



EXPULSION

Edgar Tolson (1904–1984)

Campton, Kentucky; 1969–1970

Carved wood with paint and pencil; 14 ½ × 18 × 7"

Gift of Elizabeth Ross Johnson, 1985.35.17

Photo by Gavin Ashworth, New York

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Edgar Tolson was born in eastern Kentucky, deep in the Appalachian heartland. Woodcarving, a byproduct of the skills needed to survive in a region known as much for its grinding poverty as for its natural beauty, came to the artist naturally. Growing up in a family of subsistence farmers, Tolson worked at a variety of jobs during the course of his life. Following in the footsteps of his fundamentalist father, James Perry Tolson, the artist also served as a lay preacher.

Tolson began woodcarving in earnest following a stroke in 1957. Although his repertoire was varied, he is best known for a series of sequential narrative carvings depicting the Fall of Man as described in Chapter 3 of the book of Genesis. One of the most frequently quoted chapters of the Bible among evangelical Christians, Genesis tells the story of the temptation of Eve, the loss of innocence, the entry into the world of sin and suffering, and hence—according to Christian understanding—the need for the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In approaching this theme, Tolson was fully aware both of the centrality of its theological message and its vivid theatricality.

Here the artist depicts Adam and Eve being driven out of the Garden of Eden. Only the serpent, hovering sinuously in the tree, is painted, heightening the drama of the narrative. The angel, slightly elevated on a platform, is one of the cherubim who, along with the flaming sword, were placed by God at the east of Eden at the time of the expulsion (Gen. 3:24).

RESOURCES

American Folk Art Museum:

www.folkartmuseum.org

Ardery, Julia S. *The Temptation: Edgar Tolson and the Genesis of Twentieth Century Folk Art*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Crown, Carol. *Coming Home! Self-Taught Artists, the Bible and the American South*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004.

Hoffberger, Rebecca, et al. *Tree of Life*. Baltimore: American Visionary Art Museum, 1996.

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.

Longhauser, Elsa, 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, 1998.

Monroe, Michael W., and Suzanne Ramljak. *Turning Wood into Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000.

PARADISE LOST

QUESTIONS FOR CAREFUL LOOKING

- What is happening here?
- What surprises you about this object?
- What can we say about these figures?
- What relationship do the figures have to each other?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- *Expulsion* is one in a series of carvings by Edgar Tolson depicting Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the oft-quoted story of the Fall of Man in Chapter 3 of the Book of Genesis. How does this image compare with your notion of the Garden of Eden or paradise? What does the artist accomplish by depicting the scene as sparsely as he does?
- What scenes do you imagine the other carvings in the series depict?
- Tolson's carvings are known for their theatricality. How does the artist create a sense of drama?
- Tolson enjoyed recognition in his lifetime for the modernity and simplicity of his carvings. Consider the colors and shapes the artist employs. Why is the simplicity effective in telling the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise?
- How is Tolson's sculpture an indictment of the twentieth-century United States? The world? What norms have individuals and countries violated?
- Compare Tolson's depiction of Adam and Eve to that pictured in the first *Metamorphosis* puzzle book on page 93. How are the two portrayals similar to and different from each other? How does each artist communicate the narrative of Adam and Eve?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- How are stories, lore, and mythology important to religion?
- How did religion affect cultural and moral norms in the American South, where Edgar Tolson lived, in the second half of the twentieth century?
- What current events might Tolson have had in mind when he created *Expulsion* in 1969–1970?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Have students research different spiritual communities in the South during different time periods.
- Select a story that the class has examined together and ask students to identify pivotal moments in the narrative. Have each student select one of these moments to represent visually in a drawing, painting, sculpture, or collage. Once the students' narrative in imagery is completed, display all the depictions together to outline the story.
- Ask students to write a persuasive essay describing how people in the twenty-first century can "regain" Eden.