to the unsung contributions of Black Americans and igniting his social consciousness and enthusiasm for the arts.

1925
Mother buys him oil paints (and later a violin). Makes his first painting.

1927
Father dies, and mother marries postal worker Clifton Marsh (from whom she separates). Charles begins twice annual visits to his mother's family in Ridgeland, Mississippi.

1931
Wins scholarship for Saturday classes at the Art Institute of Chicago.

1932
Attends Englewood High School.

1933
Exhibits with the Art Crafts Guild, a group for artists and writers of the "Black Chicago Renaissance." Members include author Richard Wright and artists Eldzier Cortor and Margaret Burroughs.

1934
Takes lessons from Jewish artist Todros Geller.

1936
Two art academies rescind scholarships when officials learn he is Black.

1937
Graduates from high school and wins a scholarship to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; earns an honorable mention.

1938
Hired for easel painting division of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a federal government initiative (1935–1943) that employed artists during the Great Depression.

1939
Transfers to the WPA mural division (until 1942) and completes *Five Great American Negroes* (Howard University).

1940
Paints mural *The History of the Negro Press* for the American Negro Exposition, Chicago; wins prizes there for a drawing and a watercolor.

1941
(Dec.) Marries sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett. Included in ground-breaking exhibition *American Negro Art: 19th and 20th Centuries*, Downtown Gallery, New York.

1942
Teaches at Dillard University, New Orleans.

(April) Receives grant from Julius Rosenwald Fund, which provides fellowships for African American artists.

(June) Moves with Catlett to New York City. Does research at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and studies at the Art Students League with Harry Sternberg. Circulates with Black artists, writers, and activists, including Duke Ellington, Ralph Ellison, and Langston Hughes. (Fall) Travels with Catlett through the South, studying Black music and culture. Beaten in New Orleans for entering a whites-only restaurant and threatened at gunpoint by a streetcar driver in Hampton, Virginia.

1943
Paints *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*, a mural at Hampton Institute, and speaks on the panel "Art and Democracy." Receives a second grant from the Rosenwald Fund to study at the Art Students League and paint a series on African American soldiers in World War II.

1944
(April–Oct.) Serves in the US Army with the rank of corporal in the 133rd Engineering Regiment, a Black corps sandbagging the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers; discharged when diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis.

1945
(Feb.–June) Artist in Residence at Howard University, Washington, DC. Draws searing political cartoons for leftist publications *Congress Vue*, *The Daily Worker*, *Freedom*, *New Masses*, and *Masses and Mainstream*.

1946
Travels with Catlett to Mexico City, where they engage in printmaking at the collective Taller de Gráfica Popular.

1947
Divorces Catlett.

(Sept.) First of seven solo exhibitions at American Contemporary Art (ACA) Gallery, New York.

1950
Marries Frances Barrett, a white social worker, with

whom he adopts two children. Refused admittance, as an interracial couple, to the home of the hosts of an Artists Equity Association conference.

1951
Travels through Europe concluding with three weeks in the Soviet Union. The FBI, suspecting him of being a communist, keeps a file on White until 1965. He receives a subpoena (in 1952) to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee, but the order is suspended.

1952
Sponsors veterans' art exhibition for American Veterans for Peace and publishes article "Until the Day I Die, My Life is Dedicated to My People." (May) The Whitney Museum of American Art acquires the drawing *Preacher*. The National Institute of Arts and Letters recognizes his lithographs for their "warm feeling of humanity."

1954
Commissioned to design album covers for Vanguard Records.

1956
Moves for his health to California, first to Pasadena

then Altadena (1957).

1958
Popular awareness of his work burgeons with its appearance in *Ebony* and *Negro Digest*.

1960
Civil Rights Act signed into law.

(May) *Solid as a Rock* wins First Purchase Award from Atlanta University exhibition.

(July) Reproduction of his work is the backdrop at a rally of the NAACP at which Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy speak.

1961
Portfolio of offset lithographs published with a foreword by Harry Belafonte. White, in turn, illustrates a book of Belafonte's songs.

1963
Congress for Racial Equality, Pasadena chapter, invites White to introduce writer James Baldwin.

(Aug.) Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington

for Jobs and Freedom.

(Nov.) President John F. Kennedy is assassinated.

1965
Begins teaching at Otis Art Institute.
(Aug.) Voting Rights Act becomes law. The Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles erupts in response to police discrimination and brutality.

1967
"Charles White: Portrayer of Black Dignity," an article in *Ebony*, spreads his acclaim.

1968
(April) Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated in Memphis.

(May) Visiting artist for a week in Dayton, Ohio, working with city children in the Living Arts Center program.

1969
Founding member of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters.

(June) Receives honorary Doctor of Arts from

Columbia College, Chicago.

1970
Wins fellowship from esteemed Tamarind Lithography Workshop, Los Angeles.

1971
Honored in the journal *Outstanding Educators of America.*

(Aug.) Southern Christian Leadership Conference, dedicated to civil rights, gives White a special award at the 14th annual convention in New Orleans.

1975
Elected to National Academy of Design.

(Feb.) Publication of Lerone Bennett Jr.'s T*he Shaping of Black America* with cover and illustrations by White.

(April) Solo exhibition at Spelman College, Atlanta.

1976
Traveling exhibition *The Work of Charles White: An American Experience* opens at High Museum of Art,

Atlanta. Also included in the now-celebrated *Two Centuries of Black American Art*, curated by David Driskell for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Designs lithograph *I Have a Dream* for the latter's exhibition poster, distributed free to public schools at White's request.

1978

City of Los Angeles commissions *Mary McLeod Bethune* mural for a library named for the educator and civil rights activist. Appointed commissioner for the California Afro-American Museum of History and Culture.

(June) Distinguished professor at Howard University, Washington, DC (there three days a month until health declines).

1979

(Oct. 3) Dies of congestive heart failure. Memorial jubilee with a tribute by actor Sidney Poitier at the Los Angeles Museum of Science and Industry.

Children in the Snow

circa 1938–42

gelatin silver photograph

Best remembered for his paintings, murals, drawings, and prints, White also engaged in photography. Like his more familiar works, *Children in the Snow* showcases the artist's interest in locating the extraordinary in the ordinary. The artist carefully framed this refined composition using architectural elements, including a fence in the foreground and staircase to the rear. Like the Social Realist photographers whom he admired, White carefully balanced the documentary and the spontaneous in works such as this photograph.

Boy with Accordion
1939

charcoal on paper

White communicates the emotional state of this boy immersed in music making, using expressive visual language. With a furrowed brow, the child slumps his shoulders and gazes at a distant point. You may notice the comma-like lines the artist made around him to suggest his movement. While White heavily worked the boy's head and hands to create a powerful sense of reality, he used only a sinuous outline to define the shirt. The slightly elevated viewpoint, looking downward at the child, makes the drawing more dynamic.

Though the title of the work refers to an "accordion," the boy plays a concertina: an instrument that, like the slightly larger, more expensive accordion, relies on the bellowed movement of air across internal pipes to produce sound.

There is Only Music

Each heartbeat a longing
For a soul his grandfather left behind
No words describe loneliness
A pain detained in the heart
There is only music
For sorrow, loss and hope
Sturdy hands play ‘Goin’ Home’

The accordion bellows moving
Breathing in, breathing out
Like the ocean waves that took
Them away from home
From all that they knew

With each tune
The soul vibrates
It connects
To all who grieve a loss
The soul sails back home
Home, home, home

– Zohreh

Zohreh Zand was born to an Iranian father and German mother and lived most of her life in Canada. Since 2013, she has served as a member of the Cincinnati Art Museum Docent Corps.

Working Man

circa 1940

pen and ink on paper

This loosely handled drawing reflects White's early interest in line, form, and the human figure. His subject—a man wearing an overcoat, collared shirt, and tie—appears weary and depleted. The artist's commitment to conveying emotional states through visual cues aligns with his interest in Social Realism and American Regionalism, movements of the 1930s and 40s that emphasized easily legible, content-driven narratives. They heroized members of the lower classes and the disenfranchised, including the working poor and farm laborers.

Portrait (Head)
1967

lithograph

Photographs that appear in books in White's extensive library were a springboard for his imagination. His imagery relates to these photographs to varying degrees. Disarmingly tender, *Portrait (Head)* reinterprets Erica Anderson's 1955 photograph of an unknown woman published in *The World of Albert Schweitzer*, a book that documents the philosopher-physician's hospital in Gabon in Central Africa. White bathes his anonymous protagonist in a radiant light. She appears saintly, like a harbinger of hope in the face of despair. More than a testament to his subject's physical beauty, White's lithograph speaks to the complexities of Schweitzer's legacy, one complicated by attitudes we today associate with paternalism, racism, and colonialism.

The Soldier

circa 1940

pen and ink on paper

This rapid sketch suggests action and shows White's less familiar, more fluid style. Here, he incorporated wispy, curved lines to create shadow and depth. Even when jotting down an idea, White considered the overall composition: the flowing contours of the soldier's body echo the hilly landscape. While no subsequent finished work is associated with *The Soldier*, White did return to the subject of service members throughout the 1940s.

Our War
From the portfolio Negro: U.S.A.
A Graphic History of the Negro People in America

circa 1948

offset lithograph

In this bold print, an air raid warden grasps a flashlight and gesticulates vigorously to those behind him as he leads them to safety. This visceral work references the 1944 Port Chicago explosion that killed 320 service members and injured another 400. Many of these victims were Black combat soldiers, assigned to unload munitions without any protective measures or concern for their safety. The disaster highlighted race-based discrimination in the military and led to strident calls for desegregation.

Awaiting His Return

1946

lithograph

Composed of faceted geometric shapes, White's composition reflects his early interest in the Cubism of Pablo Picasso and others. Similarly, his blocky approach and sharp use of line speak to his admiration for muralists such as Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, whom he encountered in 1946 when he and his first wife, the artist Elizabeth Catlett, spent several months in Mexico. The woman's physical solidity echoes the wooden table against which she rests. She looks off into the distance with apparent concern. Perhaps this woman, depicted shortly after World War II, awaits the return of a loved one from the battlefield, a supposition reinforced by the Blue Star Service Banner in the background. This non-official flag, designed in 1917, is displayed in the windows of families whose members are on active military duty.

Waiting…Wondering…Wrestling…

It only takes 10 minutes,
To get from the store
To our driveway…
It's been 20 since you said
You're on your way…
Spirit crumbles, heart starts to sway
Waiting…

Wondering…
Worrying…
I wonder if this is how grandma felt
When baba went off to war.
Fought for this country
Still had to shop at separate stores

Wrestling…
Wondering…
Waiting…
Like Aunt Niecy who was proud of
Uncle Michael for Sit ins,
Where he stood up
At counters that are colorless,
While the coloreds rest in jail cells,
Paddy wagons
Were they…

Worrying…
Wrestling…
Withering…
Like when you leave…
Waited for your entrance from my womb
But too many mothers cradle round
Abdomens, praying it wasn't a tomb
Because at 5 you're denied
Humanity,
Now 17 with dreams,
Hoping you make it to your room…

Ryan Nichole Leary is a visual artist/historian/ educator and Cincinnati native dedicated to educating, sharing, and celebrating the narratives of people that are part of the African Diaspora.

Head of a Man
From the portfolio Negro: U.S.A.
A Graphic History of the Negro People in America

1948

offset lithograph

This sculptural work is part of a portfolio of 26 prints by 15 creators from the Workshop of Graphic Art, an interracial group of Social Realist artists in New York City. As a member, White produced numerous images that demonstrated his belief in revolutionary action through art making. Here, White presents a powerful image of a Black man's head and neck—an anonymous figure whose expression suggests determination and resiliency.

Freeport Columbia
1946

ink and charcoal on paper

Freeport Columbia references two harrowing events. The first is the 1946 unprovoked killing of two Black men by a white police officer at a Freeport, New York, bus station. The second, taking place days later, is the outbreak of violence in Columbia, Tennessee, sparked by a heated interaction between African American Navy Veteran James Stephenson and his mother, Gladys, and William Fleming, a white store clerk.

In White's explosive drawing, published in the magazine *Congress Vue* as "Protest to President Truman," a raging storm of chaos, destruction, and death gives way to the towering figure of a Black man in uniform. His military shirt is tattered and torn, while a noose with fraying ends encircles his neck, and shackles circumscribe his wrists. The chains of bondage on his right hand are loose, enabling the man to hold aloft a torch—a symbol of justice and truth.

Abraham Lincoln
1952

crayon and charcoal on paperboard

White created this drawing in a photo-realist style, basing it on one of five portraits taken by the Civil War photographer Alexander Gardner on November 8, 1863, just one week before Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) delivered his now-famed Gettysburg Address. White presents President Lincoln with grit and determination as he stares directly at the viewer. Lincoln, like the abolitionist John Brown, was one of the artist's few white subjects, a reflection of his admiration for both men's commitment to equity and racial justice.

Emancipation Proclamation
1965–67

ink and collage on paper

White made this drawing to illustrate a publication by Philip Sterling and Rayford Logan titled *Four Took Freedom: The Lives of Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Robert Small, and Blanche K. Bruce* (1967). Written for a young adult audience, the book profiles four Black individuals who, born enslaved, emerged as leaders in the fight for freedom and justice. The poses of the figures suggest a sense of possibility, one holding aloft President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, mandated by executive order on January 1, 1863. The lefthand figure may be holding a newspaper and wears a robe resembling a chorister's gown, perhaps in tribute to the importance of faith and community in Black churches.

White made the illustration in ink with collaged text and used white pigment to conceal adjustments he had made to the drawing, knowing it would disappear when reproduced.

Lazarus (Black Cowboy)
1965

charcoal on paper

The title and imagery endow this drawing with multilayered significance. The subtitle references Black cowboys who, although common, were omitted from the stereotypical narratives of the American West. The man's dress complicates the story, as it resembles a Civil War cavalry soldier's uniform. He dons what appears to be a Kepi, a distinctively shaped cap worn by men fighting for both the Union and the Confederacy, and his unbuttoned jacket suggests an enlisted man's sack coat, despite the modern collar and hint of a turtleneck worn beneath. Thus, history reverberates in the present.

Biblical references, like Lazarus in the title, further deepen White's meaning. The story of Lazarus, whom Jesus Christ resurrected from the grave, is a metaphor for the journey from darkness into light guided by faith. A shower of light shining down on this man suggests hope in the face of despair.

Jazz Flute
1955

pen, ink, and gouache on paper

The light touch in this fine ink drawing suggests the melodic quality of the flute. White's subjects reflect his lifelong interest in music. While some works portray well-known musicians and performers or acknowledge their influence, this drawing isolates hands as they make music. In this vignette, the artist juxtaposes the detailed cross-hatching that shapes the hands with the fine lines that form the instrument. Despite the naturalism of *Jazz Flute*, it appears that White did not use a source image or draw from life since neither the flute's number of keys nor their disposition on the instrument's body is entirely accurate.

Solid as a Rock (My God is My Rock)
1958

linocut

This dignified portrait of a woman, whose garment strongly resembles a choir member's, reflects White's reverence for music—including gospel music. It is also a tribute to his regard for the church more broadly, as a place of communion, fellowship, sanctity, salvation, and safety. Powerfully depicted, his figure's posture and outward gaze suggest resolute steadfastness and channel the work's title. The King James Bible (2 Samuel 22:1-3) reads:

"David sang to the Lord the words of this song when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. He said:

> The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation. He is my stronghold, my refuge, and my savior—from violent people you save me."

Solid as a Rock (My God is My Rock)

Standing firm on who I am

Despite of where I am

Faith in the future before me as sure as the ground that I stand on beneath me

SEE
ME

NOTHING IN THIS WORLD IS GIVEN
NOR DO I EXPECT IT TO BE

But life shouldn’t be this hard
But I walk it
Gracefully

Head high
Intentionally

There’s a story being written and it includes me

I just hope that when you get to my part

You see my heart
And you keep telling my story!

–Vernon Jackson

Cincinnati native Vernon Jackson is a spoken word poet, best selling author, and owner of Noble Barber & Beauty. He is known globally for providing free haircuts to kids with different needs through his "Gifted Event" program.

Micah
1964

lithograph

In 1964, White created two works dedicated to the biblical prophet Micah: this small lithograph and the ambitiously scaled linocut nearby. Many civil rights proponents, including Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., drew inspiration from the Book of Micah in their campaigns for social justice, equity, and universal enfranchisement. This compact image, which depicts the prophet walking through the darkness and into the light (a clear metaphor for salvation), powerfully conveys the prophet's stalwart energy and spiritual conviction.

Micah

1964

linocut

Monumental in format, this linocut is powerful in its visual articulation. The eighth-century BCE biblical figure's gaze is locked firmly on a scene not visible to us. His full-length robes swirl around him, conveying an energy that parallels the prophet's own heightened sense of purposeful, yet agitated emotion. The artist communicates this same sensibility in the depiction of Micah's full beard and thick head of hair, which, like his garment, pulse with expressive vitality.

Study for Pope X

circa 1960

graphite on architectural vellum

With a natural and relaxed quality, this portrait combines the secular and sacred. White imagines the pope, the head of the Catholic Church, as a modern-day African American man. He wears a non-descript ecclesiastic vestment, a distinctive miter (the ceremonial hat reserved for Catholic bishops and the pope), and sunglasses. White's pope, who some scholars believe resembles Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., is a man for and of the people.

Community Voices

The art of Charles White is powerful in its relevance, continuing to move and impress us today. The Cincinnati Art Museum invited eight community members with different professions and points of view to respond to works in this exhibition. Each chose a piece to which they relate and decided on the form their response would take. Their contributions appear with their brief biographies and pictures alongside the works they selected. We thank these individuals for openly sharing their thoughts, emotions, and creativity and hope their beautiful voices enhance your experience.

To enjoy our Community Voices contributions through accessible audio recordings, please download the Bloomberg Connects app using the QR code below. Once in the application, search for the Cincinnati Art Museum. Upon opening the museum's guide, you will find the *Charles White: A Little Higher* exhibition information under "Currently on View."

Missouri C
1972

etching

Like the subjects of so many of White's works, this nameless woman is laden with symbolic meaning. The image embodies the artist's reverence for the dignity and strength of Black women as well as the fortitude, grit, and hope for a better tomorrow (the latter referenced in the light that bathes the face and chest).

Though we do not know the woman's identity, we do know White's source for her image: an Alwyn Scott Turner photograph documenting passengers on a so-called Boblo boat (a steamboat that ferried people to Detroit's Boblo Island Amusement Park) in *Photographs of the Detroit People* (1970), a publication in White's library. The artist lifted this woman out of the context of the photograph and skillfully, using cross-hatching, gave her solitary figure a monumental presence.

Pope X
1972

etching

As with White's *Study for Pope X* in the first gallery, this piece invites us to consider what it would take for a Black man to assume the papacy: one of the most influential positions in the world. Here, White depicts only his subject's head, an unusual and arresting compositional choice that the artist leaves open to interpretation. The visual allusion to decapitation recalls not only Christian martyrs, but also conjures African Americans whose lives were taken from them simply because of the color of their skin—including Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., assassinated in 1968 and, not incidentally, a man of the Church. White's pope may be read as one who sacrificed his life for a higher cause. Alternatively, he may be a spiritual man immersed in prayer, lost in thought, or contemplating a celestial vision.

Vision
1973

etching on sterling silver plate

Etched onto a silver plate, *Vision* is a luminous, dream-like image in which a Black woman lifts her chin and turns her eyes heavenward, toward a radiant glow above. Although the lighting that surrounds her appears dramatic, the effect is not menacing, but, rather, uplifting. This work was based on a lithograph by the same name, created by White four years earlier for a portfolio called *I Have a Dream* with the poem "Harlem" by Langston Hughes on the overleaf.

Cat’s Cradle
1972

etching

A young Black boy dressed only in shorts sits on the ground, legs splayed before him. He plays a game of Cat’s Cradle, creating a series of complex patterns in string by progressively shifting designs between his outstretched fingers. This image, however, is not a simple reference to the innocence of youth. Consider, for instance, how two lengths of cord ensnare the subject’s feet and cross over his head. These transform the child into a puppet whose agency—and by extension destiny—is beyond his control. They may also hint at the gruesome legacy of lynching in America and further suggest that a dangerous snare awaits him.

Love Letter I

1971

lithograph

The first of three works in White's *Love Letter* series, this image features a lone woman in the upper register. Her expression communicates a seriousness of purpose and fortitude. The two pink roses that float before her conjure thoughts of feminine strength, solidarity, sacrifice, and romantic love. The woman's natural hair, arrayed in a soft afro, functions as a secular halo, transforming her into a modern saint. It is no coincidence that the figure resembles Angela Davis (b. 1944), a prominent educator and member of the Black Panther and Communist parties arrested in October 1970 and acquitted in 1972. An activist throughout his life, White allowed the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners to use this image on pre-printed postcards addressed to Ronald Reagan (then governor of California).

I Have a Dream
1976

lithograph

In 1976, the Graphic Arts Council of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art commissioned *I Have a Dream* for a poster to commemorate its groundbreaking exhibition, *Two Centuries of Black American Art, 1750–1950*, curated by the esteemed artist and educator David Driskell. The lithograph refers to Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s seminal speech delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. White's work personifies King's vision of a more just future, built on a shared foundation of equity, dignity, and respect for all. It also references the strength and power White found in Black women and the hope for humanity he saw in children. His timeless image of maternity harkens back to five centuries of Western European art depicting the Christian savior Jesus Christ in the arms of his mother, the Virgin Mary.

The Dream Poem

44th President and great movie stars,
billionaire rappers,
gorgeous models
like Naomi Campbell in exotic cars.

Cotton picking to Sean John
the dream and hope carries on.
Fenty fashion moguls
pressing on.

From darkness to light
stealing away at night
Jim Crow nightmares
I refuse to lose sight.

I have seeds to plant up yonder
I can’t get weary;
while crossing raging rivers, a sight so scary.

A beam shining far north as I dream of freedom,
ancestors guide me and I heed them.

God by my side as Maya proclaims still I rise
and Malcolm by any means necessary
with Allah on his side.

Down on my knees I humbly pray
my eyes on the prize, through this western maze.
I'll keep pressing on to the end of days
that my child's dreams become reality
and reality will stay.

–Alpha "Arts" Frierson, © July 13, 2023

Alpha "Arts" Frierson is a multidisciplined artist from Loveland, Ohio, with a focus on portrait painting and musical performance.

Exodus II
1966

color lithograph, printed by Gemini Ltd.

By wrapping this figure in a cloak disassociated with the fashions of any era, White makes this image timeless and its message endlessly resonant. The patchy abstract background further removes the subject from the day-to-day world. The figure gazes off into the horizon at a point obscured from our view. Though we cannot see what this person sees, we may experience, through this gaze, a shared sense of venturing forth or being drawn toward one's destiny. The work's title reinforces this feeling; it references Exodus, the second book of the Bible, which recounts the liberation of enslaved Israelites in fifteenth-century BCE Egypt.

Study – Children's Games
1975

charcoal on paper

This meticulously crafted charcoal drawing is closely related to White's oil wash on paper *Children's Games II*, a work he completed the following year. Although the drawing is large, highly finished, and stands on its own, it may have been a preliminary study for the oil. In the charcoal, the boy, with pleading eyes, appears closer to us, and his isolation makes a powerful statement. A shadow—far too broad to be his own—looms behind the child. This dark shape and the tangled rope threaten to consume him, heightening the work's chilling quality. The realities of systemic racism terrified White, yet he saw in children the promise of a better tomorrow.

Sound of Silence II
1978

lithograph

The artist's subject here is a young Black male whose carefully coiffed afro resembles a halo, suggesting the qualities of a martyr or saint. He gazes at us solemnly with luminous, piercing eyes as he gently pulls his elbows up and back. This unusual gesture causes the jacket to fall open, revealing a white shirt beneath. A mysterious shell hovers between the two halves of his coat and seems to emanate from and float above him.

Interpreting White's rich symbolism in this disquieting image is like peeling an onion with many layers. Beyond the reference to Simon & Garfunkel's equally haunting song, there may be allusions to mortality and Christian salvation. White was perhaps also thinking about ritual *nkisi nkondi* figures produced by the Kongo Peoples of Central Africa, which centered power and energy in the abdomen.

Sound of Silence
1978

lithograph

White experimented with multiple versions of this enigmatic image in 1978, the year before he died. Two prints are in this gallery, this one monochromatic and the other using color. Silhouetted against a blank background, the young man in this rendition commands our full attention, while the other composition is more complex. Which do you prefer?

The evocative title references Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel's song, "The Sound of Silence," released to acclaim in 1964. The traumatic events of the early 1960s, including the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, may have contributed, in part, to the popular response to Simon's darkly poetic lyrics. The song and White's later artwork become invocations to not only hear but listen to one another: "The words of the prophets" are "whispered in the sounds of silence," Simon & Garfunkel—and White—tell us.

J’Accuse #6
1966

charcoal on paper

With his head upturned, eyes closed, arms opened wide, and fingers gently splayed, White’s subject in *J’Accuse #6* moves fluidly as though entranced by music. The patterns that compose the background correspondingly ebb and flow. This man bears more than a passing likeness to the artist’s lifelong friend and confidante, the entertainer and political activist Harry Belafonte (1927–2023), a resemblance that reinforces the sense that we may be witnessing a performance. But White leaves us free to imagine the meaning of this emotional image. The man pivots away toward a glowingly brilliant point of illumination in the work’s upper-left margin, drawing our attention to a light that looks celestial.

J’Accuse #6

The placement of the fingers. The arc of the elbows. The slight contraction of the torso. The profile of the shoulders, neck, and face. The sincerity of the facial expression reminds me of dance: shaping movement in time, communicating what IS now, and suggesting what may be in the future. The dynamic charcoal strokes wrap the implied movement of the man’s body in an atmosphere of foreboding chaos. An atmosphere thick with restraint and constriction, and yet the expressiveness—the lightness of the central figure is undeniable. This contradiction of restraint and expressiveness, darkness and light, softness and hardness are fundamentals of dance and the Black American experience. Movement as resistance. Movement as meditation. Movement as language. And movement as an expression of love.

Reggie Harris is a strategist, artist, and politico. Elected to City Council in 2021, he is a retired professional ballet dancer, a clinical social worker and therapist, and an advocate for social policy.

J’Accuse (French for “I accuse”)

White invested significance in titles for his works of art, his imagery and words resonating together. As his 1966 exhibition at the Heritage Gallery in Los Angeles was about to open, he retitled all but one of the 18 works on display there “J’Accuse,” French for “I accuse.” In so doing, he drew an analogy between systemic racism in the United States and a notorious example of governmental corruption and antisemitism in France. “J’Accuse!” is the name of an open letter Émile Zola wrote to a French newspaper to advocate for Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish military officer from Alsace falsely convicted of treason in 1894. For years, the Dreyfus Affair polarized the French public. But the resounding outcry from supporters finally led in 1906 to the captain’s exoneration. Like Zola, an indignant White pointed a finger at perpetrators of hate and injustice.

White’s use of this title for his unplanned series is provocative. Yet some of the works to which he assigned it, including the two drawings on display nearby, are among his most lyrical. It is as though his emotions were ranging between anger and despair. The unsettling events of the 1960s—notwithstanding hard-won gains in civil rights—profoundly impacted White’s outlook.

J’Accuse #2
1965

charcoal on paper

Nine distinct faces emerge from an abstracted background, arrayed in an arched shape that recalls Western European altarpieces as well as grave markers or tombstones. Curvilinear lines emanate from within the composition and appear to sway, like plants in the wind, flames, or even rising smoke. Though the figures’ expressions are varied, all present a seriousness that, in some instances, veers toward worry or anxiety. The light bathing their faces suggests a divine presence.

Wanted Poster #5

1969

oil wash on paperboard

This work is one of 21 related pieces White created between 1969 and 1972 that evoke pre-Civil War "fugitive slave" posters. His three figures have powerful stories to tell:

- "IDA" likely references journalist, abolitionist, and anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells (1862–1931). Wells is best remembered for her prodigious mind and ardent commitment to Black advancement.

- "CLOTEL," who looks out at us with defiant strength, may allude to the central character in playwright William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*. White's Clotel is held captive by the political power and systemic racism of colonial America, as the stars encircling her suggest.

- "EDMONIA" probably refers to Edmonia Lewis (1844–1907), a gifted sculptor of African American and Native American descent whose work is in Gallery 217.

Wanted Poster #5

Look at me. I'm wanted. I'm loved. I'm hated. I made it to a wanted poster and got captured by an artist—a great artist who understands that I'm wanted. I'm wanted because my ancestors set the stage for civilization and because I'm a source for rhythm. I'm wanted to extract my forefathers' melanin and alchemy to take economies out of the red and into the black. I'm wanted to harvest bales and move Coke off grocery store shelves, then out of the red, white, and blue an old uncle wanted me for protection, to fight his fight; but do not forget that I'm wanted to bow down with face to ground. White rendered me black stroke by stroke, brilliant dope, like Chappelle jokes. I'm wanted to go away, but leave those beats and your footwork can stay.

–James Pate

James Pate is a Dayton-based artist and art educator recognized for his paintings, drawings, and large-scale murals. He believes art can assist all of us in our personal journeys. "It ultimately builds confidence and lifts spirits."

Wanted Poster #14a

1970

lithograph

This lithograph showcases White's use of monochromatic sepia tones and all-over geometric patterning to evoke the faded, textured surfaces of vintage photographs and aged documents, including dehumanizing notices for the sale, capture, and return of enslaved people. White's subjects—an unnamed mother and child—look hauntingly out at us from their rounded frames. Stenciled above the boy, "1619" references the year that Portuguese enslavers brought Africans from Angola to Jamestown, Virginia. Book-ending this date at the top right is "19??," which invites us to contemplate how and when racism might end. White joined the two halves of this image with a bold "X," a pointed reference to the negation of Black Americans by a homeland they did not choose.

Love Letter III
1977

lithograph

White created this print just two years prior to his death and anchored the composition with the cloaked head, neck, and shoulders of a woman rising from the lithograph's lower margin. His wife, Frances Barrett White, related the following story about it:

> For Charlie, the shell became a symbol. In one of his last color lithographs there was a strong, radiant head thrust upward—the head of a woman with a conch shell floating [above] her. I asked Charlie, "Why a shell?" He answered me, "It was one of man's earliest religious symbols. It represents woman." Hugging me, he told me, "This is my tribute to the wonderful woman in my life."

Shells of diverse types have long-held cross-cultural associations as metaphors for both femininity and faith. White may have found inspiration for this lithograph in sculptures from the 1600s of women transported by religious experience.

Prophet I
1976

color lithograph

By the mid-1970s, Charles White had begun moving away from the monochromatic palette that characterized his earlier works to embrace color. Color gives this work and the others nearby a sense of otherworldliness and stillness. In this lithograph, gradations of a soft blue form an abstracted backdrop, against which hovers a single pink flower. The curves of this traditional symbol of femininity and love contrast sharply with the crisp edges of the beams that intersect to resemble a Christian cross, directly behind White's meditative figure. The drapery that enfolds this figure is reminiscent of linen wrappings used in burial rituals; it conveys a sense of rebirth or redemption as if the man has been raised, Lazarus-like, from the tomb.

The Shaping of Black America

In 1974, the Johnson Publishing Company commissioned White to produce the cover image and chapter-opening illustrations for Lerone Bennett Jr.'s landmark publication *The Shaping of Black America* (1975). This project was a summary of White's steadfast commitment to communicating with the public about the matters that most concerned him: the legacies of racism and oppression, the nobility and aspirations of ordinary people, the heroes who fought for freedom and equality, and the accomplishments of Black Americans.

John H. Johnson (1918–2006) founded the Johnson Publishing Company in Chicago in 1942 and three years later published the first issue of *Ebony*. *Ebony* made the company one of the leading Black-owned businesses in the United States. The monthly magazine spoke to the interests of a Black audience hungry for positive representation. Journalist and historian Lerone Bennett Jr. (1928–2018) became the magazine's longtime executive editor in 1958. His book reflects the shared objectives of the publisher, author, and artist: to expose and improve race relations in America.

White's illustrations are conceptually and visually complex. As in works from his Wanted Poster Series in the previous gallery, their backgrounds resemble old, discolored parchment paper folded and unfolded over time, alluding to nineteenth-century broadsides announcing auctions of enslaved people or hunting down those who managed to escape. The artist's exquisite original artwork transcends the requirements for small-scale reproduction. White diluted the oil paint to the consistency of watercolor, creating delicate washes and subtle tonal gradations. His commanding draftsmanship endows the figures with monumental gravitas.

The First Generation (Arrival)
1974

oil wash on paperboard

The First Generation opens Lerone Bennett Jr.'s *The Shaping of Black America* (1975). The figure of the woman is iconic, gazing straight at the viewer out of the past. The composition imprisons her; her emotional face appears mug shot-like in a square at the top, and her exquisitely delineated, careworn hands are revealed through a larger window at the bottom. "20 INDENTURED BLACKS" boldly and impersonally stenciled in the center band refers to the arrival at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 of twenty African people violently wrested from their homelands and brought to North America in forced servitude.

SIXTEEN NINETEEN

Being First
Doesn't necessarily make you a Winner
Perhaps you're just the Guinea Pig
The Unwilling Participant, the Beginner.
The Test Run.
For now, you just look like the Best One.
Subconscious reminding one to retain
Some semblance of the Prayers you knew
In the midst of utter confusion
Ocean far more gray than Blue
Torn from your People and Language
While under the dubious care of the White Lion
Swaying in the salts of the New World breeze
Bringing the First Twenty of Me, my Brethren
Crying.
Some resigned to remain stoic
In the Face of What They Don't Know.
The tears remain suspended in ducts
They know Not Where They Go
There is a Horizon
Apparently somewhere far from Here
This a different Sun altogether
They have never known this Fear
Couriers of a foul Legacy

A Binding Contract Unsigned
Ancestors on the Wind
Forever On My Mind

–Derek Snow

Derek Snow: Black Man. Actor, Director, Writer. Son. Friend. Brother with an unquenchable desire to make a difference.

The World of the Slave: Harriet Tubman
1974

oil wash on paperboard

White featured the celebrated American abolitionist and Underground Railroad "conductor" Harriet Tubman (circa 1822–1913) in multiple works throughout his career. In some, he presented her in allegorical terms (as, for instance, a modern-day Moses). In others—such as this portrait—his renderings are more straightforward. While other artists generally depicted Tubman as a formidable woman of action, here she appears contemplative; perhaps she is reflecting on the inhumanity of enslavement or considering strategies for continuing to lead individuals to freedom.

White designed even deceptively simple compositions such as this one with great care. The repeated folds of Tubman's headwrap echo the circular shape of the roundel, and the curving forms of her shoulders and soft collar create a harmonious composition.

The Black Founding Fathers: Rev. Richard Allen

1974

oil wash on paperboard

Unlike Captain Paul Cuffe, whose portrait is adjacent, Reverend Richard Allen (1760–1831) was born enslaved (to a Philadelphia lawyer). He taught himself to read and write and paid $2,000 (more than $36,000 today) for his freedom in 1780, by which time he had already been directly involved with the Methodist Church for several years. In 1794, he founded the Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. As the first bishop of the AME Church, Reverend Allen provided a welcoming place of worship, refuge, and social services to Black Americans.

The Black Founding Fathers: Capt. Paul Cuffe

1974

oil wash on paperboard

An influential abolitionist, philanthropist, and ship merchant, Captain Paul Cuffe (sometimes spelled Cuffee; 1759–1817) was one of the wealthiest African Americans of his generation at the peak of his career. Born a free man on Cuttyhunk Island, Massachusetts, he was deeply devoted to the cause of Black emancipation and directly engaged with the communities of freed people that Britain established in Sierra Leone.

System: Frederick Douglass
1974

oil wash on paperboard

White expressed deep respect and admiration for the celebrated abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) whom he featured in several drawings, prints, and murals over the decades. In both this illustration for Bennett's history and the nearby etching, the artist presents Douglass in a roundel, a format used in Western cultures since Greco-Roman antiquity to honor ancestors, heroes, or other illustrious figures. Crowned by his famously exuberant hair, Douglass pierces us with his gaze. His seemingly stern expression suggests thoughtful concern and resolve.

Frederick Douglass
1974

etching

During the time White made the illustrations for *The Shaping of Black America*, he also created independent works that relate to the project. In this example, the artist used an old-fashioned script and crisp, linear techniques to give this image of Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) a patina of age, as though we are looking at the frontispiece of a nineteenth-century book. You may notice that the image of Douglass is in reverse from that in the adjacent painting, a result of the printing process. This necessitated writing the name backwards on the etching plate, not an easy task.

White Servitude
1974

oil wash on paperboard

In “White Servitude in America,” a 1969 article for *Ebony*, Bennett expressed his contention that the bondage of poor white people in Europe in the 1600s served as a “proving ground” for the enslavement of Black Africans in America. *White Servitude* features a woman viewed slightly from below as though elevated on a platform. Just above the crown of her head appears the dehumanizing word “SOLD” and behind her, “A WHI[TE] FEMALE / AGE 23 YRS / NAM[ED] NAN.” The framing around the painting’s edges reinforces the analogy to an old, crinkled auction broadside.

The woman has an “X” prominently emblazoned on her hand, a potent reference to the negation and invalidation of enslaved people and a mark that illiterate individuals used to sign documents. White refers to the prohibition against education in reading and writing intended to keep captive people in a state of physical and intellectual dependency.

The Road Not Taken
1974

oil wash on paperboard

“A nation is a choice.” This is the opening sentence for Bennett’s chapter “The Road Not Taken,” the road being that of equality for all people in the United States. He wrote, “The race problem in America was a deliberate invention of men who systematically separated blacks and whites in order to make money.”

Like many of White’s images for Bennett’s publication, the interpretation of this illustration is richly thought-provoking. The artist divides the composition into two registers. The word SOUTH is partially seen at the top left and NORTH at the bottom right. Are these figures allegories of these regions? Does the person at the top seem wary, despondent, or tired? The active bottom figure is clearly on the move, perhaps looking toward the future. Is this person making the “Great Migration” from the Southern states to the North in search of better opportunities for self-actualization, professional advancement, and personal fulfillment?

Red and Black
1974

oil wash on paperboard

Presented in a triangular composition, these three individuals open chapter four of Bennett's *The Shaping of Black America*, also titled "Red and Black." As with Bennett's chapter, the figures embody the complexities and contradictions governing relations between Africans, Indigenous Peoples, and their descendants in the United States. Although close and overlapping, the figures are immersed in their own worlds. The crisp geometric patterns behind them function as a unifying backdrop, simultaneously recalling Britain's Union Jack, the flag of the Confederacy, and textiles from African and First Nation Peoples. A bullseye hovers above the group, suggesting that they are targets of racially motivated violence in the United States.

The Black Worker
1974

oil wash on paperboard

To accompany Bennett's chapter nine, *The Black Worker* visually embodies "the arc of black labor from legal slavery to economic slavery." A lone figure stands firmly in the middle of the pictorial field, his strong arms crossed before him. Dressed in the utilitarian clothes of a laborer and wearing a working man's cap, he turns his head slightly to his left. How do you read his expression?

Hovering just above and behind the figure is the ghostly silhouette of a man's head inscribed with a stylized rendering of his skull and brain. White includes arrows at left and right as though commanding us to notice this feature. Europeans and Euro-Americans commonly used the profile and the pseudoscience of physiognomy to claim their superiority over people of color. Charles White counters such racist assumptions by suggesting the breadth of the worker's abilities—both physical and intellectual.

Labor Worthy

Whom much is given much will be required.
Laborer is definitely worthy of his hire.
Holy righteous work you can never retire.
Be living proof purified by fire.
Labor not in vain bruh do your thang.
Faith the size of a mustard grain.
Knocking down mountains the strength of a crane.
Battle of the mind protect your brain.
Make conscious effort do more than maintain.
Be an Apostle of the Lord keep it simple and plain.

You work hard on the yard on the boulevard.
You feel you're doing your part but your heart
truly scared.
Laboring something you and I must do.
Stop the vanity and labor in truth.
Work tilling the earth or work on the roof.
House with foundation won't be able to move.
YAH's yoke is easy burden is light.
Make it through tough times look on side
that's bright.
Work pray through night reach higher heights'
Be cordial polite the Holy Spirit invite.

–Damon Di'ke Nelson

Damon Di'ke Nelson is a self-proclaimed poet and the Facilities Support Team supervisor for the Cincinnati Art Museum.

System: W. E. B. DuBois
1974

oil wash on paperboard

White's fascination with renowned educator, sociologist, and activist W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963) dates to his youth, when he encountered Alain Locke's seminal book *The New Negro* (1925) while browsing the shelves of the Chicago Public Library. The artist—whose predominantly white high school taught nothing about the history of Black America—was captivated by what he read in Locke's anthology, including DuBois's "The Negro Mind Reaches Out," a searing critique of European colonialism. He paired DuBois with another of his intellectual heroes, Frederick Douglass (also in this gallery), for this opener for Chapter 8 of *The Shaping of Black America*. This chapter is devoted to exploring the "colonial system that perpetuated the political, economic, and cultural exploitation of non-Europeans" and the opposition of these men thereto.

Money, Merchants and Markets
1974

oil and collage on paperboard

Money, Merchants and Markets introduces the tenth and final chapter of Lerone Bennett Jr.'s *The Shaping of Black America*. Like the text it complements, the image celebrates African American business acumen, industry, and entrepreneurial spirit. The focus is a man, seated on a chair and deep in thought. Wearing a suit, he lifts the corner of an oversized sheet of paper from the floor as if to read or analyze it. Pinned to the wall behind him are three schematic diagrams inscribed "ATLANTA," "SO. CAR[OLINA],"and "LOUI[SIANA]." Reminiscent of architectural blueprints or construction documents, these seem to simultaneously reference aerial maps, redistricting plans, military operational charts, and Industrial Age machinery. Behind the ATLANTA drawing, to the left and right, emerge partially visible five-dollar bills. Whatever White's intention with these somewhat cryptic details, this man appears in charge of his own destiny.

Lerone Bennett Jr., *The Shaping of Black America*, illustrated by Charles White. Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1975

Closed copy: Lent by the Harriet Beecher Stowe House

Open copy: Lent by the Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library

In the preface to this book, Lerone Bennett Jr. explains his intentions:

This is an essay towards a new understanding of the long and continuing attempts of Africans and African descendants to possess themselves and the new land…. I have been interested here in the forces and events that made black America what it is today. And since black America was of central importance in the shaping of white America, I have dealt at some length with some of the forgotten pages of white and [Indigenous] history.

The book has two sections:

Foundations "begins with the first generation of African-Americans and contains chapters on the black founding fathers, the white semi-slaves of America, and the vitally important story of the relations between the blacks and [Indigenous people]."

Directions "focuses on the history of black labor and black capital… and ends with the central paradoxes of the political economy of blackness."

"There is no final chapter," he writes. "The final chapter is being written by men, women, and children who are groping for new directions in one of history's hard places."

Jubilee
1974

oil wash on paperboard

A man with a warm expression joyously hoists a toddler on his shoulders. In the nineteenth century, "Days of Jubilee" were celebrations of emancipation anniversaries, which differed in date from one state to the next. 1865, at the top of White's *Jubilee*, is not the year of the Emancipation Proclamation, which Abraham Lincoln issued in 1863; it is the year that General Order No. 3 liberated the enslaved people of Texas, the last holdout. This took place on June 19th, marked by our national Juneteenth holiday.

White suggests both the euphoria and trepidation that emancipation invoked, as well as the specter of racism to come. His inclusion of the spangle of eight stars may symbolize the "Stars & Bars," the colloquial name for the first flag of the Confederate States of America. This oblique reference to the American South was perhaps an indictment of the region's resolute championing of enslavement.