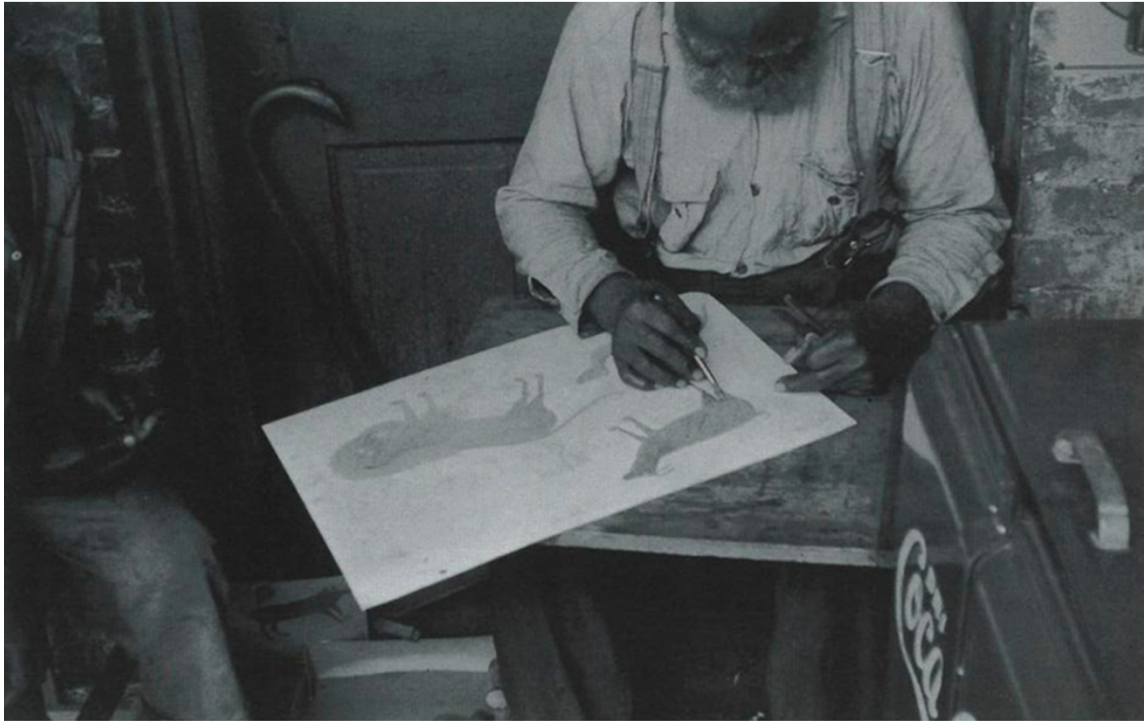


# CHRISTIE'S



## Photographs of Bill Traylor at work document the completion of an important drawing

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FINE ART | ARTISTS

Main image:

Charles Shannon, *Bill Traylor's Hands/Drawing Board and Cane*, 1939.  
Photograph: Charles E. and Eugenia C. Shannon Trust, courtesy Betty Cuningham Gallery

The images taken by Charles Shannon, a painter and lifelong champion of Traylor, offer rare glimpses into the Alabama artist's process and imagination

Bill Traylor made his first known artworks in 1939 at age 86. What began as drawings of single figures or animals remembered and observed from his doorstep in Montgomery, Alabama, blossomed into complex compositions, which would posthumously earn him the well-deserved reputation as one of the most important American artists of the 20th century.

Born into slavery around 1853, Traylor spent his working life on plantations and farms, and in 1928, he moved to the African-American section of the Alabama state capital. In 1939, Charles Shannon, a young painter and leader of New South, a progressive group of white artists in Montgomery, noticed and befriended Traylor, whom he photographed working on Monroe Street.

The resulting images are the most well-known and iconic of the artist. In this series, Traylor can be seen drawing Goat, Camel, Lion and Figures, which will be offered in Christie's Outsider and Vernacular Art on 18 January in New York. It is through Shannon's documentation of this work's creation, and through his dedication to the artist, that much can be understood about Traylor.

'These photographs, and the artwork associated with them, give us a unique window into Traylor's life and existence, his memories, explorations, materials, and practice,' says Cara Zimmerman, Christie's head of Americana and Outsider Art. Shannon would supply Traylor with materials, in addition to promoting his artworks to outside communities.

'Traylor and other artists who were working without formal training during this period provide another lens as to what was happening in America and American visual culture in a way that has been woefully missing from the canon of art history for a very long time,' she adds.

Largely due to Shannon's tireless work, which continued many years after Traylor's passing, the artist's market eventually grew. 'In the last 10 to 15 years, we've seen a huge uptick of interest,' says Zimmerman, adding that a number of museum shows, such as the Smithsonian American Art Museum's 2018-2019 exhibition, 'Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor', have also brought increased attention.

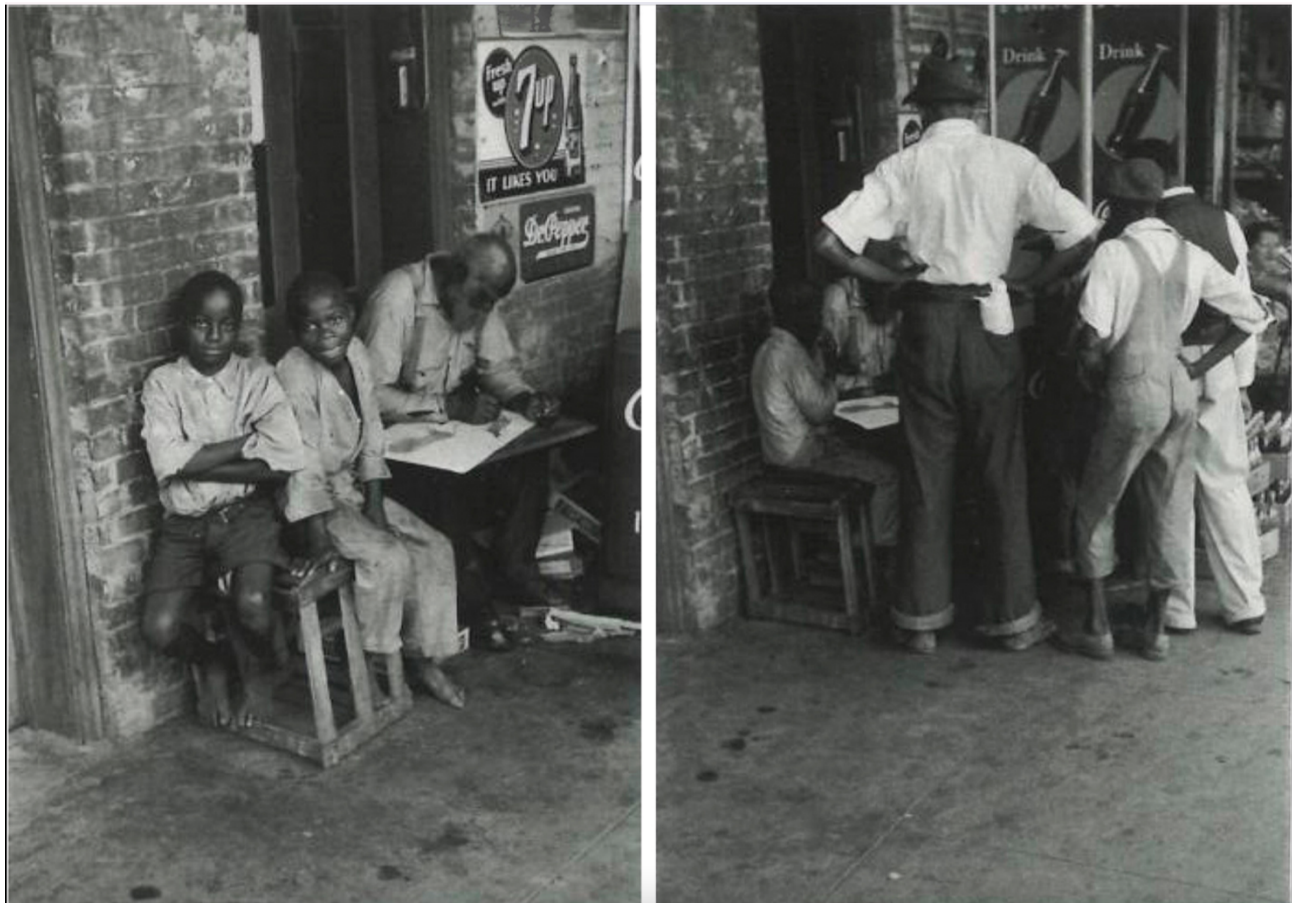


Charles Shannon, *Bill Traylor (Frontal)*, 1939. Photograph: Charles E. and Eugenia C. Shannon Trust, courtesy Betty Cuningham Gallery

In 2020, Christie's set the world auction record for Traylor with the double-sided *Man on White, Woman on Red / Man with Black Dog*, which sold for \$507,000. The work had previously been gifted by Steven Spielberg to American author Alice Walker after filming had concluded for the adaptation of Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple* in 1985.

'Today we are increasingly embracing the work of people who come from different backgrounds and have different narratives — works by Black artists, female artists, and artists from different races, cultures and creeds,' says Zimmerman. 'Shannon tried for decades to get Traylor recognition. He approached world-renowned museums and struggled to gain traction, but he did not give up.'

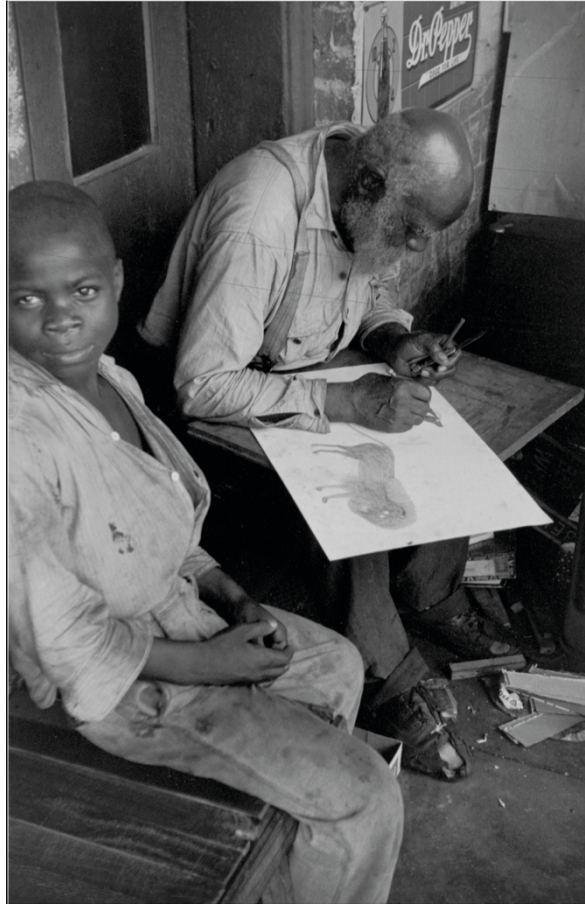
In 1979, Shannon secured the artist's first gallery show in Brooklyn, which was his first since two minor exhibitions in the 1940s. He collected most of the roughly 1,200 surviving works that Traylor made between 1939 and 1942, and eventually parcelled them out to museums and galleries, prompting Traylor's market to begin taking off.



Left: Charles Shannon, *Seated Boys/Seven Up Sign/Traylor Drawing*, 1939. Photograph: Charles E. and Eugenia C. Shannon Trust, courtesy Betty Cuninghame Gallery. Right: Charles Shannon, *Young Men Watching Bill Traylor Draw*, 1939. Photograph: Charles E. and Eugenia C. Shannon Trust, courtesy Betty Cuninghame Gallery

'Traylor was incredibly sophisticated in his use of both placement on a surface, and in his extremely graphic renderings. He distils figures, animals, and forms into their essence,' notes Zimmerman. As epitomised by *Goat, Camel, Lion and Figures*, 'Traylor manages to create this idea of movement, energy, and space with the simple tools of graphite and repurposed card,' his preferred canvas.





Charles Shannon, *Boy with Clasped Hands/Taylor Drawing*, 1939. Photograph: Charles E. and Eugenia C. Shannon Trust, courtesy Betty Cuninghame Gallery

Goat, Camel, Lion and Figures also captures Traylor's imagination. In his earliest drawings, Traylor would portray single objects or animals, such as cats or mules, but this work presents a more complete and complicated composition combining foreign animals with more familiar images — a figure chasing a man with a cane — drawn from his memory.

'This work is an example of Traylor reaching outside his comfort zone,' says Zimmerman. From his doorstep, Traylor would never have seen actual lions or camels, but rather images from posters and cigarette cartons.

Shannon's photographic documentation of Traylor is especially important for its illumination of Traylor's process. Zimmerman describes: 'This photo series shows us how he would draw outside surrounded by posters, visual culture, bustling crowds, and children. He would rotate his paper to reach the figures at the angles that he needed. There was no big setup with an easel to create the perfect artistic environment. For Traylor, making art was an organic offshoot of his existence in Montgomery.'