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Beauty and Style on the Outside, Charm Within
Gallery Exhibitions of Bill Traylor, Gene Davis and Phyllis Bramson.

By : Peter Plagens Sept. 13, 2013

Bill Traylor: American Folk Art Museum

Brief, 10-year careers seem to be the fate of an uncommon number of great artists. Most of them—Vincent van Gogh and Georges Seurat come to mind—died relatively young. The American ex-slave Bill Traylor, on the other hand, had a long if hardscrabble life in the Jim Crow South, dying at the age of 95 in 1949. His decade of making art occurred only at the end, when he slept in the back rooms of shops at night and sat on the sidewalks of Montgomery, Ala., during the day.

'Untitled (Figures, Construction)' (1940-42) by Bill Traylor.
Lyle Peterzell / Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts

But in that short time, the self-taught Mr. Traylor produced somewhere in the neighborhood



of 1,500 works. Miraculously animated, his passionately stylized silhouettes of people and animals he observed, imaginatively remembered or simply made up were typically painted or drawn on pieces of reclaimed cardboard in black or dark blue. His art is absolutely consistent but somehow never repetitive.

Mr. Traylor's output is available to us only because, shortly after he started making art, a patron arrived in the person of Charles Shannon, a young white artist who supplied Mr. Traylor with poster paint, collected and preserved his drawings, and introduced his work to galleries and museums in the North. There was, however, no heartwarming rocket to stardom. Real

notice of Mr. Traylor's genius didn't happen until the art world became enraptured with the "outsider artist" phenomenon in the 1970s. Genius is, by the way, the appropriate term. Mr. Traylor's work combines his own singular view of the world with the best of Henri Matisse's sense of shape and Paul Klee's visual wit. This is not an overstatement.