

1854–1949



Bill Traylor was born into slavery on a plantation, near Benton, Alabama. After the Civil War, Bill continued to live on the plantation, but in 1939, he left because everyone of importance to him had moved on. Bill's wife had died and his nine grown children had moved away from the area, so he relocated to Montgomery.

He could not read or write, having never had an opportunity for a formal education. But at the age of 83, he took up drawing, and over a period of only a few years produced more than 1,800 drawings. Sitting on a wooden box creating his work in downtown Montgomery, Bill gained attention and was discovered—during the height of segregation in the deep South—by a white artist named Charles Shannon, who arranged for Bill's work to be shown at the New South Art Center in Montgomery in 1940.

Bill's drawings are sophisticated, even if naïve by conventional standards. His innate sense of design is strikingly illustrated in the untitled piece now in the collection of the High Museum in Atlanta, Georgia (figure 21). The piece's rhythmic rocking is created through a masterly use of diagonal lines and an overall triangular structure that cradles the seesawing movement. An unusual spatial sense, coupled with a unique vocabulary of shapes and symbols, underscores the authenticity of his direct approach (figure 20).

More than 60 years after his death, Bill Traylor is one of America's most recognized folk artists.

—Katherine Aimone



figure 20

Bill Traylor
Walnettos Figures Construction, 1939
Poster paint on cardboard

Courtesy of the Anthony Petullo Collection of Self-Taught and Outsider Art



figure 21

Bill Traylor
Untitled, ca. 1939–1942
Tempera crayon and pencil on cardboard

High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Purchase with funds from Mrs. Lindsey Hopkins, Jr., Edith G. and Philip A. Rhodes, and the Members Guild, 1982.114