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Born into slavery, Bill Traylor didn't just paint, he left us a world

By Philip Kennicott

Bill Traylor's art gathers force the more you see of it. The self-taught artist, who was born into slavery and took up drawing and painting only in the last decade of his life, left behind more than 1,000 works when he died in 1949. Any one or two of them leaves a weak impression. His figures seem crude and even childlike, and he never mastered some of the basic skills of standard representation. But when his work is gathered together, one sees the overwhelming ambition of it. Traylor wasn't just making images, he was creating a world, a coherent, expansive and emotionally raw understanding of the time, place and people that he knew.

The Smithsonian American Art Museum has brought together 155 works by Traylor, from his early pencil drawings of human and animal figures, to his later composite paintings in which multiple figures are rendered in enigmatic groupings and collective activity. Most of his work has been dated only approximately, so one can't be certain of how his skills developed and how his idiosyncratic visual language evolved. But it's clear that he quickly mastered his own, deeply personal visual code. In a style that often resembles early Native American imagery and prehistoric cave painting, he conveys tension and emotion, size and placement, class and temperament, animation and activity.

A Bill Traylor dog may seem, at first, a bit like a deliberately crude cartoon. But when his dogs start moving, baring their teeth, fighting with one another and attacking humans, they are as convincingly canine as any hound that ever bounded across a 19th-century hunting canvas or lolled at the feet of an 18th-century aristocrat. Animals, including dogs, horses, cows, rabbits, snakes and lizards, were a recurring theme for Traylor, inspired in part by his memories of plantation life and their symbolic meaning within African American folk culture. The rabbit, often seen in

highly charged chase scenes, was probably a stand-in for human characters who must outwit and outrun their oppressors.

Traylor worked with a limited color palette, with brown and black predominant, and a cobalt blue often used for dramatic effect. Figures are generally seen from the side, and he was drawn to using simple, evocative silhouettes. Some of his silhouette forms — a round black jug, a turkey, human figures contorted by drinking into strangely elastic shapes — have the look of modernist distillation that appealed to collectors in the past century. Traylor is now an established and revered figure among outsider or self-taught artists, and it's easy to see why: His work is instantly recognizable, historically resonant and has an austerity that makes it seem at times almost minimalist.

But the more complicated images, the ones that aim at narrative or social description, are even more compelling, especially if one considers that Traylor was old enough to remember having been born into slavery, the Civil War, the worst of Jim Crow and lynching, and the great migration north. In his renderings of houses, often with a surrounding drama of human and animal figures, one senses some of the same ambivalence to home as in the work of Marc Chagall. The house offers only an imperfect safety, and is as much a site for vulnerability as for domesticity. In one remarkable painting, "House, Blue Figures, Blue Lamp," a couple and their dog are seen at home in a small cabin. The lamp on the table does little more than illuminate the basic forms of the figures, which are otherwise surrounded in an encroaching darkness made thick and tangible with brown paint. In other house paintings, people topple from roofs, carouse and fight, and seem perpetually to make repairs.

Traylor rarely broaches questions of race directly, or the brutal racism that was endemic in Alabama and Montgomery, where he lived during the latter part of his life. But in at least one image, "Untitled (Lynching)," he seems to depict bodies hanging from a scaffold. It is perhaps one of the least accomplished of his drawings, but it also seems to be an effort to render perspective. Lines that were probably drawn with a straightedge suggest the wooden frame from which the deadly ropes

are hung, and the victims are seemingly rendered at the moment they have been dropped to their death. It's tempting to see the effort at perspective as a sign of his emotional response to the events depicted, an effort to render the horrible scene as accurately as possible. But it could also suggest a connection in the artist's mind between the world white men made, and the tools they used to render it in art. Thus, to capture the darkest side of white culture, he alludes to the signal accomplishment of Western artistic culture since the Renaissance.

It is only one drawing among dozens, and it is an outlier. But it raises the question that lurks in the mind when looking at the work of many self-taught, outsider artists. If a genie had come to Traylor and said, "I can make you paint with the same facility as Thomas Hart Benton or Grant Wood," would Traylor have taken up the offer? The answer, like the meaning of many details in Traylor's work, is unknowable. But there is a moment in a film on view at the gallery, a little more than two minutes of color footage of Montgomery in 1941, which shows a man with a big belly and a hat on his head, that makes the speculation moot. This figure, seen fleetingly, is indistinguishable from a male figure that Traylor painted again and again, and looking at the figure in the film leaves the uncanny sense of seeing it through Traylor's eyes. Which is to say, the force of Traylor's vision makes the world seem more like his art, which is a greater accomplishment than making art that looks like the world.

Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor *is on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum through March 17. For more information, visit americanart.si.edu.*

Philip Kennicott
Philip Kennicott is the Pulitzer Prize-winning art and architecture critic of The Washington Post. He has been on staff at The Post since 1999, first as classical music critic, then as culture critic. Follow