



HIRSCHL & ADLER MODERN

BILL TRAYLOR (1854–1949)

*Mexican Man with Green and Red Spotted Shirt*

Poster paint on cardboard, 11 3/8 x 8 in.

Executed about 1939–42

EXHIBITED: The Ginza Art Space, Tokyo, Japan; Collection de l'art Brut, Lausanne, Paris, 1991–92, *Bill Traylor: Judy Saslow's Collection (American Self Taught, Vol. 2)*

EX COLL: the artist; to Jay Leavell, Montgomery, Alabama, until 1983; by descent to his wife, Josephine Leavell, Montgomery, Alabama, until 1988; to private collection, Chicago, Illinois, until the present

A key figure in the tradition of twentieth-century African American folk art, Bill Traylor is considered by many to be the truest embodiment of the “outsider” or “self-taught” artist. A visual storyteller whose drawings have been likened to such evocative interpreters of the South as William Faulkner and Robert Johnson, Traylor’s iconic images of people and animals reflect his powers of imagination as well as his close observation of the world around him. Lauded for his ability to combine geometric stylization with his keen sense of design and narrative detail,

Traylor created a unique body of work. Since 1982, when his drawings were reintroduced to modern audiences through the exhibition *Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980*, held at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., critics have speculated about the social, cultural, and political implications of his art, as well as its parallels with blues music. What is always agreed upon, however, is its universal appeal stemming from the artist’s sincerity, humor, and remarkably sophisticated formalism. (For a discussion of the artist and his work, see Phil Patton, *Bill Traylor: High Singing Blue*, exhib. cat. [New York: Hirschl & Adler Modern, 1997] and *Bill Traylor 1854–1949: Deep Blues* [New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1998].)

One of the most unlikely chronologies of the life of an American artist, Traylor’s career did not begin until the age of 85. Born into slavery on George Hartwell Traylor’s cotton plantation in Benton, Alabama, he lived there through emancipation and ultimately worked there for the better part of his life. However, with crops failing in the late 1920s, and with the onset of the Depression, Traylor and other black sharecroppers were forced to find employment in the city. Around 1935 he moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where he worked in a shoe factory and did other odd jobs before rheumatism forced him into retirement.

In 1939—inspired by his early experiences on the farm and in response to the bustling world outside his doorstep—Traylor set up base on a covered stoop outside the entrance to a local pool hall on Lawrence Street and began making drawings on scraps of cardboard and on the backs of advertising posters. Populated by drunken revelers, stray dogs, runaway carts, forlorn mules, and countless farm animals, his compositions possessed an extraordinary sense of design and abstraction that caught the eye of Charles Shannon (1914–1996), a white teacher and artist

whose own paintings dealt with the daily life of African Americans in Alabama. Intrigued by Traylor's work, Shannon supplied him with art supplies and bought his drawings. In 1940, he organized Traylor's first exhibition at New South, a cooperative gallery in Montgomery. Shannon eventually acquired between 1,200 and 1,500 drawings by Traylor, all of them produced between 1939 and 1942.

In the early summer of 1942, Charles Shannon was drafted into military service and would not return until January 1946. Traylor subsequently lived with relatives in Washington, D.C., Detroit, New York, and elsewhere in the north, but produced no drawings during the war years. In 1946, he returned to Montgomery, where he lived with his daughter, Sarah (Sally) Traylor Howard, until his death in 1949.

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