

# Charles White: An Artist for Humanity's Sake

by

Paul Von Blum, J.D.

Senior Lecturer, Ralph J. Bunch Center for African American Studies  
University of California, Los Angeles

Charles White (1918-1979) was one of the finest American artists of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and a giant figure in African American art history. Throughout his distinguished career, he combined outstanding technical skill as a painter and printmaker with a lifelong commitment to chronicling the hopes and struggles of the African American population. His artworks celebrated African American heroes as well as ordinary women and men struggling to maintain dignity in a racist society. He achieved major national and international acclaim even in an era where abstract expressionism dominated the mainstream art world and where African American artists were, as usual, consigned to the margins of critical recognition in galleries, art journals, newspapers and magazines, and colleges and universities.

In an interview in 1940, he offered his artistic vision that characterized the social and moral outlook that pervaded his entire artist career:

I am interested in the social, even the propagandistic angle of painting. . . that will say what I have to say. Paint is the only weapon I have with which to fight what I resent. If I could write, I would write about it. If I could talk, I would talk about it. Since I paint, I paint about it.

This outlook informed and solidified his standing in a long line of renowned socially conscious artists, including such luminaries as Francisco Goya, Honore Daumier, Kathe Kollwitz, and the Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, whose personal political activism and powerful social and historical murals influenced White throughout his artistic career. Likewise, White's artworks revealed the influence of a generation of American Social Realist artists, including Ben Shahn, William Gropper, Phillip Evergood, and many others.

Equally important, his socially conscious vision reflected a major current of African American art history, a strain found in such predecessors as Patrick Reason, Edmonia Lewis, Aaron Douglas, Claude Clarke, Hale Woodruff, and others. Likewise, he displayed and reinforced the social vision of many of his generational contemporaries, including his first wife Elizabeth Catlett, Horace Pippin, Gordon Parks, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Cliff Joseph, John Wilson, John Biggers, and others. He also influenced a younger generation of socially conscious African American artists like Benny Andrews, Faith Ringgold, Dana Chandler, David Hammons, Elliot Pinkney, and scores of others.

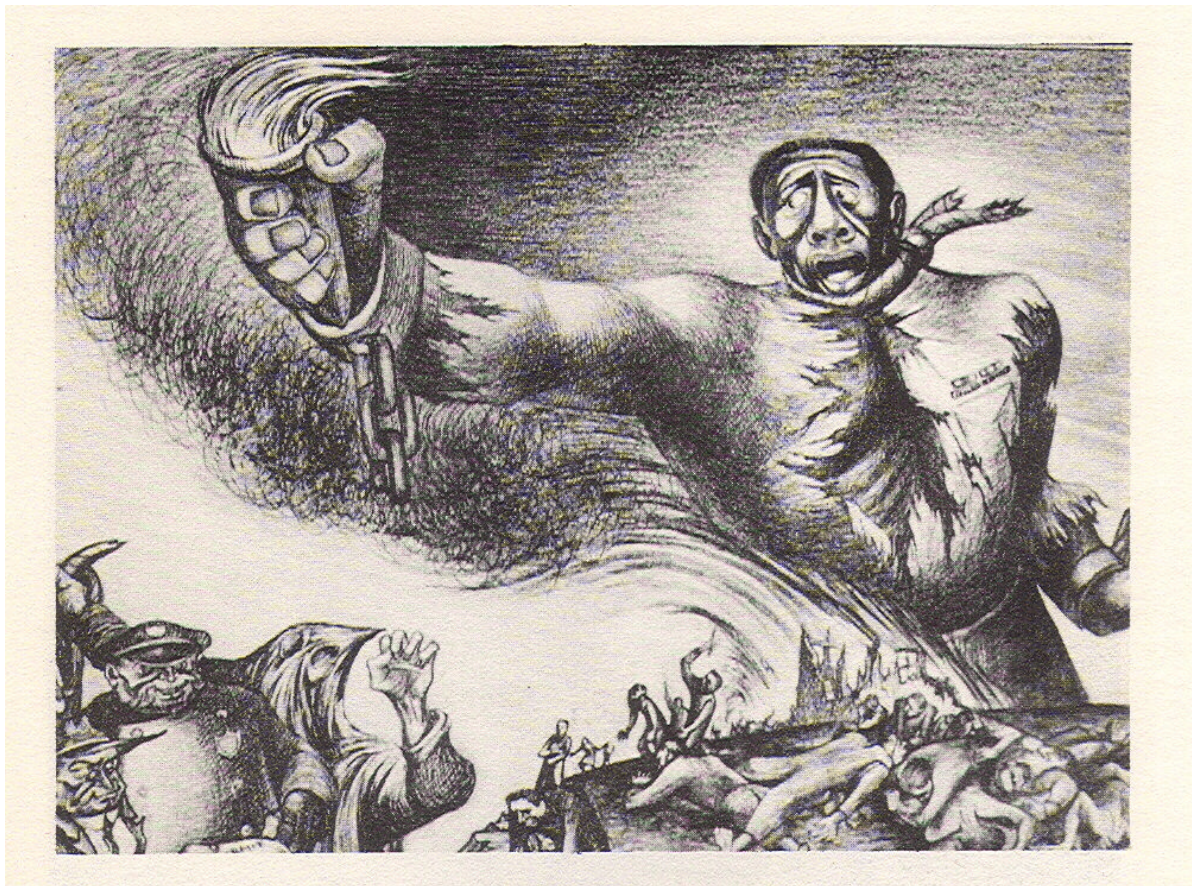
White's entry into the art world was scarcely easy. From his early childhood in Chicago, White showed a talent for visual art. But living in an economically precarious situation with his mother's marginal earnings as a domestic and his stepfather's erratic alcoholic behavior; he had few opportunities to pursue his natural talent. Still, he persisted, combining personal will and intellectual curiosity, especially about the neglected history of African American life and culture. Above all, he discovered the contributions of people of African origins—a history conspicuously absent from his own curriculum in Chicago public schools.

The young White established contacts with leading black artists and cultural figures and eventually overcame the entrenched racism of the times to win a scholarship to the Art Institute of Chicago, where he enhanced his drawing and painting skills and learned various printmaking techniques. This training enabled him to join the Works Progress Administration during the New Deal, where he acquired knowledge of and skills in socially oriented mural painting. This experience solidified his commitment to the social vision of art that pervaded his entire career.

In 1941, he married Elizabeth Catlett and moved with her to New Orleans, where she was teaching at Dillard University. He was drawn to Southern black life and culture, especially music, which informed his artistic work for the remainder of his life. He also encountered the brutalities of Southern Jim Crow, reinforcing his fierce anti-racism and underscoring the political focus of his life and art. Leaving New Orleans, the couple went to New York, where White augmented both his technical skills and deepened his political vision. White studied with Harry Sternberg at the Art Student League and found his instruction especially valuable in developing his expertise in lithography and etching. In New York, the couple also met Viktor Lowenfeld, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany who taught at historically black Hampton Institute in Virginia and who invited both Catlett and White to teach at Hampton.

While there, he painted his famous mural in 1943 entitled "Contributions of the Negro to American Democracy," which highlighted many key figures of African American history, including Crispus Attucks, Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Booker T. Washington, Paul Robeson, and Marian Anderson. This engaging artwork, reminiscent of the Mexican muralist style of visual narrative, provided a valuable historical corrective to a mainstream educational universe that omitted the efforts of African Americans to the political, intellectual, and cultural history of the nation. The mural likewise underscored the capacity of black artists to produce work of exemplary quality, serving as a powerful role model for Hampton students and campus visitors alike.

In 1944, White was drafted into the army and developed the severe respiratory condition during his service that made his health constantly precarious until his early death at 61. Diagnosed with tuberculosis, he spent three years in a VA Hospital. After his release, he and Catlett returned to New York, where he worked prolifically and had a solo exhibition at the ACA Gallery. His powerful socially oriented artworks focusing on the black figurative tradition began to attract favorable critical attention.



“Freeport” (Figure 1)

His socially conscious artistic vision led him, in 1947, to create a powerfully disturbing charcoal and ink drawing entitled “Freeport” (Figure 1). Like numerous other African American 20<sup>th</sup> century artists, White focused on the recurring tragedy of lynching, especially of African American military veterans who had served honorably in their nation’s defense, only to return to even greater white racist hostility and violence. In this depiction, a soldier has broken free of the lynchers’ noose; his military decoration and the broken chain on his wrist are both conspicuous, signifying the broader will of African Americans to excel in all facets of American life *and* to break free of the barriers of racial oppression.

Likewise, the soldier holds a replica of the Statue of Liberty torch in his right hand, representing the still unfulfilled promise of full constitutional rights. At the bottom left, White depicts the unholy alliance of the Ku Klux Klan, the police, and the white male representing the persistence of American racism. The scene at the right reflects the continuing racial turmoil that endured through the civil rights movement and beyond. Together, "Freeport" represents an effective vision of the post-war racial discord that eventually catalyzed the historical struggles for dignity and equality less than a decade later.

In 1947, the couple traveled to Mexico, where White improved his printmaking technique and came further under the Marxist influence of the major Mexican political artists of the post-war era. Both worked at the Taller de Grafica, Mexico's most important political printmaking operation. This experience reinforced his personal social vision and catalyzed his commitment to creating art about and for people of African descent.

Returning to the U.S., he spent a year as artist-in residence at Howard University. His health deteriorated and his marriage to Catlett ended in divorce. In New York again, he made connections with the black political and cultural elite, including W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Jacob Lawrence, Harry Belafonte, Thurgood Marshall, and above all, Paul Robeson. He also met and later married Frances Barrett, in 1950. He began exhibiting his works regularly and his leftist political identity gained him considerable recognition throughout Europe, including the socialist bloc of nations like Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Poland and in the Soviet Union itself. He continued to encounter both racism and McCarthyism in the United States and he saw some of his closest friends subject to the severe persecution and blacklisting of that repressive era.

In 1956, Charles White and his wife moved to California, settling in the Los Angeles suburb of Altadena. From then on, he became an iconic figure in the history of post-war Los Angeles art history, especially among African Americans. He began exhibiting widely in regional and national venues, including in Los Angeles college and university galleries. A major breakthrough occurred at the Heritage Gallery, the main commercial gallery in Los Angeles to break the informal color line by exhibiting the works of black artists.

In 1961, Benjamin Horowitz opened Heritage on La Cienega Boulevard, helping to make that area the center of the Los Angeles art scene for many years. His politically conscious background led him to provide gallery space to exemplary figurative artists, especially those whose works combined outstanding artistic technique with trenchant commentary and criticism. Horowitz's role as President of the Art Dealers Association of California gave him a level of clout and recognition, encouraging him to transcend art world racial barriers. Accordingly, he added African American artists to that perspective, giving them a premier setting in an era when their efforts were regarded as primitive curiosities, merely "folk art," far beyond the canon of artistic "excellence." He understood that a major focus of African American art was both figurative and social; by including them, he implemented his vision of a powerful convergence of conscience between white and black artists.

Heritage Gallery's major black artist was Charles White, whose works were frequently shown in solo exhibitions at Heritage and Horowitz also promoted White throughout the country. His guidance helped White garner numerous exhibitions in other commercial galleries and museums. He also wrote a book about White entitled *Images of Dignity: The Drawings of Charles White* in 1967.

In 1965, moreover, White had started teaching at the Otis Art Institute, a position that put him in close contact with scores of younger artists of all races. His prolific body of works that he produced in Southern California, moreover, reinforced his growing national and international reputation. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, White created a wide variety of artworks addressing numerous themes, almost all centering on powerful features of the African American experience.

One key focus was his emphasis on ordinary black people. Countering the racist caricatures that dominated American visual popular cultures for many decades, White instead portrayed his people as dignified, hard-working men, women, and children seeking opportunity and justice against overwhelming racial, political, and economic barriers. His *J'Accuse* series, which he adapted from the infamous 19<sup>th</sup> century deliberately appropriated from Emile Zola's famous pamphlet about French anti-Semitism and the Alfred Dreyfus case, depicted African Americans of all ages, striving resolutely for full freedom in American society.



“Awaken from the Unknowing” (Figure 2)

Likewise, his *Wanted Poster* efforts, based on pre-Civil War posters for slave auctions and rewards for runaway slaves, served as the base for some moving portraits of contemporary African Americans; the striking contrast between the racist background and the dignified portraits represented one of the crowing achievements of Charles White's socially conscious artwork.

Throughout his career, White often focused on black females and on their spectacular but largely unrecognized significance to their race and to America generally. In 1961, for example, in "Awaken from the Unknowing" (Figure 2), he created an engaging charcoal drawing of an adolescent girl studying intently. Her facial expression reveals her profound seriousness about her educational pursuits. Head in hand, she gazes at the books in front of her, recognizing the daunting academic tasks ahead. But above all, her determination to succeed despite the challenges emerges as the central theme of this drawing. White's work, accordingly, reveals a dual message to its audience. On one level, it illustrates how a young African American woman can overcome the odds through sheer persistence and will—a model, in fact, for millions of other young people in black communities throughout the land. At a deeper level, this drawing reflected the artist's profound commitment to education itself. White well understood that knowledge is power—the key to both individual and political liberation. He understood too that the corollary is equally true; the lack of knowledge leads inexorably to the lack of power, both personally and politically.



"General Moses" (Figure 3)

During his California years, White also used his artistic skills to highlight some of the major figures of African American history: women and men known generally in African American circles but often omitted in traditional educational and media institutions. One of his majestic efforts was “General Moses” (Figure 3), which Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company commissioned in 1965 as part of its growing collection of original African American artworks. This large-scale 47 x 68 inch ink drawing of Harriet Tubman reveals the heroism of its subject. It is a tribute to one of the most remarkable women in American history—an escaped slave who returned frequently to the South to lead hundreds of her people from bondage to freedom, despite relentless pursuits and substantial rewards offered for her capture. Tubman, who also served both as a spy and as a nurse during the Civil War, is one of the iconic female figures of the long struggle for African American freedom.

Tubman’s expression communicates her enormous strength and personal courage. The rocks behind her reinforce her solidity, her hardness and resolve in the face of overwhelming adversity. For many years, “General Moses” hung in the lobby of the Golden State; the work was a veritable role model for the young people whom White taught at Saturday morning classes at the company headquarters. Significantly, when he produced the drawing, America was in the midst of the modern civil rights movement, a reminder that even such iconic figures as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King had essential predecessors like Harriet Tubman, without whom a contemporary movement would have been impossible. Unfortunately, the artistic story of “General Moses” ended badly: in 2007, facing severe financial difficulties, Golden State sold off most of its artistic treasures, including this masterpiece drawing by Charles White.



Paul Robeson (Figure 4)



In 1973, White produced a portrait of his friend and political compatriot Paul Robeson (Figure 4). This magnificent effort was later used as the cover for the posthumous celebration of Robeson's 80th birthday at the Afro-American Museum of Detroit in 1978. Technically magnificent as usual, this painting bears a striking resemblance to Robeson, the quintessential genius of modern American life. Robeson's face, especially the upward gaze of his eyes, signifies his lifelong commitment the freedom of his own African American people and to the liberation of all oppressed people throughout the world.

White's hopeful depiction stands, ironically, in stark contrast to the brutal official treatment of Paul Robeson during the final decades of his life. In the post-war era of McCarthyism and severe political repression, Robeson was savagely blacklisted because of his left-wing activities and associations. He was essentially obliterated from the nation's history, despite his brilliant achievements as an athlete, stage and screen actor, linguist, singer, scholar, and domestic and international political activist. White's portrait, accordingly, is itself a ringing dissent from the "official story" of state-sanctioned historical distortion and reputational obliteration. And above all, the artwork contributed to the slow but inexorable process of restoring Paul Robeson to his earned and rightful place in American cultural and political history, a process that even now is continuing in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

No account of the life and work of Charles White would be complete without noting his colossal role as a mentor to both his artistic contemporaries and to younger generations of African American artists, especially in the Los Angeles area. As an Otis faculty member, White had a huge influence on his students, both technically and intellectually. He took close personal interest in younger artists, providing them with guidance and encouragement in an art world that was indifferent, even hostile, to artists of African descent. His personal mentorship to many artists helped propel them to the artistic stature they have all earned and enjoyed. Some like David Hammons, Richard Wyatt, Alonzo Davis, Ernie Barnes, Ulysses Jenkins, Charles Dickson, and others have gained major national and international acclaim. White also supported black artists in other ways. He regularly attended exhibitions at alternative African American spaces like the Brockman Gallery and Gallery 32. His very presence added prestige to these operations and contributed to shaping African American art in Southern California—now one of the major centers for this tradition in the entire nation.

Perhaps no finer tribute to an artist can be found than when one prominent artist pays homage to another. In 1988, the late Ernie Barnes (1938-2009) painted a magnificent canvas entitled "Homage to Charles," a work that was loosely modeled on White's Los Angeles mural about black educator Mary McLeod Bethune. Barnes's painting depicts three young people reading, a tribute to White's long artistic and personal commitment to the genuine education that liberates people, especially those in oppressed communities of color. When Ernie Barnes concluded his successful professional football career, he struggled to rebuild his life and identity as a visual artist in Los Angeles. Early on, Charles White befriended the young artist, offering guidance, encouragement, and contacts, including Benjamin Horowitz at the Heritage Gallery.

Barnes never forgot this assistance; he spoke warmly about Charles White regularly until his own untimely death in 2009. That deeply felt tribute mirrors the attitudes of so many others, including fellow artists, personal friends and associates, and thousands ordinary viewers of his paintings, drawings, and prints. That explains why Charles White was, first and foremost, an artist for humanity's sake.

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