

# Charming — and complex

Born into slavery, Bill Traylor, later in life, created more than 1,200 folk drawings. His works are now celebrated.

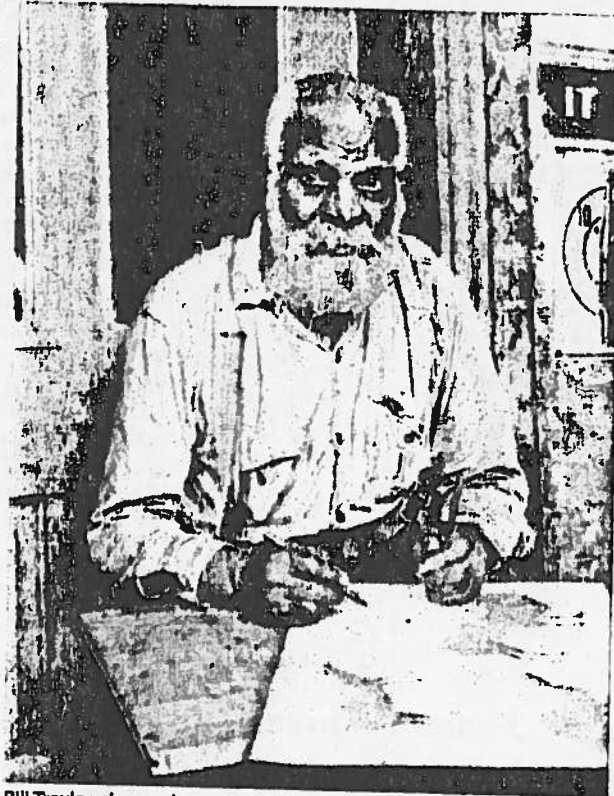
By Howard Pousner  
hpousner@ajc.com

At first glance, Bill Traylor's simple, silhouette-dominated drawings beguile with a charming simplicity. But since the Alabama self-taught artist's inclusion in the groundbreaking "Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1980" exhibit at Washington's Corcoran Gallery in 1982, the art world has embraced them, rather, for their modernist sophistication.

That same year, Atlanta's High Museum of Art and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts both acquired collections of 30 Traylor drawings. That further secured the legacy of the artist who was born into slavery in the 1850s, worked as a field hand for more than five decades and, in his mid-70s, about 1928, moved to Montgomery, where he began making what is believed to be his first art. The decade that followed Traylor's relocation was one of fecund creativity in which he turned out more than 1,200 drawings that recalled memories of plantation life and recorded sidewalk scenes from Montgomery's six-block African-American community known as Dark Town.

Traylor died in 1949, long before his art-world discovery. A young white Alabama artist, Charles Shannon, was a key figure in his late life and following his death: providing encouragement and paint and other art supplies to Traylor; purchasing many of the drawings for safekeeping; working (unsuccessfully) to get Traylor recognized in New York before World War II; and seeing the work exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1995, a year before his own death.

Traylor drawings, which now fetch \$40,000-\$225,000, have been represented in at least 30 solo exhibitions and 85 group shows. "Bill Traylor: Drawings From the Collec-

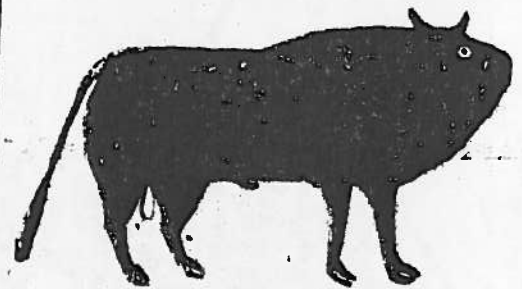


Bill Traylor, shown about 1939 in a photograph by Charles Shannon, drew from memories to create his art. Charles E. and Eugenia C. Shannon Trust

tions of the High Museum of Art and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts," the largest exhibit yet, drawing from the two biggest public collections of the artist's works, has just opened in Atlanta.

We asked High folk art curator Susan Crawley to discuss three of the 65 pieces (the High's collection has grown to 35). The exhibit will remain on view through May 13, before a national tour with stops in Nashville and San Diego.

A closer look and understanding of three of the drawings by folk artist Bill Traylor. D2



## On view

"Bill Traylor: Drawings From the Collections of the High Museum of Art and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts"

Through May 13, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.  
Tuesdays-Saturdays; until 8 p.m. Thursdays; noon-5 p.m. Sundays. \$18; \$15 students, seniors; \$11 ages 6-17; free 5 and younger. 1280 Peachtree St. N.E., Atlanta. 404-733-4200, www.high.org.



What's playing near you: [accessAtlanta.com/showtimes](http://accessAtlanta.com/showtimes) Restaurants, movie trailers, tickets: [accessAtlanta.com/movies](http://accessAtlanta.com/movies)

ART BY BILL TRAYLOR WORKS



"Man, Woman"

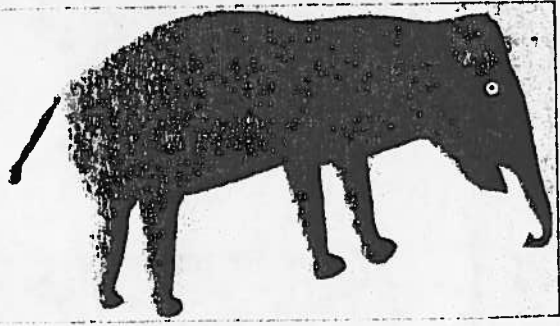
**"Man, Woman" (circa 1940-42)**

Bill Traylor drew many variations of this standoff between a well-dressed couple, who engage each other with eye-to-eye contact, flashing fingers and animated body language and generally appear ready to invade each other's spaces. Charles Shannon recounted that Traylor once observed of such scenes, "She's not *asking* him where he's been, she's *telling* him."

Traylor is presumed to have known something about conflict with the opposite sex: He had two wives and many girlfriends and reportedly sired some 20 children.

"Why he made it a common subject, we don't know – whether it was because it resonated with him or just amused him," Susan Crawley said of the quarreling couple, which could just as well be dancing. "It certainly seemed the latter was the case either way."

Traylor spent many days under an awning near a pool hall where he bunked for a time at night, depicting the parade of humanity. Some of the compositions are simple, some are complex, but all reveal him to have been a keen, and wry, observer of day-to-day urban life.



"Untitled"

**'Untitled' (1939-40)**

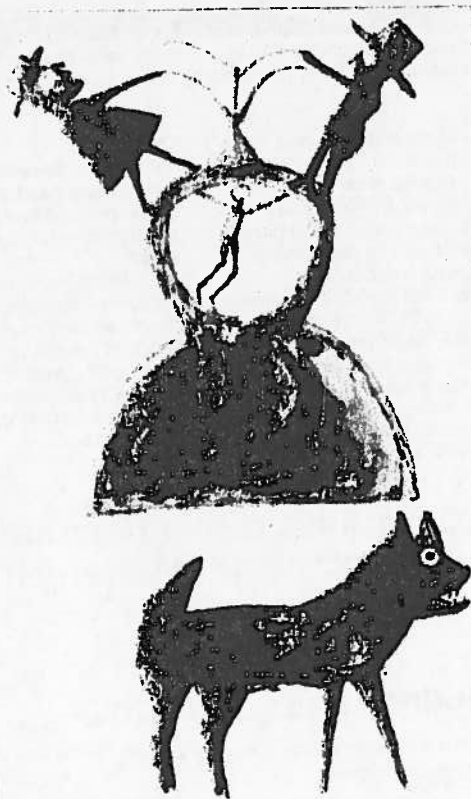
Traylor's drawings of farm animals, depicted decades after he left the plantation, are prized for the way they convey individuality. Dogs, pigs, cats, birds, horses – he brought them all back to life with his acute visual memory.

His animals are imbued with personality, Crawley said. "It's not a generic horse, it's a specific horse," she said. "It's not a generic pig, it's a specific pig."

And even though the creatures were depicted in flat silhouette, Crawley said Traylor could "reanimate" them via his powers as "a master of subtlety of line" and in the playful way he placed his figures in negative space to achieve movement.

The seemingly smiling elephant pictured with a forward tilt here wasn't anything Traylor would have seen on a plantation, of course, but probably captured his imagination in an annual parade that wove through

**'Figures, Construction' (circa 1940-42)**



Architecture also was on Traylor's radar and alive in his memory. Some of his most complex compositions place small characters bounding about forms that can be recognized as the Alabama Capitol, a fountain amid that city's Court Square and even a swimming platform from the plantation where he toiled in Lowndes County, near Benton, Ala.

The unusual form with a hollowed apple shape in this drawing, which recurs in other Traylor pieces, is most likely the street clock beside the Klein and Son jewelry store, also on Court Square, a few blocks from where Traylor came to live and work.

"It's not always obvious what Traylor is drawing because he's rarely just reproducing something inanimate that he remembers," Crawley said. "Great artists absorb forms and images from the world around them and their own imagination, and in their remarkable brains, these things are amalgamated and come out as something else."

Still, the curator believes that Traylor intended the character in the center with arms outstretched to evoke the hands of the jewelry store clock.

"The similarity is unmistakable."