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**Special Issue: Tracing the Representation of African American Artists**

## Charles White: A Retrospective

*The Must-See Show in New York*



Charles White, *(Sound of Silence)* (1978). Printed by David Panosh, Published by Hand Graphics, Ltd. The Art Institute of Chicago. Margaret Fisher Fund © 1978 The Charles White Archives

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In [Must See](#)



The aim of the artistic life of the African American painter and printmaker Charles White (1918-1979) was to create “images of dignity” of his people; he believed that art had a role to play in shifting narratives that might change the world. His contribution to the struggle is seen in the [traveling retrospective](#) “Charles White: A Retrospective”. Presented during the centennial of White’s birth in 1918 on Chicago’s South Side, it [debuted earlier this year](#) at the Art Institute of Chicago and will open next month at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (7 October-13 January) before traveling to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art next spring. The retrospective is the first major monographic presentation of White’s drawings, photographs, sculpture and ephemera to have taken place in more than 35 years.

The grey, pencil-drawn images of such historically important African American figures as Harriet Tubman, the American abolitionist and political activist, Frederick Douglass, the statesman social reformer and writer, and Booker T. Washington, orator and advisor to US presidents, are on show alongside quotidian scenes of black life that are imbued with grace and beauty.



Charles White, *General Moses (Harriet Tubman)* (1965). Private collection © The Charles White Archives. Photo courtesy Swann Auction Galleries

There are also illustrations of racial pride, cultural legacy and political achievement, such as a reproduction of White's large 1943 mural *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*, from Hampton University, Virginia, an anti-slavery scene presented on the scale of a history painting, featuring a central figure whose chains really are to be broken by George Washington Carver, Marian Anderson and Nat Turner, among others.

White's pictures pull in different directions to heighten hidden histories, and, at turns, to complicate the depiction of the African American experience. Leading figures are drawn to evoke the cost of triumph. In the charcoal and white gouache portraits of Denmark Vesey, a former slave who was hanged in 1822 after being accused of planning a slave revolt in Charleston, South Carolina, and singer, actor and activist Paul Robeson, among others, what stands out are their eyes: they search, they are sorrowful and ultimately they show something of solace.

"My work takes shape around images and ideas that are centered within the vortex of a black life experience, a nitty-gritty ghetto experience—resulting in contradictory emotions: anguish, hope, love, despair, happiness, faith, lack of faith, dreams," White once said. "Stubbornly holding on to an elusive romantic belief that the people of this land cannot always be insensible to the dictates of justice or deaf to the voice of humanity."

Much of the work in the MoMA exhibition precedes the Civil Rights and Black Power movements that led to the Black Arts Movement, where formal demands were made on black artists to create uplifting art for the community. In some ways, White is one of the early leaders of that aesthetic movement, having worked for four decades drawing the black body, heroically and with great elegance and real authority. In doing so, he influenced generations of figurative artists, giving them permission to celebrate what has often been ignored. Kadir Nelson, whose every [New Yorker cover illustration](#) evokes White's prolific virtuosity, is a reminder of White's legacy, as are the careers of two of his former students, Kerry James Marshall and David Hammons.

Hammons, as a precursor to the retrospective, organized a [single-room exhibition](#) at MoMA last year titled "Charles White—Leonardo da Vinci. Curated by David Hammons". The exhibition included a single work by White and da Vinci along with their natal charts, suggested a cosmic connection (both artists were born in the first half of April). Each artist's fidelity to drawing, 450 years apart, links their mastery of the medium and enduring influence.



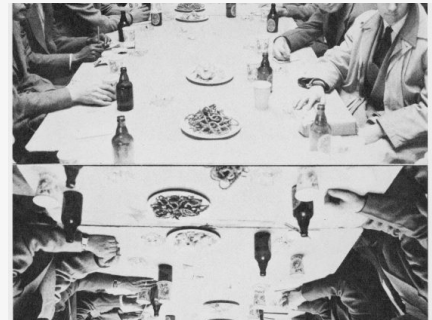
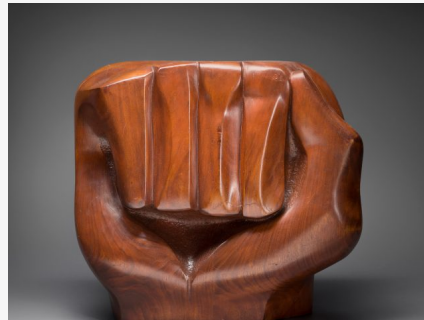
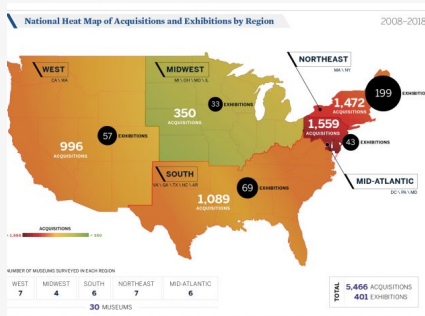
Charles White, *Our Land* (1951). Private Collection © The Charles White Archives. Photo credit: Gavin Ashworth. Courtesy Jonathan Boos

Hammons slyly suggested how White's 1973 oil-washed, *Black Pope (Sandwich Board Man)* deserves equal footing with any da Vinci. For his part, Marshall has written in his essay, *A Black Artist Named White*, "No other artist has inspired my own devotion to a career in image making more than he did. I saw in his example the way to greatness."

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