

Woman with Bird, ca. 1940-1942. Watercolor and graphite on cardboard, 13 1/4 x 7 3/8 in. Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, Alabama, Gift of Charles and Eugenia Shannon, 1982.4.07

Bill Traylor

Drawings from the Collections of the High Museum of Art and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts

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Frist Center for the Visual Arts

This exhibition is co-organized by the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery. This exhibition is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.



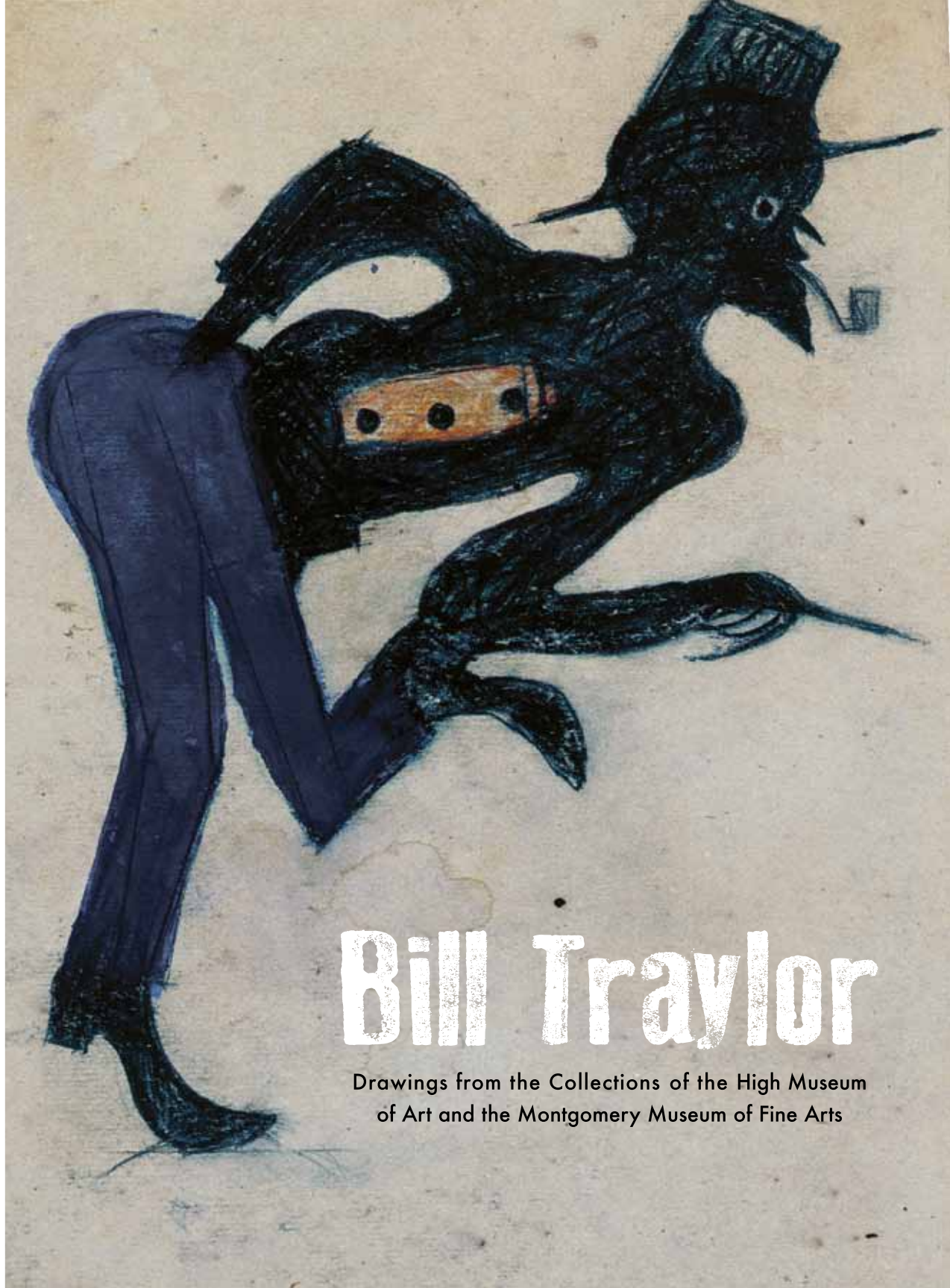
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Cover: *Untitled [Man in Blue Pants]*, ca. 1939–1942. Poster paint and pencil on cardboard, 10 5/8 x 7 1/4 in. High Museum of Art, Atlanta, T. Marshall Hahn Collection, 1997.115

Above: *Untitled*, 1939–1940. Poster paint and pencil on paper, 14 5/8 x 25 3/4 in. High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia. T. Marshall Hahn Collection, 1997.113

As early as 1939, the pared-down forms in Alabama self-taught artist William “Bill” Traylor’s (1854?–1949) energetic drawings struck a chord with observers accustomed to the formal reductions of modernism, making him one of the first African American vernacular artists to attract the notice of the art establishment in the twentieth century. Beginning when he was in his eighties, in a prolific decade of art-making, Traylor produced between 1,200 and 1,500 drawings in graphite pencil, colored pencil, poster paints, and crayon. Many of his works were created on shirt cardboard, cast-off signs, or other shaped supports, whose unusual forms often influenced his designs. Traylor used these materials to create geometrically-based representations of human and animal figures, often combining them in complex compositions that included abstracted objects or

“constructions.” These stylized forms are immediately recognizable as being Traylor’s for their economy, wit, and formal tension. His figures float in space, lacking ground-lines. He took his subject matter from his memories of events from plantation life, passersby on the street around him, and animals. Far from embodying the common stereotype of the self-taught artist as visionary, Traylor created compositions that are neither mystical nor religious—except for a crucifixion scene—but distinctly secular, although many are filled with images that may have been remembered or might be imaginary.

Traylor, who had been born into slavery, remained for more than fifty years as a field hand on the plantation where he was born. By 1928 he had moved to the city of Montgomery. In 1939 painter Charles Shannon, a founder of the progressive New South cultural center, encountered Traylor drawing as he sat on the sidewalk. Recognizing Traylor’s ability, the younger artist and his friends provided the older man with art supplies and bought his drawings for small sums, thereby preserving much of his work. Traylor was one of a small number of Southern African American vernacular artists working before the 1960s whose works gained some attention from the art establishment during their lifetimes. He was the featured artist in a one-man show at Montgomery’s New South Art Center in 1940, and his drawings were exhibited in Riverdale, New York, in 1942. After Traylor’s death, his work was represented in the Corcoran Gallery’s seminal 1982 exhibition *Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980*, and his drawing of a snake appeared on the front cover of its accompanying catalogue. His high status in the self-taught art world is confirmed by the presence of his pictures in at least eighty-seven group and thirty solo exhibitions between 1983 and 1999; since then, only two exhibitions have featured his work.

Previous museum exhibitions have looked at Traylor’s work from many angles, but none has emphasized the role of Charles Shannon and his friends in the preservation of Traylor’s drawings and their placement in American museums. With thirty-five and thirty drawings, respectively, the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia, and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, Alabama, have the two largest museum collections of Traylor’s work in the world. Both museums acquired their first thirty Traylor drawings in 1982 directly from Shannon. Despite their size, high quality, and provenance, these two collections have never been exhibited outside the Southeast and few of the works have been published. This exhibition showcases the best of Traylor’s drawings from two of the most significant museums in the South that are now actively collecting and preserving the work of self-taught regional artists. It also highlights Shannon’s contributions, displaying his preliminary sketch of Traylor for a portrait mural at the New South Art Center and an original block-printed brochure from Traylor’s 1940 New South show.

Susan Mitchell Crawley,
curator of folk art, High
Museum of Art, Atlanta



Untitled, ca. 1939–1947. Poster paint and pencil on cardboard, 13 1/2 x 13 7/8 in. High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia. T. Marshall Hahn Collection, 1997.114