

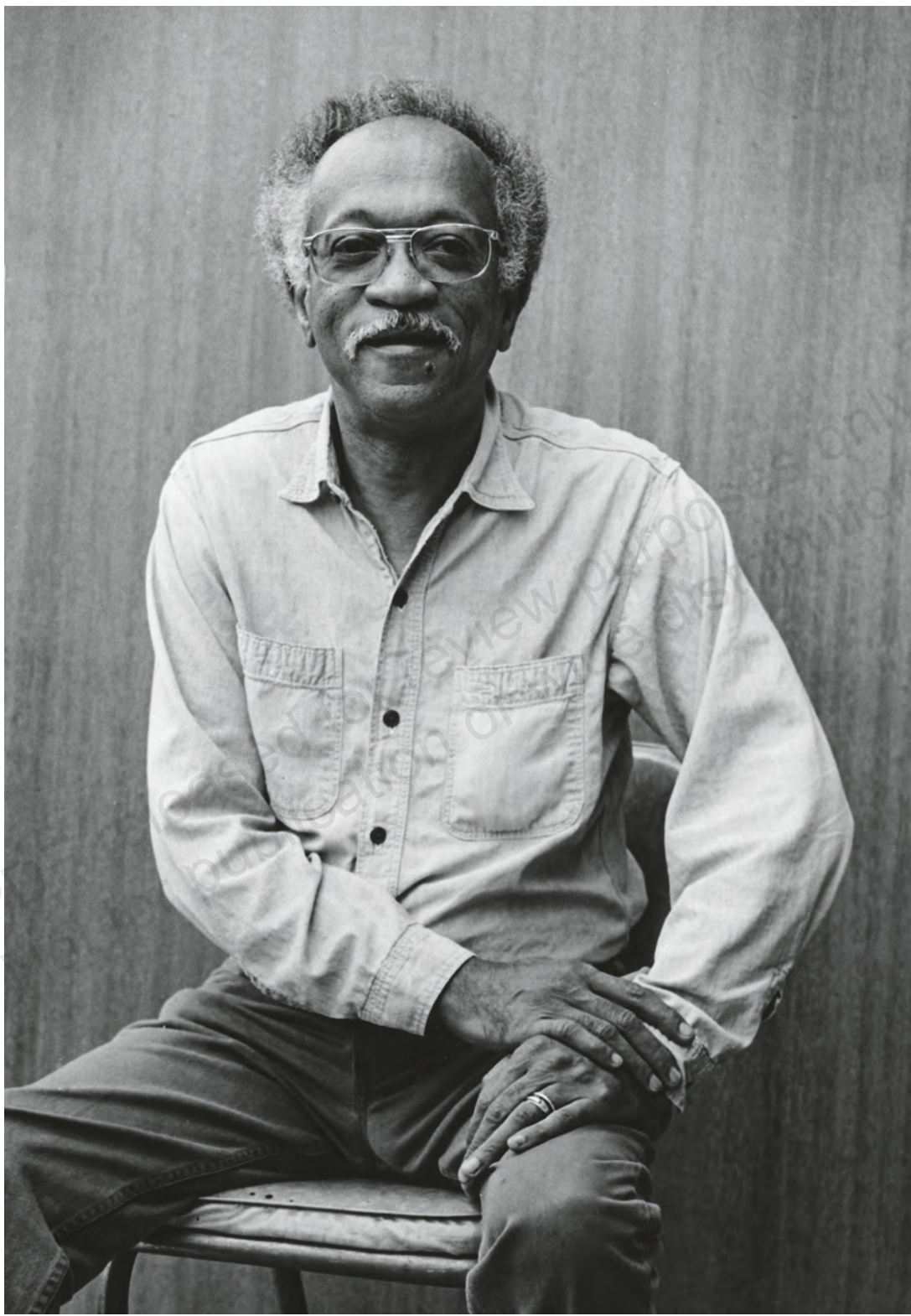
CHARLES WHITE BLACK POPE



MoMA

CHARLES WHITE

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ESTHER ADLER

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
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In October of 1943, the artist Charles White had tea in the penthouse of The Museum of Modern Art. He was there to celebrate the opening of *Young Negro Art*, an exhibition of works by students at the Hampton Institute, a Virginia school founded expressly for African and Native Americans. But White was not a student at Hampton; a graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, this twenty-five-year-old had already gained national recognition. A photograph of him at MoMA on this occasion speaks to his status (p. 6): White and his wife at the time, the artist Elizabeth Catlett, sit with the Museum's founding director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and White himself is deep in conversation with Dorothy Miller, an associate curator at the Museum whom he had met a few years earlier. In fact their rapport is the most striking element of the photograph.

Thirty-five years later, in an interview published in 1978, just a year before his death, White asserted the guiding principle that had informed him from the beginning. The statement demonstrates the sense of purpose that might have caught Miller's attention decades earlier:

*An artist must bear a special responsibility. He must be accountable for the content of his work. And that work should reflect a deep, abiding concern for humanity. He has that responsibility whether he wants it or not because he's dealing with ideas. And ideas are power. They must be used one way or the other.*¹

White's sense of mission, and his ability to translate that mission into images, were key to establishing his reputation and led to the respect and admiration in which he was held by peers and general audiences alike. Over the course of his life, from 1918 to his premature death in 1979, he lived in major cities across the United States, on the East Coast, the West Coast, and in the heart of the country, and he became a crucial figure in creative communities in all of them. Born in Chicago, he began his career there, revealing his sense of social responsibility from his earliest mature work onward and purposefully inserting black men and women, both historical and contemporary, into the American art of his time. In the 1940s and early '50s he lived mainly in New York, in an art world focused on Abstract Expressionism, but his dedication to the human figure continued, as did his commitment to a realistic visual style that assured maximum accessibility for broad audiences.

During White's final decades—in Los Angeles, where he moved in 1956—he was one of the few black artists to have gallery representation in the city, and this professional success, as well as his increasingly complex work, made him a beacon for both younger artists and peers. One former student of his, for example, is the artist David Hammons, who sought him out in 1968 at Otis Art Institute, where the older artist was then a teacher of drawing. White's influence extended not only to Hammons's work but to his understanding of the role of the black artist: "He's the only artist that I really related to," Hammons said in 1971, "because he is black and I am black, plus physically seeing him and knowing him. . . . he's the first and only artist that I've ever really met who had any real stature. And just being in the same room with someone like that you'd have to be directly influenced."² Hammons also picked up on the content of White's images: "In most of Charles White's art 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."³ The painter Kerry James Marshall, another former student of White's, has remarked in a similar vein, "Under Charles White's influence, I always knew that I wanted to make work that was about *something*: history, culture, politics, social issues. . . . It was just a matter of mastering the skills to actually do it."⁴

What, then, are we to make of White's monumental 1973 drawing *Black Pope (Sandwich Board Man)* (p. 5)? A signature example of the oil-wash technique that White was known for by this point in his career, it shows the "black pope" of its title as a man wearing a heavy coat and scarf, a sandwich board, and a hat bearing a cross. The depiction is relatively readable, but who is this man? What is his message

and why is White bringing him to our attention? Where is he—what is his context—and what are we to make of the visual elements around him, including the lower half of a human skeleton? If for White the artist by definition had to deal with ideas, what are the ideas here?

Where White had formerly been committed to creating images with clear messages, *Black Pope* . . . and its complex figure and space reveal a new way of addressing the social and the political, one in dialogue with the art of the 1970s and, for that matter, of today. White's refusal of immediate answers in the drawing reflects a reimagining of what he considered the artist's "special responsibility." *Black Pope* . . . at once extends his lifelong commitment to addressing the social and political struggles of African Americans, often by applying religious symbolism to images of social injustice and protest, and reinvents his methods and strategies in the service of long-held ideals.

"IMAGES OF DIGNITY"

With the title of his book *Images of Dignity: The Drawings of Charles White* (1967), Benjamin Horowitz, the owner of Los Angeles's Heritage Gallery and White's dealer beginning in 1964, coined a phrase that has been applied to the artist's work ever since. Horowitz wrote,

In an era when the artist is expressing his detachment from the human condition by a "cool" and geometric style, Charles White's superb drawings challenge this lack of faith and self-involvement. Their epic quality affirms his deep concern for humanity, his love of man and life, and his belief that brotherhood is not just a catchword. . . . A warm understanding of the meaning of existence, man's aspirations and sorrows, his inner spirit, but above all his dignity, form the central core of Charles White's love affair with life.⁵

The qualities that Horowitz championed were present even in White's earliest works. As the artist was growing up in Chicago, the Great Migration of black Americans, from the rural Southern states to the urban North, was transforming the city.⁶ His mother, Ethelene, had come there from Mississippi in 1914, four years before he was born, and his extended family in the South would be a touchstone for him throughout his life.⁷ Drawn to art from a young age, White began taking classes at The Art Institute of Chicago when he was in the seventh grade. Having received a

scholarship to continue his studies there after high school, he completed them in 1938, finishing two years of course work in just a year. As early as 1932, as a fourteen-year-old, he also joined the Art Crafts Guild, a group of black artists who organized to help disseminate formal art instruction, which few of them could afford, and to exhibit their work.⁸

By 1939 White was working for the Federal Art Project, a division of the Works Progress Administration (WPA)—the U.S. government program that both supported visual artists by employing them during the Great Depression and placed commissioned works in public buildings throughout the country. Here White began to make the murals that remain some of his best-known works, including *Five Great American Negroes* (1939–40; pp. 12–13).⁹ In both subject matter and execution, the painting exemplifies White's early practice while also reflecting the social and cultural goals he shared with the other artists of the Art Crafts Guild. The "great American negroes" it shows—Sojourner Truth, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, George Washington Carver, and Marian Anderson—had been "selected by school children and readers of the *Chicago Defender* as those who have contributed most to the progress of the Race."¹⁰ The mural itself speaks to White's desire to demonstrate on a grand scale the contributions of African Americans to their country's story, as well as to combat their absence from the mainstream historical narratives of his time.¹¹

It was White's involvement with the WPA and with a project the agency supported, Chicago's South Side Community Art Center—cofounded by White and others in the Art Crafts Guild—that brought him to the attention of Dorothy Miller, then associate curator of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art.¹² Through her husband, Holger Cahill, the director of the Federal Art Project, Miller had a personal connection to the WPA and an interest in the artists working for it. In a letter of November 1941 to Fred Biesel, director of the Illinois chapter of the Federal Art Project, she wrote, "I am very eager to consider the possibility of exhibiting Charles White's big mural which I saw uncompleted at the Project last summer. . . . I would also want to include some of those big, handsome drawings of his—studies for his murals, and the studies for his other mural which I saw exhibited at the South Side Art Center, and possibly a few easel pictures."¹³ The "other mural" that Miller saw studies for was likely *Five Great American Negroes*, completed in 1940; the "big mural" was certainly *Chaotic Stage of the Negro, Past and Present* (c. 1940–41; pp. 14–15, 16), a nine-by-twenty-one-foot two-panel work on canvas, intended for the George Cleveland Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library, that would have been in process when Miller visited the

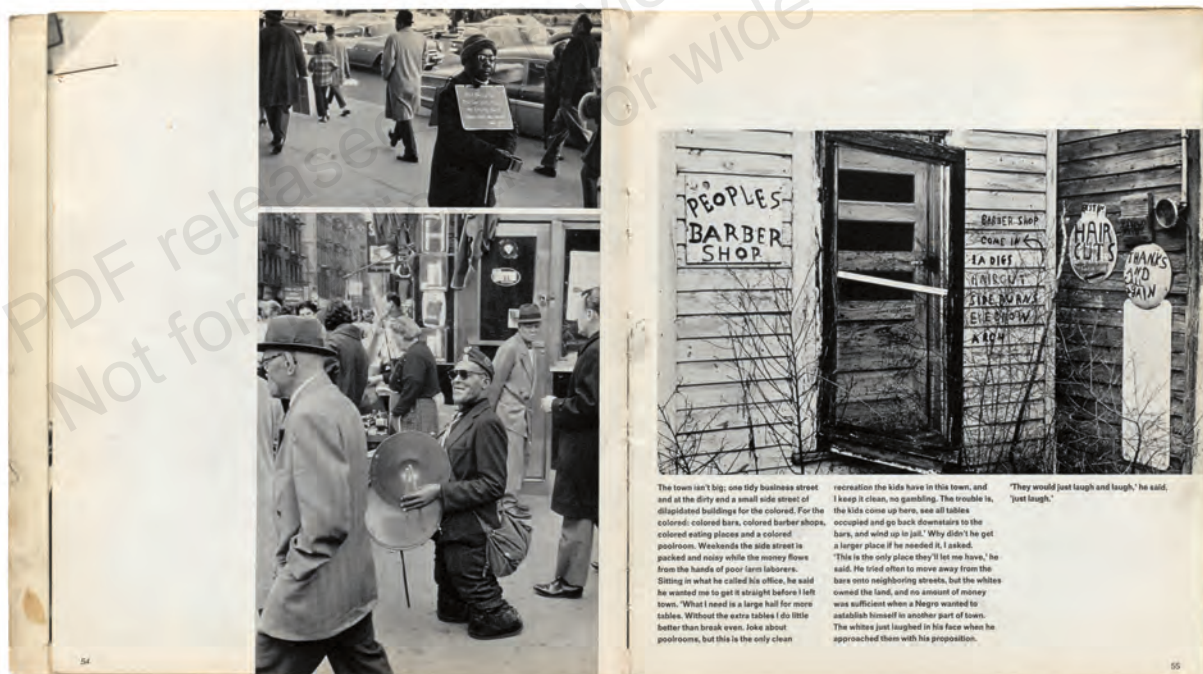
city but was never completed and is now lost.¹⁴ The exhibition in which Miller hoped to include this painting was *Americans 1942: 18 Artists From 9 States*, the first in a now legendary series of six shows, collectively known as the *Americans* exhibitions, that she organized between 1942 and 1963. She left the work out in the end,¹⁵ but her enthusiasm for it reflects both its strength and the broader response to White's art at the time: his drawing *There Were No Crops This Year* (1940) won first prize at the *Exhibition of the Art of the American Negro (1851 to 1940)*, organized by the distinguished curators and scholars Alonzo Aden and Alain Locke and on view in Chicago in 1940, and works of his were also exhibited at the Library of Congress that year.¹⁶

White left Chicago in 1941 to join his new wife, the artist Elizabeth Catlett, at Dillard University in New Orleans. Over the next few years the couple lived in New York, traveled in the South, and worked at the historically black Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) in Virginia. There White painted another major work, *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* (1943), his only mural made directly on the wall of a building.¹⁷ With its dense composition of figures surrounding an axis of factory machinery, the work testifies to the influence on White of the Mexican muralists José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros.¹⁸ In fact White had planned to use funding received through a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship to visit Mexico to study with these artists, but when the military draft board denied his request to leave the country, he ended up attending the Art Students League in New York, then going to Hampton, where he executed the mural.¹⁹ White was drafted into the army in 1944; there he contracted tuberculosis, from which his recovery was long and slow. In 1946, however, he and Catlett were finally able to go to Mexico, where he met Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros, as well as the printmakers of the progressive workshop Taller de Gráfica Popular.²⁰ His Mexican experience affected him profoundly: "Mexico was a milestone. I saw artists working to create an art about and for the people. This had the strongest influence on my whole approach. It clarified the direction in which I wanted to move."²¹

White's time in Mexico was also one of personal change: his marriage ended there (he and Catlett would divorce officially in the United States in 1947). Returning to New York, in 1950 he married Frances Barrett, a social worker he had met years earlier. Both were members of the Committee for the Negro in the Arts, an organization that included such prominent figures as the singers Paul Robeson and Harry Belafonte, the actors Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, and the poet Langston Hughes, and that aimed both to fight racial stereotypes in the popular media and to promote



Charles White. *The Preacher*. 1940.
Tempera on board, 30 x 21½ in. (76.2 x 54.6 cm).
Collection the Davidsons, Los Angeles, California



Leonard Freed (American, 1929–2006). *Black in White America* (New York: Grossman Publishers, n.d. [late 1960s]).
Spreads, pp. 28–29 and 54–55, from White's personal copy of the book



Charles White. *Pope X*. 1972.

Etching, 25 $\frac{5}{16}$ x 34 $\frac{1}{16}$ in. (64.3 x 86.5 cm).

Publisher: unknown. Printer: Joseph and Hugo Mugnaini, Los Angeles.

Edition: 25. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. John B. Turner Fund, 2013



Charles White. *Love Letter #1*. 1971.
Lithograph, 30 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 22 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (76.4 x 56.8 cm).
Publisher and printer: Tamstone Group, Los Angeles. Edition: 25.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. John B. Turner Fund, 2013



Charles White. *Homage to Sterling Brown*. 1972.
Oil on canvas, 40 x 60 in. (101.6 x 152.4 cm).
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Black Pope (Sandwich Board Man) (detail).
1973. Oil wash on board, 60 x 43 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.
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