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The Museum of Modern Art

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ELIJAH PIERCE

ELIJAH PIERCE, whose work is currently on view in the Members' Penthouse of The Museum of Modern Art, is a 79-year-old, self-taught, black artist from Columbus, Ohio, whose carved and painted images are a strong, original example of American folk art.

Pierce, who works as a barber during the day, carves and paints his wood images and assembles them in "pictures" whose subjects are taken from American tradition and folklore, the Bible, daily life and personal experience. His earliest polychrome reliefs dating from the 1920s are based on stories from American cartoons. Later he turned to topics from daily life. By the 1930s religious subjects predominated in his work and the imagery and symbolism of subsequent carvings includes American history, current events, sports and moral convictions about the nature of man.

Born in 1892 on a farm near Baldwin, Miss., Pierce grew up in a very religious family. Carving has been a life-long fascination, and from his earliest years, he carved on the trunks of old trees and cut and carved walking sticks. He learned barbering while still on the farm, but migrated to Columbus during the Depression years. When he couldn't afford to buy his wife a birthday present, he carved her an elephant which so pleased her that he promised her a whole zoo. Thus, he began carving figures and pictures though he never thought of himself as an artist.

During summer vacations, Pierce would load his car with carvings and go from town to town lecturing on the subjects and morals his scenes represented and selling his pictures at county fairs. He gave up carving a few years ago, but Boris Gruenwald, a Yugoslavian sculptor who lives in Columbus, saw his work and urged him to continue. Gruenwald was instrumental in initiating the first public showing of Pierce's work last year at Ohio State University.

(more)

Pierce, who has been called "one of the last surviving true American primitives," uses direct and simple, yet forceful images and colors. Spatial relationships represent temporal and logical connections among the elements in each composition such as the conjunction of roadgangs of convicts, formal busts of Lincoln and Washington and Uncle Sam shaking hands with a young black soldier under an American flag in a work titled PRESIDENT AND CONVICTS (1941).

Only a small fraction of Pierce's total output remains to be seen since most of it was dispersed during those summer trips. The 14 pictures on view represent a selection from his entire life work with the earliest going back to 1923. They are all being seen in New York for the first time as part of UNTITLED III, an exhibition of sculpture, drawings and prints organized by The Art Lending Service of the Museum. The exhibition includes the work of four other artists and is open to the public daily from 3 to 5:30 pm. It was selected and installed by Pierre Apraxine, Assistant Curator of Painting and Sculpture who is in charge of selections for the Art Lending Service. Located on the sixth floor of the Museum, the Art Lending Service maintains a collection of about 800 works in various media available for rent or sale to Museum members.

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