

**Exhibition:** *Charles White: A Retrospective*

**Date:** February 17–June 9, 2019

**Location:** Resnick Pavilion



Image captions on page 5

(Los Angeles—January 16, 2019) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents the West Coast premiere of *Charles White: A Retrospective*, the first major exhibition of the artist Charles White (1918–1979) in over 30 years. Charles White created powerful interpretations from African American history and culture throughout his 40-year career. A gifted draftsman and printmaker as well as a talented mural and easel painter, White almost exclusively portrayed black subjects. A lifelong social activist, he championed racial pride and condemned the institutionalized racism faced by African Americans in all areas of life by using his art as a form of protest, affirmation, and celebration. Co-organized by the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) and the Museum of Modern Art New York (MoMA), the exhibition showcases approximately 100 paintings, drawings, prints, and photographs that reflect White's life as he moved from Chicago to New York to Los Angeles. White's time in Los Angeles was an important phase of his career; he created some of his most famous works in the city.

The exhibition was previously presented at the Art Institute of Chicago (June 10–September 31, 2018) and the Museum of Modern Art, New York (October 7, 2018–January 13, 2019). *Charles White: A Retrospective* is organized by Sarah Kelly Oehler, Field-McCormick Chair and Curator of American Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, and Esther Adler, Associate Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints,

The Museum of Modern Art. The presentation at LACMA is curated by Ilene Susan Fort, Curator Emerita of American Art.

The Los Angeles presentation will add to the touring display approximately 13 works from LACMA's permanent collection, further showcasing the range of media White worked in. Also unique to the LACMA presentation are audio recordings of Charles White who occasionally gave lectures at LACMA. During the LACMA presentation, two concurrent and complementary exhibitions will be on view in Los Angeles, including *Life Model: Charles White and His Students* (February 16–September 15, 2019) on view at LACMA's satellite gallery at Charles White Elementary School, formerly Otis Art Institute, where the artist taught for many years; and *Plumb Line: Charles White and the Contemporary* (March 6–August 25, 2019) will be presented at the California African American Museum (CAAM), whose mission to showcase African American history, art, and culture was shared by White throughout his career.

“Charles White is one of the most significant artists of mid-century America. Driven by an enduring hope that change is possible, White consistently strove to unite ideas and aesthetics, creating a powerful body of work whose message remains relevant today,” said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. “Los Angeles was the third and last city in which the artist lived and worked. His extraordinary legacy of art, activism, and teaching are seen in his work and in the work of his students. We are privileged to share his life and legacy through this exhibition.”

### **Exhibition Organization**

*Charles White: A Retrospective* is organized loosely in chronological order and arranged by city where White spent the most time: Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. Within each exhibition section are sub-themes such as early murals, agriculture, music, and more.

### **Chicago (1918–1942)**

White studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and aligned himself with a network of local leftist artists who drew attention to inequities within American society in order to effect social change. In his early oil canvases illustrating contemporary life, created

under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, he developed an expressive, often distorted figurative style typical of many Chicago artists of the time. Inspired by Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera, White believed that his art should reach the broadest audience possible, and to this end he created public murals and affordable prints and reproductions and joined community exhibitions. He often derived his subjects and titles from folk tales, the Bible, spirituals, and books. Between 1939 and 1943, White painted four monumental murals thematically drawn from African American history. He chose their subject matter to counter mainstream narratives that ignored or obscured black achievements. He recognized that historical mistreatment of African Americans contributed to the injustices facing black people of his own day.

### **New York (1942–1956)**

In 1942, with his first wife, artist Elizabeth Catlett, White relocated to New York City, where he continued making art while teaching and exhibiting widely. In response to World War II, he created images of African Americans in the military and on the home front, as he believed that the United States could defeat fascism only with a united front that included all Americans. Serving in a segregated division of the army, White contracted tuberculosis, which permanently damaged his health. In 1946 White accompanied Catlett to Mexico, where he worked at the famed printmaking collective, Taller de Gráfica Popular (the Popular Graphics Workshop or People's Graphic Art Workshop). The experience invigorated his printmaking practice and encouraged his activism to address current issues. Back home, the artist became closely involved with the interracial Committee for the Negro in the Arts, which was founded in 1947 with support from singers Harry Belafonte and Paul Robeson and poet Langston Hughes, and advocated for the integration of African Americans into all areas of American life.

White's subject matter may appear apolitical, but his new realism was a highly political choice. In 1951, as hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee threatened to blacklist many leftist artists, White and his second wife, Frances Barrett White, traveled to the Soviet Union. There he encountered Socialist Realism, the propagandistic artistic style that featured monumental figures and

optimistic views of workers' lives. He applied it to themes of labor, agriculture, and music in his own works, with a renewed emphasis on the dignity and beauty of African Americans.

### **Los Angeles (1956–1979)**

White continued his activism following his move to Southern California for health reasons in 1956. There his network expanded to include media personalities such as actor Sidney Poitier and screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, and his art appeared in Hollywood projects. From the 1960s on, White worked primarily as a draftsman and printmaker, taking advantage of the region's growth as a center of lithography. He often focused on single figures, and they became larger in scale and more monumental in effect. Relishing the directness of lithography, his handling became increasingly complex and abstract. No longer content to model in a purely naturalistic manner, White increased the vigor of his line while he continued to tackle thematic questions of history, equality, and figuration. This exploration of a new symbolic language often included the addition of color.

White's work intersected with the growing Black Arts Movement, which emerged from the ideals and social concerns of Black Power Movement during the mid-1960s and early 1970s. Although he did not display the overtly revolutionary symbols often deployed by the movement, his images did become stronger due to his frustration over the lack of progress in civil rights. In 1965 he joined the faculty of the Otis Art Institute, where he trained a generation of artists, many of whom would follow his lead and develop their own socially committed practices. By the time of his death in 1979, White was not only active in the cultural politics of Los Angeles and a cult hero of California art circles, but he had also become a significant international figure. His messages still resonate today.

### **Related Programming**

For information on related programming, visit [lacma.org](http://lacma.org)

### **Catalogue**

*Charles White: A Retrospective* | \$50 | \$45 Member Price

Essays by Esther Adler, Ilene Susan Fort, Kellie Jones, Sarah Kelly Oehler, Mark Pascale, and Deborah Willis and a preface by Kerry James Marshall

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Available at the LACMA Store or online at [LACMAStore.org](http://LACMAStore.org)

**Credit**

Organized by the Art Institute of Chicago and The Museum of Modern Art, in collaboration with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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**About LACMA**

Since its inception in 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has been devoted to collecting works of art that span both history and geography, mirroring Los Angeles's rich cultural heritage and uniquely diverse population. Today LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of over 135,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of art history from new and unexpected points of view. A museum of international stature as well as a vital cultural center for Southern California, LACMA shares its vast collection with the Greater Los Angeles County and beyond through exhibitions, public programs, and research facilities that attract over one million visitors annually, in addition to serving millions more through community partnerships, school outreach programs, and creative digital initiatives. LACMA's main campus is located halfway between the ocean and downtown, adjacent to the La Brea Tar Pits and Museum and the future home of the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures. Dedicated to serving all of Los Angeles, LACMA collaborates with a range of curators, educators, and artists on exhibitions and programs at various sites throughout the County.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. [lacma.org](http://lacma.org)

**Image captions:**

(left) Charles White, *Sojourner Truth and Booker T. Washington (Study for Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America)*, 1943, collection of the Newark Museum, purchase 1944 Sophronia Anderson Bequest Fund, © The Charles White Archives, photo courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York  
(left center): Charles White, *General Moses (Harriet Tubman)*, 1965, private collection, © The Charles White Archives, photo courtesy of Swann Auction Galleries

(right center) Charles White, *Sound of Silence*, 1978, The Art Institute of Chicago, Margaret Fisher Fund, 2017.314, © The Charles White Archives, photo © The Art Institute of Chicago

(right) Charles White, *I Have a Dream*, 1976, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Cirrus Editions Archive, purchased with funds provided by the Director's Roundtable, and gift of Cirrus Editions, © The Charles White Archives, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

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