

The Man Who Taught a Generation of Black Artists Gets His Own Retrospective

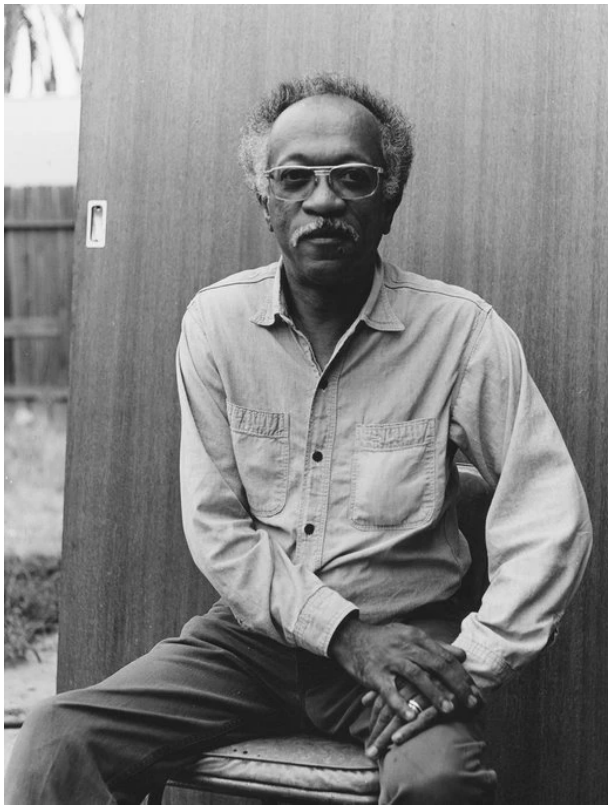
When he died in 1979, Charles White had been influential, both in and outside of the art world. Now, a coming show at MoMA resurrects the American master.

By [M.H. Miller](#)

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AT THE TIME of his death in 1979, Charles White was the most famous black artist in the country. As the painter Benny Andrews said in White's obituary in *The New York Times*, "People who didn't know his name knew and recognized his work." He was a public figure who ranked in the imagination of black Americans alongside such figures as Harry Belafonte — a friend, collector and portrait subject — and Sidney Poitier, who eulogized the artist at his memorial service.

To begin a discussion about White like this, with the ending so to speak, is strange but appropriate. He was not a morbid or melancholy artist — quite the opposite, in fact: His images are passionately alive. But there is a sense, in his work, that time itself is not linear and history is not inevitable. His drawings and paintings include figures ranging from Harriet Tubman and Nat Turner to Langston Hughes and Sammy Davis Jr. (in character from the 1958 film "Anna Lucasta") to anonymous street figures all the more captivating for their stoic mystery. In his 1943 mural, "The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America," which remains to this day at the Clarke Hall auditorium at Hampton University in Virginia, White depicts a transhistorical scene that spans centuries, showing black Union soldiers marching alongside the folk singer Leadbelly, captured in the midst of performance, while George Washington Carver works away in his lab. "Black Pope" (1973), perhaps his most famous painting, casts a bearded black man with sunglasses, wearing a sandwich board and flashing a peace sign, as an ecclesiastical figure. His divinity is neither forced nor satirical, it just is, and though the painting, with its tremendous grandeur and respect for its subject, isn't a self-portrait, it's tempting to see it as one. But White's project, in general, was bigger than himself, nothing less than the presentation of a history too long ignored: "Because the white man does not know the history of the Negro, he misunderstands him," he said in 1940.



Left: Charles White at his home in Altadena, Calif., 1971. Right: "Black Pope (Sandwich Board Man)," 1973.

Left: © The Charles White Archives. Right: The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Richard S. Zeisler Bequest (by exchange), the Friends of Education of the Museum of Modern Art, Committee on Drawings Fund, Dian Woodner, and Agnes Gund. © 1973 The Charles White Archives. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar, Museum of Modern Art Imaging Services



“The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America,” 1943.

Collection of the Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Va.

Following his death, White’s fame faded somewhat. Part of this had to do with the fact that throughout the ’80s and ’90s, artists of color were rare in an industry that endorses the work of white men at the exclusion of everyone else, an imbalance that was certainly the case during White’s lifetime and remains to this day, despite more recent efforts to correct it. It also didn’t help that, during his lifetime and in the decades following, the figurative art that White championed was overshadowed by a more abstract or conceptual style, or as Belafonte put it in the foreword to a 1967 monograph on White, “Many artists have deserted reality for the various schools of nonobjectivity.” Following a 1982 retrospective show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, White’s work, aside from his murals, most notably “The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America,” could be difficult to see firsthand.

Next month, the Museum of Modern Art is staging White’s first, and long overdue, major museum retrospective of the century, an exhibition that has traveled from the Art Institute of Chicago, in White’s hometown, where the artist used to sketch with a drawing pad as a child. In the time between his show in Harlem and this one, White has taken on the status of a folk hero not unlike some of the subjects of his paintings: an American master, who made mysterious, almost metaphysical images of African-American dignity and, as a teacher at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles from 1965 until his death, became a role model to an entire generation of younger black disciples. For many of these artists — Kerry James Marshall, David Hammons, Alonzo Davis among them — the rarefied space they carved out for themselves in the art world was previously unimaginable outside of White’s own paintings.



"Bessie Smith," 1950.

Private collection. © The Charles White Archives. Photo: © Museum Associates/LACMA

WHITE'S UPBRINGING WAS, in many respects, typical of a black working-class childhood in the years between the wars. He was defined more by what he was denied, and his early life demonstrates just how limited a path was available for any African-American with artistic ambitions. Born in Chicago in 1918, White was raised by his mother, who had migrated north some years earlier. She never married his absent father and, with no day care options, would often drop White at the Chicago Public Library while she worked. As a child, White became interested in Harlem Renaissance artists and writers like W. E. B. Du Bois, and when he reached high school,

he was awarded a scholarship to take Saturday classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. Already a remarkable talent, he would soon receive scholarships to the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts and the Frederic Mizen Academy of Art; both schools would rescind these scholarships upon learning of his race. (In 1937, he earned a scholarship to support one year of study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he took courses in art history, composition and figure drawing.)

Chicago was where he came of age, but his frequent trips to the South to visit his mother's family greatly affected him. He became active in politics early on. While still a teenager, White was the staff artist of the Chicago-based National Negro Congress, which fought for black liberation. His early social realist style reflected this activism, which he refined as an artist for the Works Progress Administration and while living in New York in the '40s and '50s, inspired in part by the frescoes of Diego Rivera. In later years, he was an important figure within the civil rights movement. Along with Belafonte — with whom White was a member of the Struggle for Freedom in the South, a group founded in support of Martin Luther King Jr. — he would also count among his admirers Emory Douglas, the Black Panthers' Minister of Culture, who liked White's work, even though it didn't inspire viewers to "go out and kill pigs," according to the historian Ilene Susan Fort in the retrospective's catalog.

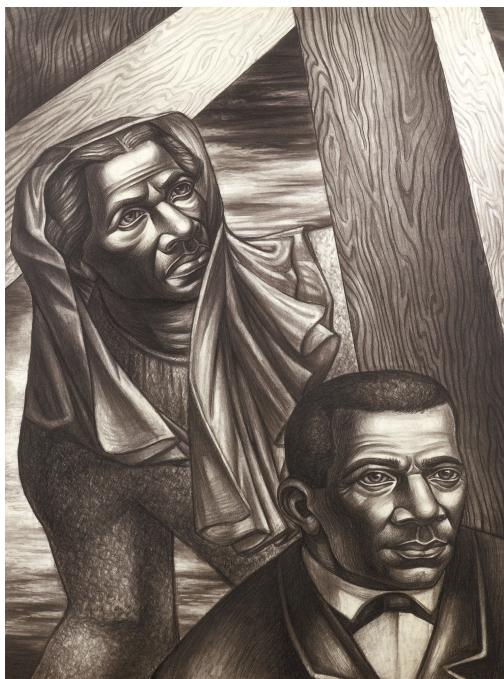


A life drawing class taught by White at the South Side Community Center in Chicago, circa 1940.

Holger Cahill papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Long plagued by health problems — he lost one lung to tuberculosis and the other became infected in 1956 — White moved to Southern California that year at the urging of his doctor. He lived near Poitier, a friend he first met in New York, and the two spent a great deal of time together, including on the set of Poitier’s 1958 film “The Defiant Ones.” White remained an active public figure — he introduced James Baldwin at an event for the Pasadena chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality — and began showing at the Heritage Gallery in the Pacific Palisades, which opened in 1961 to show artists of color and gave White multiple solo shows throughout the rest of his life. His work appeared on album and book covers — Belafonte even used White’s drawings as backdrops for his television show “Tonight With Belafonte” in 1959. But White did not obtain steady teaching work in California until 1965, when he was offered a job at the Otis Art Institute.

IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, in the ’60s and ’70s, there were two main places a person could receive a classical training in the fine arts: One was the Walt Disney-owned Chouinard Art Institute, which began as a kind of feeder school for Disney’s production company and in 1969 would be renamed CalArts; the other was Otis. According to the MoMA show’s co-curator Esther Adler, at Otis, which was known in particular for its life drawing classes, White gave assignments like, “From a representational study of the figure, create an abstract study.” White also had the opportunity to teach students about his own work, a great validation for an artist who constantly fought for institutional recognition. He developed a more cosmic later style at the school, still rooted in realism, but mining an almost unnamable vastness that underscored the scope of White’s career: His figures, carrying the same grace, were now pictured amid a background of swirling abstraction, or a floating seashell, or a bloody hand print.



“Sojourner Truth and Booker T. Washington (Study for Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America),” 1943.

Collection of the Newark Museum, purchase 1944 Sophronia Anderson Bequest Fund. © The Charles White Archives. Photo courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, N.Y.

White became a sought-after figure at the school, a generous and kind mentor to artists of color, like David Hammons, who took night and weekend classes with him. In 1971, Hammons had his first major exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art alongside his former instructor, as well as the artist Timothy Washington, another student of White's, in a show called "Three Graphic Artists." This was an extraordinary moment in many ways, a conversation between "the doyen of American black artists," as the museum described White, and his younger pupils, who were at the time largely unknown but already making vital work. "Three Graphic Artists" included Hammons's now-canonical body prints, his works most clearly indebted to White, in which the artist used his own body to apply paint to the canvas, leaving shadowlike impressions. These were shown alongside a number of White's greatest works, including the drawing "Seed of Love," a stately portrait of a pregnant black woman, the curve of her belly covered in a long frock rendered in staggering detail, and which the museum would later acquire for its permanent collection.

Most importantly, though, the show was a serious investigation of contemporary black artists at a time when most institutions ignored their existence. The exhibition catalog reinforces just how remarkable the appearance of these three artists in a museum was at the time, positioning White as an important but nonetheless exceptional figure in American culture. In an interview, Hammons describes seeking out White at Otis particularly because "I never knew there were 'black' painters, or artists, or anything until I found out about him."



Left: "Folksinger," 1957. Right: "Mahalia," 1955.

Collection of Pamela and Harry Belafonte. © 1957 The Charles White Archives. Photo: Christopher Burke Studios.



"J'Accuse #7," 1966.

Private collection. © The Charles White Archives. Photo courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, N.Y.

As the '70s continued, White's fondness for realism became more of an outlier, as contemporary art began reassessing itself, throwing out classical modes of thinking and delving deeper into a theoretical framework of how and why artists create meaning. This affected curriculum as well. In January 1977, the painter Kerry James Marshall enrolled full-time at Otis in order to study with White. (Like so many black artists of the '60s and '70s, White was Marshall's first exposure to any artist of stature, let alone an artist of color.) By the time of Marshall's arrival, the school had introduced an "intermedia" department, where students experimented with the still-nascent fields of conceptual art, video and installation, dismantling the more traditional art practices at the school, both figuratively and, in at least one instance, literally. In an essay called "A Black Artist Named White," Marshall describes the chair of the intermedia department at Otis personally tearing down a medieval bronze statue on the campus quad that depicted "the she-wolf sucking Romulus and Remus." He tied a rope to it and attached it to the bumper of his truck.

IN A 1971 INTERVIEW, Hammons described what he found so appealing about White's work: "There aren't too many people smiling, and I like that in his things. There's always an agonized kind of look, I think, because there aren't many pleasant things in his past. He's gone through a lot of hell. I know he has."

Going through hell, and surviving, was indeed a kind of through-line of much of his work. In recent years, it may not have been as easy to see White's own work as it has been to see that of his students, which is a testament both to White's skills as a teacher and to cultural vicissitudes. (Marshall, for instance, is the top-selling living black artist in history.) But one can see his imprint in surprising places. After Aretha Franklin died in August, The New Yorker featured a cover by the artist Kadir Nelson called "The Queen of Soul (After Charles White's 'Folksinger')," a riff on White's extraordinary 1957 portrait of Belafonte, which Belafonte and his wife lent to the recent retrospective. The ink drawing falls into the artist's more spiritual later style: Belafonte, his back arched, his eyes shut, is not so much a popular singer in this image as he is some time-displaced traveler, his face seeming to communicate all the anguish of an American past, but also shrouded in light, pointing upward, toward something better.

"Charles White: A Retrospective" is on view from Oct. 7, 2018, to Jan. 13, 2019, at MoMA, 11 West 53rd St., New York, moma.org.

A Blind Publisher, Poet — and Link to the Lower East Side's Cultural History Feb. 9, 2018



Kerry James Marshall Is Shifting the Color of Art History Oct. 17, 2016



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