



## MAN WITH A PLOW

Bill Traylor (1852/56–1949)

Montgomery, Alabama; c. 1939–1942

Poster paint and pencil on paperboard; 15 × 25 ¾"

Promised gift of Ralph Esmerian, P1.2001.267

Photo courtesy Sotheby's, New York

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### BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE OBJECT

Bill Traylor spent most of his life on a plantation in Alabama, first as an enslaved child and fieldworker and later as a freed farmworker. After more than seventy years, Traylor eventually left the plantation and worked for a short time in a Montgomery, Alabama, factory. It wasn't until the age of 84, when he was no longer able to work, that he began to draw and paint.

In the mere three years that comprised his career as an artist, from 1939 to 1942, Traylor produced about fifteen hundred works on paper. Although he was poor and often had to use found materials, such as laundry shirt cardboards and discarded pencil stubs, out of necessity, he actually preferred found cardboard and paper to new, store-bought paper. The marks on and irregular shapes of cut-up boxes and signs he often used were, in fact, inspirational: When working on a cardboard that had a thin slot cut into it, for example, Traylor drew a figure peeking into the slot.

Traylor recorded the images of his life sitting on a Montgomery sidewalk, across the street from a hotel. His inspirations were the memories he had of specific people or animals, as well as the people he saw every day in the city, such as the travelers carrying suitcases who kept coming in and out of the hotel. Still other subjects were the inventions of his own imagination. When he remarked, once, "I wanted to be plowing so bad today, I draw'd me a man plowing," he might have been speaking about this very painting.\* However, Traylor painted several depictions of men plowing, so it is just as possible that he was referring to another, similar picture.

Simplified forms, often built from geometric shapes, characterize Traylor's artistic style. He used a small stick as a straightedge, constructing his figures from squares, rhombuses, and triangles before drawing their outlines and filling them in with color. The figures were stripped of details and thus made into bold graphic symbols.

Sometimes Traylor displayed his works, hanging them on a nearby fence for passersby to see. However, he wasn't particularly interested in selling them; when he did sell a drawing, though, he accepted whatever amount of money a person offered—usually just a few cents. The idea of people buying his artwork seemed to amuse Traylor; he said, "Sometimes they buys 'em, when they don't even need 'em."†

### RELATED LESSONS

- "History Through the Eyes of Individuals: Bill Traylor" (4–5)
- "Exploring Folk Art Through Poetry" (2–3)

\* Quoted in John L. Moore, "Bill Traylor," in Elsa Longhauser and Harald Szeemann, *Self-Taught Artists of the 20th Century: An American Anthology* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books in association with Museum of American Folk Art, New York, 1998), p. 58.

† Quoted in Alfred M. Fischer, "Looking at Bill Traylor: Observations on the Reception of His Work," in Josef Helfenstein and Roman Kurzmeyer, *Bill Traylor, 1854–1949: Deep Blues* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 163.

# HISTORY THROUGH THE EYES OF INDIVIDUALS: BILL TRAYLOR

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4-5

**GRADE LEVEL: 4-5**

**NEW YORK STATE LEARNING STANDARDS: THE ARTS, ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE ARTS, AND SOCIAL STUDIES**

**ESTIMATED TIME: THREE 45-MINUTE PERIODS**

## **OBJECTIVES**

- Students will view a work by former slave and self-taught artist Bill Traylor and learn about his biography through a reading and discussion.
- Students will learn about the daily life and experience of slaves, pre- and post-emancipation, in the United States.
- Students will explore U.S. history, using an artwork and a first-person narrative as primary sources.
- Students will write fictional stories in response to the artwork.

## **MATERIALS**

- Images of *Man With a Plow*
- A copy of *Deep Blues: Bill Traylor, Self-Taught Artist*, by Mary E. Lyons
- An ex-slave narrative from the Library of Congress's "Voices from the Days of Slavery" online archive (see "Recommended Websites" at the end of this lesson plan)
- Writing materials

## **LESSON ACTIVITIES AND PROCESSES**

### **Day One**

#### **Introduction**

- The students will view and discuss a reproduction of *Man with a Plow* by Bill Traylor.
  - What is happening in this picture?
  - What are your ideas about the man in the picture?
  - Why might the artist have chosen to create the work the way he did, using this particular style?
- Introduce the biographical information about Bill Traylor and/or read from *Deep Blues: Bill Traylor, Self-Taught Artist* by Mary E. Lyons, then continue the discussion of the artwork in light of this new information.

### **Day Two**

#### **Discussion**

- Read excerpts from an ex-slave narrative with students. Transcripts and audio recordings of such narratives can be found in the Library of Congress's "Voices from the Days of Slavery" online archive (see "Recommended Websites" at the end of this lesson plan).
  - What was daily life like for the slave who told his or her story?

- How did the ex-slave describe the ways emancipation changed his or her life?
- How does the life described differ from your own?
- How did this person’s life compare to Bill Traylor’s life?
- What surprised you about the narrative?
- Why is it important to preserve records of the life experiences of former slaves?
- Make connections between the ex-slave narrative and the fifteen hundred drawings and paintings that can be said to form a visual narrative of Bill Traylor’s life experiences.
  - Why do you think it was important to Bill Traylor to depict the people and the animals that surrounded him through his life?

### **Day Three**

#### **Activity**

- Ask the students to write a work of historical fiction inspired by Bill Traylor and his painting *Man with a Plow*. The story may concern:
  - the day Traylor painted the picture
  - the man in the painting and his relationship to Traylor
  - a specific memory of Traylor’s from his days on the plantation that may have inspired the painting
  - other ideas inspired by looking at and discussing *Man with a Plow*.
- Remind the students to include details and descriptions of the events, characters, and settings in their stories.
- Encourage the students to incorporate information gathered from the ex-slave narrative and/or from the background information on Bill Traylor.
- Students should each have access to a reproduction of *Man with a Plow* while planning and writing their stories.

### **PRE- AND POST-LESSON ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS**

- This lesson can be conducted within an extended unit on slavery, the Civil War, or the Reconstruction era in American history.
- Have the students illustrate an event or a character from their stories with simple drawing materials.
- Visit the American Folk Art Museum for a guided tour. Conduct this lesson before or after your museum visit.
- The “Character Creations” lesson may be conducted in conjunction with this lesson to offer students another opportunity to respond to folk art through creative writing.

## ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION METHODS

- Students thoughtfully observed and discussed the presented painting.
- In discussion, students showed comprehension of the ex-slave narrative as a primary historical resource.
- Students responded to a work of folk art in creative writing, responding to the objective aspects of the work and their own personal thoughts and associations.
- Students included information or ideas gathered by reading excerpts from an ex-slave narrative and/or the book *Deep Blues: Bill Traylor, Self-Taught Artist* in their own historical fiction stories.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Recommended Books for Students and Teachers

Lyons, Mary E. *Deep Blues: Bill Traylor, Self-Taught Artist*. New York: Scribner, 1994.

A picture-book exploration of Bill Traylor's childhood, adulthood, and life as an artist, based on historical research into the lives of slaves and free African Americans in Alabama and written at a level appropriate for upper-elementary and middle-school students.

Po rte, Barbara Ann. *Black Elephant with a Brown Ear (in Alabama)*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1996. Imaginative short stories inspired by ten paintings by Bill Traylor.

### Recommended Books for Teachers

Arnett, Paul, and William Arnett (eds.). *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*. Atlanta, Ga.: Tinwood Books, 1999.

The definitive book on African American folk artists of the South. Volume 1 explores artists working in the years following World War II; Volume 2 focuses on artists working in the 1980s and '90s.

Berlin, Ira, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, eds. *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation*. Book & Cassette edition. New York: New Press, 1998.

Transcripts of 124 former slaves interviewed in the 1920s and '30s by the Federal Writers' Project, accompanied by original recordings and narratives read by contemporary actors.

Helfenstein, Josef, and Roman Kurzmeyer. *Bill Traylor, 1854–1949: Deep Blues*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999.

A collection of essays exploring Traylor's life and work within the historical context of the segregated South of the first half of the 20th century. Illustrated with black-and-white photographs of the artist working and reproductions of his drawings and paintings.

Hollander, Stacy C. *American Radiance: The Ralph Esmerian Gift to the American Folk Art Museum*. New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001. Catalog of this once private collection of American folk art, comprising hundreds of pieces of furniture, signs, ceramics, textiles, weathervanes, walking sticks, and other objects, including several works by Traylor. *Man with a Plow* is illustrated and discussed on pages 279 and 504.

Hollander, Stacy C., and Brooke Davis Anderson. *American Anthem: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum*. New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001. An exploration of American folk art from the colonial period through the present as seen through highlights from the American Folk Art Museum's collection. Two other works by Traylor are illustrated and discussed on pages 204, 205, and 374.

Livingston, Jane, and John Beardsley. *Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980*. Jackson: Published for the Corcoran Gallery of Art by the University Press of Mississippi, 1982. Catalog published in conjunction with the groundbreaking 1982 exhibition “Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980” at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., which included works by Bill Traylor.

Maresca, Frank, and Roger Ricco. *Bill Traylor: His Art, His Life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991. Reproductions of Traylor's drawings and paintings, accompanied by an interview with Charles Shannon, the artist who preserved and promoted Traylor's work after having befriended him in Montgomery, Ala.

#### **Recommended Websites**

Bill Traylor biography on *Raw Vision* website:

[www.rawvision.com/back/traylor/traylor.html](http://www.rawvision.com/back/traylor/traylor.html)

Artist's biography on the international “outsider art” magazine's website.

The Library of Congress's American Memory website:

“Voices from the Days of Slavery” online archive

[www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/vfssp.html](http://www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/vfssp.html)

Transcripts and audio recordings of the narratives of former slaves. Teachers may wish to choose excerpts.