

## Charles White

*Charles White: A Retrospective* (February 17–June 9, 2019) is the first major exhibition of Charles White's work in more than thirty-five years. It provides an important opportunity to experience the artist's work firsthand and share its powerful messages with the next generation. We are excited to share the accompanying curriculum packet with you and look forward to hearing how you use it in your classrooms.

### Biography

One of the foremost American artists of the twentieth century, Charles White (1918–1979) maintained an unwavering commitment to African American subjects, historical truth, progressive politics, and social activism throughout his career. His life and work are deeply connected with important events and developments in American history, including the Great Migration, the Great Depression, the Chicago Black Renaissance, World War II, McCarthyism, the civil rights era, and the Black Arts movement.

Born in Chicago in 1918, White took an immediate interest in art. His mother gave him his first paint set when he was seven, and he began attending Saturday classes at the Art Institute of Chicago on scholarship at age thirteen. African Americans were conspicuously absent from White's high school curricula, so he found books at the public library that reflected his racial identity and experiences. His discovery of Harlem Renaissance leader Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925) was especially impactful. How many of us can relate to the experience of finding a book during our adolescence that made us feel truly seen, maybe for the first time?

Even in his early work, White was committed to depicting black subjects and unearthing forgotten historical truths. In 1938, he was hired to work for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Illinois Art Project (IAP), a New Deal initiative that provided relief for struggling and unemployed artists. While

involved with the WPA, White painted three murals in Chicago that celebrate essential black contributions to American history. Shortly thereafter, he painted the mural *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* (1943), discussed in detail in this packet.

After living in New York from 1942 until 1956, White moved to Los Angeles, where he remained until his passing in 1979. Just as he had done in Chicago and New York, White became involved with local progressive political and artistic communities. He produced numerous lithographs with some of Los Angeles's famed printing studios, including *Wanted Poster Series #14a* (1970), *Portrait of Tom Bradley* (1974), and *I Have a Dream* (1976), which are included in this packet. He also joined the faculty of the Otis Art Institute (now the Otis College of Art and Design) in 1965, where he imparted both drawing skills and a strong social consciousness to his students, among them now-famous artists such as Kerry James Marshall and David Hammons. White took his role as a teacher seriously, serving as a dedicated mentor to his students and encouraging their artistic development.

### Technique & Style

White worked in a variety of media, including easel painting, mural painting, drawing, photography, and lithography. He is widely praised as an excellent draftsman and his sensitivity to composition and figuration are exceptional. Throughout his entire career, White remained dedicated to representing human figures in a realistic style that was accessible, monumental, and dramatic. He is often described as a social realist artist, meaning that he created relatively naturalistic, realistic images of people in order to reveal important truths about the human condition and comment on social or political issues.

### Subject Matter

Like many other social realist artists, White often turned his attention to average people. He also

elevated important black figures whose accomplishments had long been ignored by the dominant white culture. In both cases, White was motivated by justice: he wanted to negate the racist caricatures of black people that pervaded mainstream media, uplift black audiences, correct the prevailing historical narrative in the United States, and communicate universal truths through black subjects. This was no small feat, yet when we spend time with White's work, we can grasp the magnitude and success of his endeavor.

## Conclusion

In 1964 White told the *Los Angeles Times*, “my whole purpose in art is to make a positive statement about mankind, all mankind, an affirmation of humanity ... All my life, I have been painting one single painting. This doesn't mean that I'm a man without angers—I've had my work in museums where I wasn't allowed to see it—but what I pour into my work is the challenge of how beautiful life can be.”<sup>1</sup> White used art as a force for positive change, creating images that explored and elevated black subjects, life, and history. His work continues to resonate strongly today and implores us to share it with younger generations: after all, what could be more enriching for students than to learn about American history and culture in a way that celebrates all of our accomplishments and doesn't shy away from communicating the hard truths?

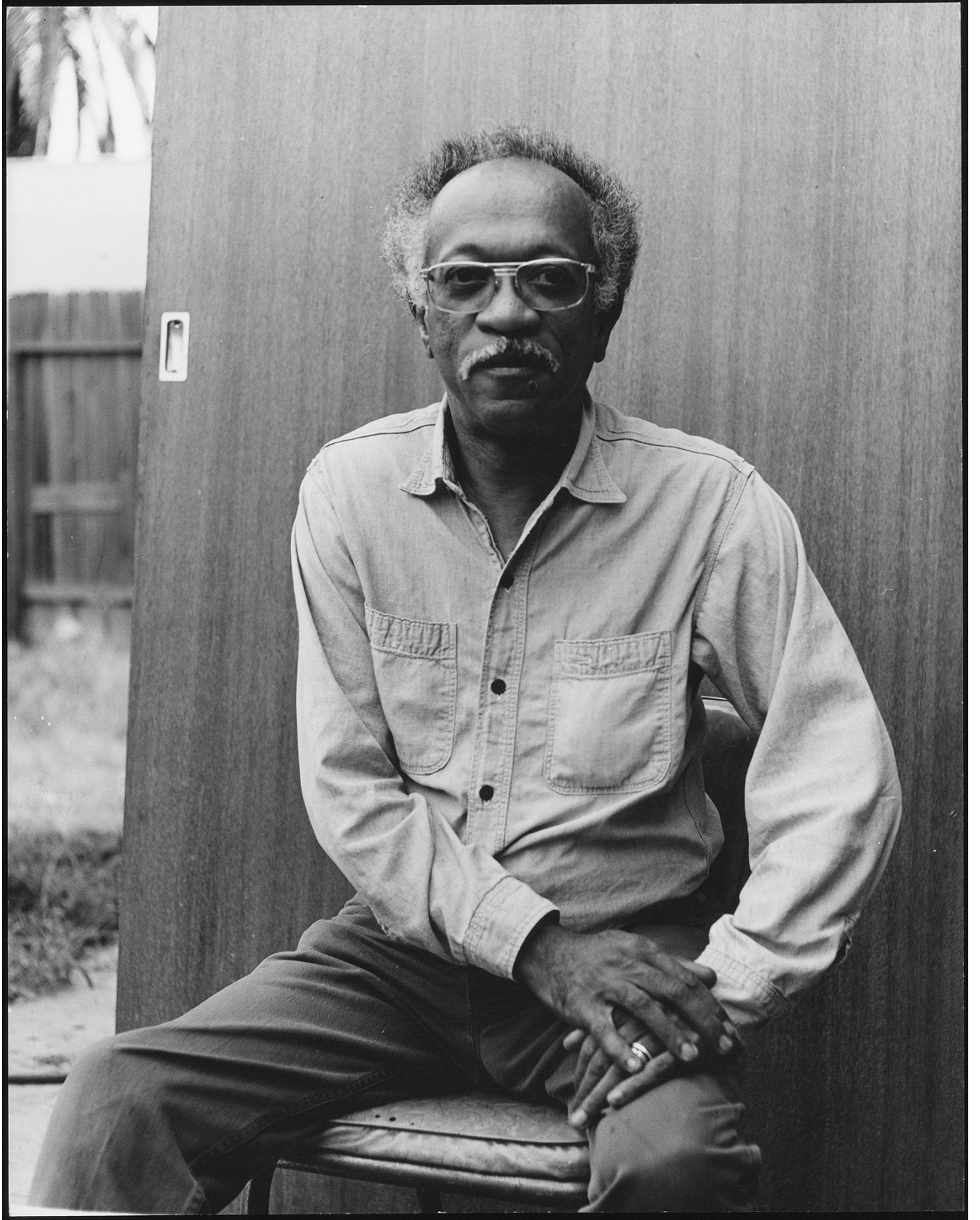
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<sup>1</sup> Art Seidenbaum, “The Racial Picture in Black and White,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 1964, C1, C12. Quoted in Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 33.

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Charles White at home in Altadena, California, 1971. Courtesy the Charles White Archives.

**Sojourner Truth and Booker T. Washington  
(Study for *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*), 1943  
Charles White**

***The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*, 1943  
Charles White**

In 1942, twenty-four-year-old Charles White received a fellowship from the Julius Rosenwald Fund to paint a mural at Hampton Institute, an historically black university (HBCU) in Virginia whose alumni include significant individuals such as Booker T. Washington, Clara Byrd Baker, and Mary Jackson, among others.<sup>1</sup> Entitled *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*, the mural depicts fourteen “prominent African American men and women, past and present, whose military, intellectual, and artistic achievements had gone largely unnoticed in mainstream accounts of the history of the United States.”<sup>2</sup>

The study of Sojourner Truth and Booker T. Washington shown here is one of the numerous figural drawings that White created in either pencil or charcoal to determine exact features and proportions for the final mural. An accomplished, detailed work of art in its own right, the study displays White’s skills as a draftsman. Truth and Washington are convincingly volumetric: despite the close cropping, they take up significant space and appear as solid as the wooden beams framing the image. Both gaze to the right, unsmiling and with steely resolve. It was important to White to produce faithful images of his subjects, and it is likely that he based his depictions of Truth and Washington on historical photographs.

In the mural, Truth and Washington can be found on the right, near the top and just to the right of the silvery gray industrial equipment. Truth wears a red headscarf and Washington’s suit is blue. They share the crowded picture plane with a chronologically arranged arc of prominent figures that begins in the lower left corner with Crispus Attucks and Peter Salem, both of whom fought in the Revolutionary War. Moving up and to the right, important figures from the colonial era to the twentieth century can be identified, including Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner,

Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Peter Still, George Washington Carver, Ferdinand Smith, Lead Belly, Marian Anderson, and Paul Robeson.

Stylistically, both the study and the mural reflect the aesthetics of social realism, a movement developed between the two World Wars by artists on the political left who were interested in using realism (albeit often highly stylized) to reach broad audiences and draw attention to injustices. The artworks also reveal White’s knowledge of murals being created around the same time by Mexican artists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros.

The mural addresses prevailing injustices in multiple ways. White explicitly intended his strong, dignified representations of black individuals to negate the “plague of distortions, stereotyped and superficial caricatures of ‘uncles,’ ‘mammies,’ and ‘pickaninnies’” that represented black subjects in popular culture.<sup>3</sup> The mural can also be understood as a corrective to mainstream accounts of American history that ignored or obscured black contributions. Finally, numerous figures in the mural are notable for resisting slavery. Peter Still (in the uppermost right corner), for example, holds up a flag that reads, “I will die before I submit to the yoke,” reminding viewers of black Americans’ ongoing resistance

<sup>1</sup> Hampton Institute is now called Hampton University. Booker T. Washington was an educator, civic leader, and thought leader; Clara Byrd Baker was an educator, civic leader, and suffragette; and Mary Jackson was a mathematician and aerospace engineer at NASA.

<sup>2</sup> Breanne Robertson, “Pan-Americanism, Patriotism, and Race Pride in Charles White’s Hampton Mural,” *American Art* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 53.

<sup>3</sup> Charles White, “Statement of Plan of Work,” Julius Rosenwald Fund Papers, Box 456, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tenn.

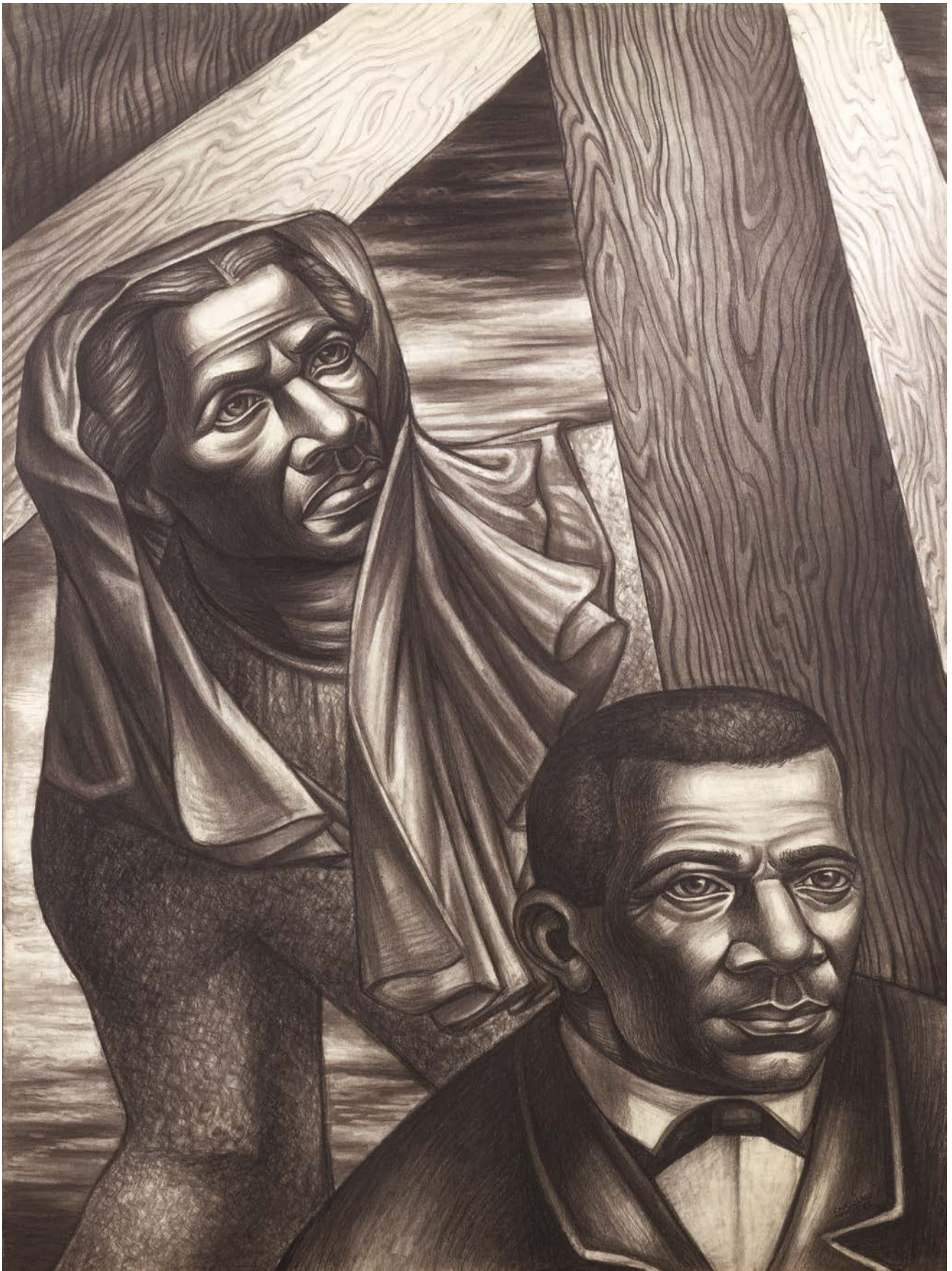


to oppression and long-standing commitment to freedom and equality.

*The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America* reflects White's belief in the power of historical truth to uplift his audiences and combat racist depictions of African Americans in mainstream media. It also invites viewers to learn more about black heroes whom they may not have encountered in textbooks and reconsider certain contradictions in the history of American democracy.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Who were Sojourner Truth and Booker T. Washington? What can you tell about them based on White's mural study? Describe the figures. Why do you think White included them in his mural?
2. Look closely at *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*. Work with a partner or small group to identify the historical figures in the artwork. Then, select one figure to research further.
3. Social realism was a popular artistic style in the 1930s and '40s. How or why do you think social realism helped artists reach broad audiences? How are murals, usually in public places, able to reach broad audiences in ways that other types of artworks cannot?
4. The essay alludes to "contradictions in the history of American democracy." What do you think those contradictions are? How did they play out historically? Do they continue to be influential today? How so?



Charles White, *Sojourner Truth and Booker T. Washington* (Study for *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*), 1943, pencil on illustration board, 37 × 27½ in., collection of the Newark Museum, purchase 1944 Sophronia Anderson Bequest Fund, © The Charles White Archives, photo courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York





Charles White, *The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America*, 1943, egg tempera, Collection of the Hampton University Museum, Hampton, VA, © The Charles White Archives



***I Have a Dream, 1976*****Charles White**

*I Have a Dream* is one of several prints Charles White created in honor of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, which King delivered at the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. The March on Washington took place one hundred years after Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and was one of the largest civil rights rallies in American history, with two hundred and fifty thousand people in attendance demanding full civil, political, and economic rights for African Americans.

The feelings of hope, pride, and determination that characterize King's "I Have a Dream" speech are palpable in White's simple, yet powerful print. A woman carrying a child in her arms looms above the viewer and seems to emerge out of the brilliant white light of the background from a far-off place or time. Except for the child's short-sleeved t-shirt, their clothing gives little indication of historical period. The cloak draped over the woman's head and body contributes to the air of mystery that surrounds the figures and also acts as protection. Both of their eyes are closed, perhaps suggesting that they are guided by faith alone on their journey. It isn't difficult to interpret the two figures as a version of the Christian Madonna and Child, a near-universal icon in the West.

Over the course of his career, White's commitment to progressive causes was unwavering. In the 1950s, he became involved with the civil rights movement and was especially supportive of Dr. King. White often donated his art to fundraising efforts, and, in 1960, he joined the Committee to Defend Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as the Struggle for Freedom in the South after the minister was arrested for tax fraud. Additionally, White was a signatory to a *New York Times* advertisement condemning the state of Alabama for its harassment of King. White also donated artworks for memorials held in Los Angeles and New York commemorating the first anniversary of King's death in 1969.

The figures' implied forward motion in *I Have a Dream* evokes the powerful, unstoppable momentum of the civil rights movement, and especially King's conviction that "There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges."<sup>1</sup> While King was speaking specifically about African Americans' plight in America, his words have broad resonance for all who are engaged in ongoing struggles for justice. Charles White's *I Have a Dream* is an appropriate accompaniment to King's speech, similarly conveying a universal message of hope, love, will, and strength.

**Discussion Prompts**

1. Look closely at Charles White's *I Have a Dream*. Describe the figures and their expressions. What do you think is their relationship? How do you know? Why do you think White left the background empty?
2. Read or listen to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Then, revisit Charles White's *I Have a Dream*. What is similar about them? How did White adapt the ideas in King's speech in his artwork?
3. What do the words "fair" and "equal" mean to you? What can we do to create fairness and equality in our communities?
4. What kind of future did King and his supporters, including Charles White, imagine? In what ways has their vision been achieved? In what ways has it not been achieved? What kind of future would you like to imagine?

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," Address Delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, accessed January 14, 2019, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>.



Charles White, *I Have a Dream*, 1976, lithograph, 18 1/8 x 25 1/8 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Graphic Arts Council Fund (M.79.76), © The Charles White Archives, photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA



## ***Wanted Poster Series #14a, 1970*** **Charles White**

*Wanted Poster Series #14a* belongs to a series of fourteen oil-wash drawings and lithographs that White began in 1969. The series was inspired by nineteenth-century wanted posters for fugitive slaves as well as advertisements for auctions where black people were bought and sold, and links the historical trauma of slavery to the present day.

White created the twenty-two-by-thirty-inch print by first drawing directly on a lithographic stone, likely with a variety of different implements to achieve a range of gray and black tones, line qualities, and textures. He probably drew the faces with a lithographic pencil and might have achieved the layered, textural background by turning a lithographic crayon on its side and rubbing it across the stone's surface. The lithographic medium allowed him to create multiple prints of the image.<sup>1</sup>

*Wanted Poster Series #14a* depicts the pensive, partially lit faces of two figures side by side in separate roundels against an abstract background. A faint line extends from top to bottom between the two roundels. Other noteworthy details include a large letter "X" near the bottom of the print and two numbers in old-fashioned lettering in the upper left and right corners: "1619" and "19??" The print's stained, creased appearance recalls the historic posters and ads White consulted, but the handling of the figures is radically different. Whereas wanted posters and auction ads during slavery typically included stock illustrations, White chose to create sensitive, fully modeled portraits of his subjects. By doing so, he reminds viewers (especially white viewers) that slavery did not destroy the humanity of those held in bondage.

The dates at the top of the print imply a strong connection between past and present. 1619 is the year most often cited as marking the beginning of slavery on the North American continent. Why did White pair this fateful year with an ambiguous

twentieth-century date? It seems that the artist is implying that a through line exists from slavery to the present day. A sense of frustration underlies the incompleteness of this second date ("19??"), suggesting that the artist could have replaced the question marks with any year in the twentieth century and the foundational message would remain relevant: the oppression of black people that began with slavery is ongoing. It did not end in 1865, or 1954, or 1964, for that matter.<sup>2</sup>

The dates also suggest a relationship between the two figures. Although the figure on the left appears much younger, they might be the ancestor of the figure on the right. Or, perhaps there is no direct familial relationship between them, but instead a bond forged by shared history. The "X" may refer to the naming practice of Nation of Islam members of refusing the name given to them in the slave system and instead adopting an "X" as their surname (Malcolm X being the most well-known example). White's figures are resilient and their dignity remains intact.

In 1970, White declared, "some of my recent work has anger. I feel that at this point I have to make an emphatic statement about how I view the expression, the condition of this world and of my people ... I guess it's sort of finding the way, my own kind of way, of making an indictment."<sup>3</sup> While White's words reflect on the fraught social and political context of the civil rights movement period, they also—like his *Wanted Poster Series*—allude to a much deeper historical trauma.

<sup>1</sup> See "Pressure + Ink: Lithography Process," The Museum of Modern Art, accessed January 14, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUXDItQfqSA>.

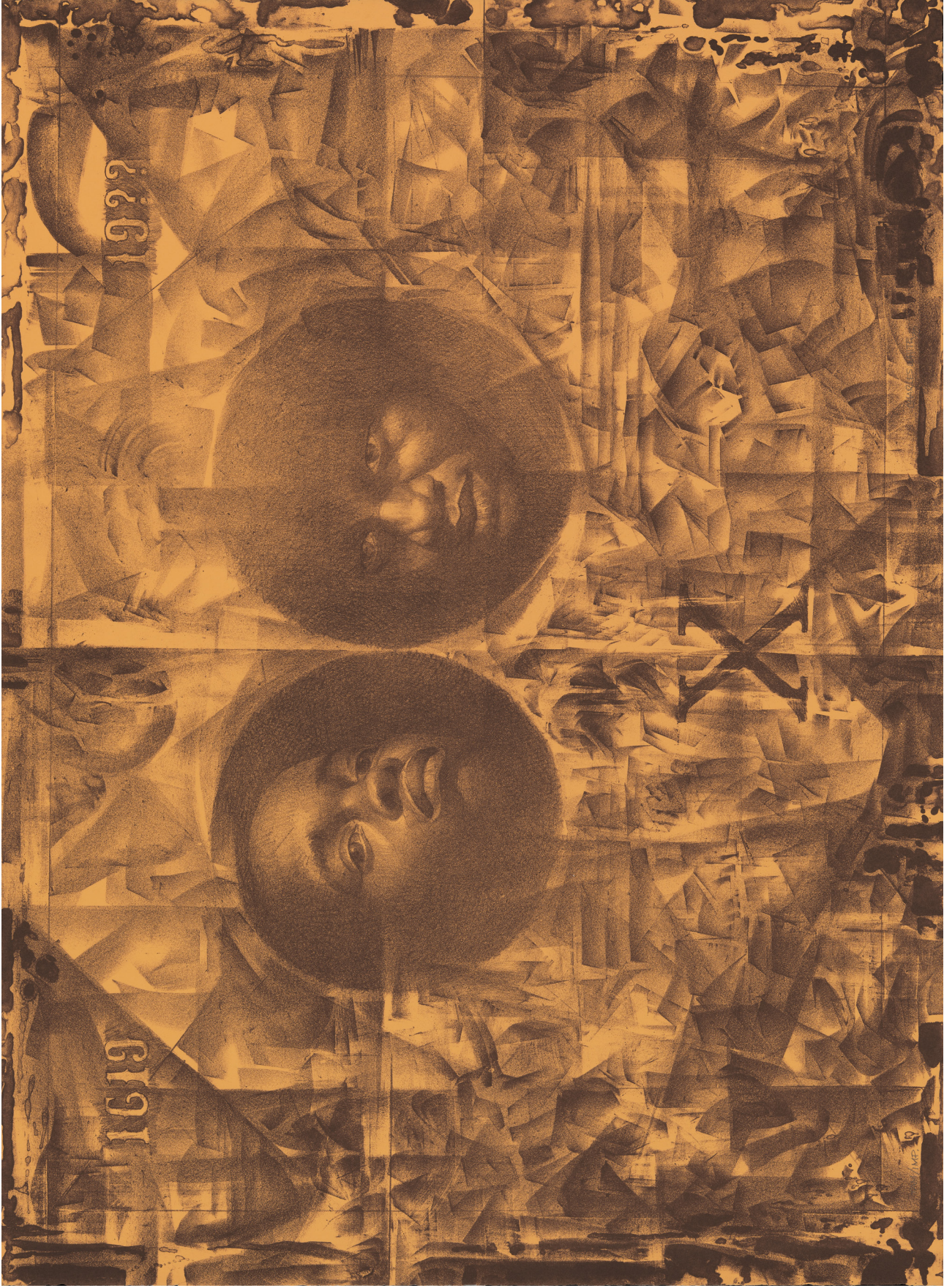
<sup>2</sup> These are the dates marking the end of slavery, *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the Civil Rights Act.

<sup>3</sup> Charles White, quoted in *Graphic Arts Council Newsletter* 5, no. 5 (Jan.–Feb. 1970).

## Discussion Prompts

1. Look closely at Charles White's *Wanted Poster Series #14a*. Describe the figures. What do you think is their relationship? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. Develop a poem, story, or play that explores the relationship between the two figures in the artwork. How do they know each other? What would they share with each other if they were to meet and have a conversation?
3. How does *Wanted Poster Series #14a* speak both to history and to the present day?
4. How does the legacy of slavery continue to affect the present? Research recent American history and select a year to replace "19??" in White's print. Write a short paper detailing why you chose that year and how it connects to 1619.





Charles White, *Wanted Poster Series #14a*, 1970, lithograph, 22 x 30 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum Purchase with County Funds (70.4.146), © The Charles White Archives, digital image © Museum Associates / LACMA



**Portrait of Tom Bradley, 1974**  
**Charles White**

Charles White was not only interested in creating images of historic African American heroes; he also turned his attention to important individuals in the present, as in this lithographic portrait from 1974 of Tom Bradley (1917–1998), the 38th Mayor of Los Angeles.

Dressed in a pristine white suit jacket, Bradley seems to float in space. A soft halo of light emanates from behind his head, setting the contours of his profile in relief. Additional patches of light illuminate his eyebrows, cheekbones, nose, mouth, and chin. His face appears smooth and unlined, in contrast to the textured image background. White chose to depict Bradley with a three-quarter view, a perspective that is commonly used in portraiture. The artist also chose to downplay the Mayor's emotions: Bradley appears stoic and gazes resolutely ahead, as if ready to tackle the next challenge before him. His lips are slightly upturned, communicating confidence, calm, and kindness.

Born in Calvert, Texas in 1917, Bradley and his family joined the Great Migration and headed West to California when Bradley was seven.<sup>1</sup> He attended UCLA on a track scholarship and went on to join the LAPD, becoming a lieutenant in 1950. Interested in bringing about change in a city known for housing segregation, police brutality, and a lack of equal representation within the local government, Bradley set his sights on the political sphere. He was elected representative of Council District 10 in 1963 and Mayor of Los Angeles in 1973.

Bradley's mayoral win was of great significance. He was not only the first (and remains the only) African American to be elected Mayor of Los Angeles, he was also the first African American to be elected mayor of any major American city. Bradley's ability to form a multiethnic coalition that was committed to a shared vision of change was crucial in securing his mayoral win, and also helped usher in more

equal representation among city employees once he took office. Bradley is also known for building a subway system, bringing the 1984 Olympics to LA, and overseeing the expansion of the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), where the international terminal is named after him. Bradley served as Mayor for five terms, from 1973 to 1993, and was awarded the Spingarn Medal by the NAACP in 1985.

White came to know Bradley personally during his second term, when Bradley began a major initiative to encourage the political mobilization of African Americans through the arts. White also served as a member of the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Culture.<sup>2</sup> His portrait of the Mayor, created one year after Bradley took office, celebrates the civic leader's watershed victory and affirms his important place in both local and national history. It also shows the extent to which White had become embedded in the civic and cultural communities of Los Angeles, where he lived from 1956 until his passing in 1979. Like Bradley, White was a firm believer in the power of community coalitions to achieve positive change.

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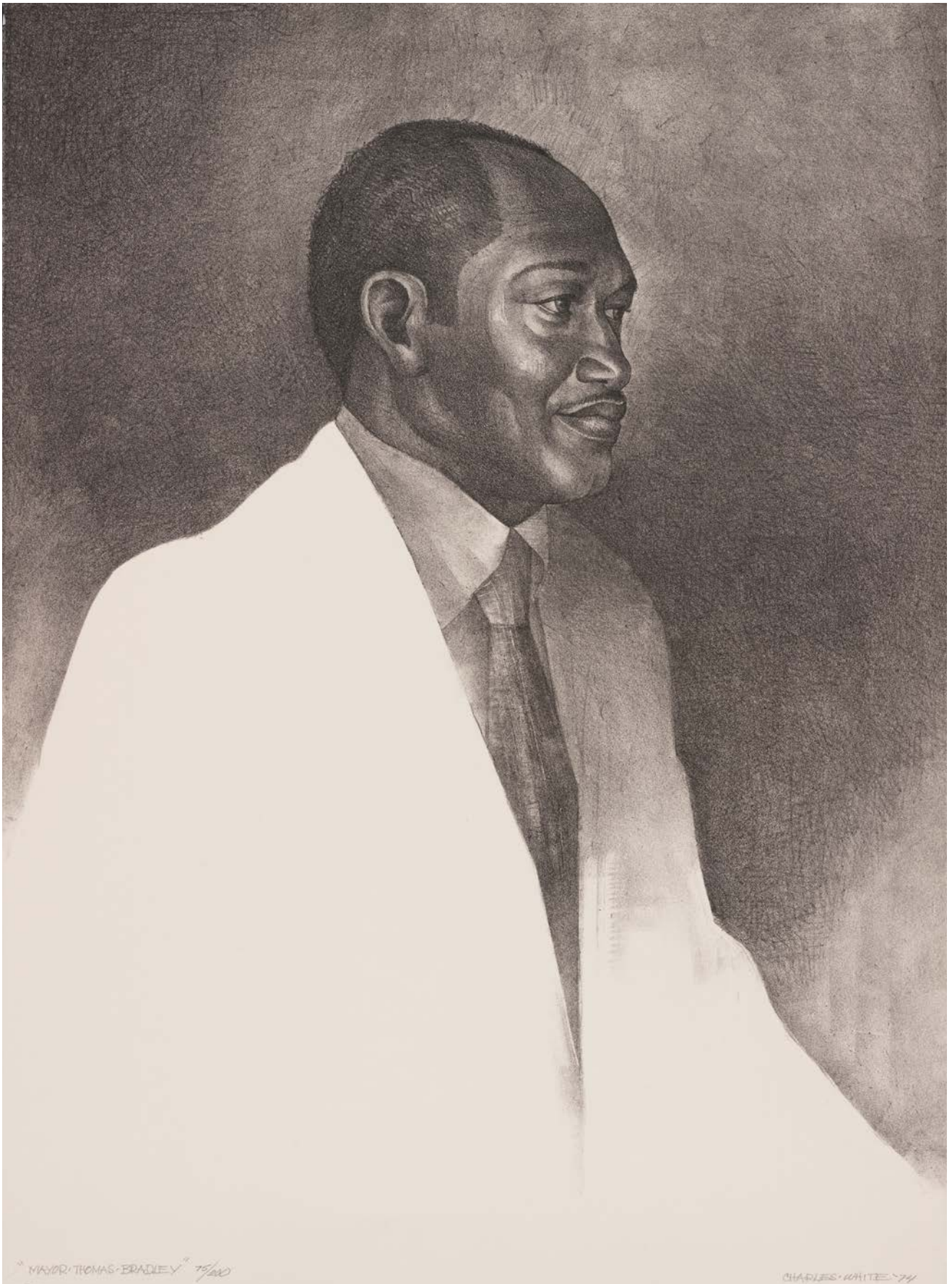
<sup>1</sup> In U.S. history, the Great Migration is the widespread migration of African Americans in the 20th century from rural communities in the South to large cities in the North and West. From 1916 to 1970, it is estimated that some six million black Southerners relocated to urban areas in the North and West. See "Great Migration," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed January 3, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Migration>.

<sup>2</sup> Ilene Susan Fort, "Charles White's Art and Activism in Southern California," *Charles White: A Retrospective* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), 137.

## Discussion Prompts

1. Look closely at Charles White's *Portrait of Tom Bradley* and describe the Mayor's facial expression and posture. What do you think he is communicating with his face and body?
2. Have you ever seen portraits of important people that are similar to White's *Portrait of Tom Bradley*? Where are such portraits typically displayed? Where can you imagine White's portrait of Tom Bradley being displayed?
3. Tom Bradley formed a multiethnic coalition of Angelenos who supported his mayoral bid. Why do you think such a coalition was important and necessary in a city like Los Angeles?
4. Were you surprised to learn that Tom Bradley was the first, and still the only, African American to be elected Mayor of Los Angeles? Why or why not? What barriers were in place in the 1960s and '70s that made it difficult for African Americans to enter politics? Do those barriers exist today?





Charles White, printed by Lloyd Baggs, published by Cirrus Editions Ltd., *Portrait of Tom Bradley*, 1974, lithograph on Arches paper, 30 × 22¼ in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Mayor Tom Bradley (AC1992.283.1), © The Charles White Archives, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

## Classroom Activity

### Traits of a Leader

**Essential Question** How can an artist convey the traits of a good political leader in a visual artwork? How can we use art to communicate our ideas about what makes a good political leader?

**Grades** K–12

**Time** One or two class periods

**Art Concepts** Graphic art, lithograph, message, symbol

**Materials** Paper, pencils, erasers, 12" × 18" heavy white drawing paper, colored markers, highlighters in assorted colors, colored pencils, Sharpies

**Talking About Art** Charles White spoke about universal truths through his art: humanity, struggle, injustice, dignity, courage, hope. He was born in 1918. Growing up, he had to look in library books to discover African American accomplishments and contributions to society. His art portrayed ordinary people, but also highlighted important African American figures whose accomplishments had not been given the recognition they deserved. His art acknowledged and honored the people who fought against slavery in the 1860s and the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Through his art, he communicated the bravery, suffering, and sacrifice of those who came before him. His art is of African American heroes past and present, in every field, including science, music, and art.

Look closely at the lithograph portrait of Mayor Tom Bradley. What do you notice about this image? How would you describe the way White has depicted Bradley? What choices did he make? What is your impression of Bradley, based on this image? Tom Bradley was the first and the only African American to be elected Mayor of Los Angeles, in 1973. He was also the first African American to be elected Mayor of any major American city. He served five terms in total. Charles White was active in the political and art scene of Los Angeles. He made this portrait during Bradley's first term and based it on a photograph of the Mayor.

Compare the portrait of Mayor Bradley to the "Hope" poster depicting 2008 presidential candidate Barack Obama. The poster was designed by Shepard Fairey and the photograph that it is based on was taken by Mannie Garcia. The poster gained popularity immediately after it was released and became a symbol of both Obama's campaign and his values. Compare Charles White's portrait and Shepard Fairey's poster. What is similar about them? What is different?

**Making Art** What are the attributes you would look for in a political candidate? Make a list. Who can be a political leader? If you were running for office, what would your slogan be? Would you include any of the attributes you listed?

Second option: read about Mayor Tom Bradley or view the PBS documentary "Bridging the Divide: Tom Bradley and the Politics of Race," available to watch for free (with a Los Angeles Public Library account) on [www.kanopy.com](http://www.kanopy.com). What were Bradley's main attributes and values as a politician? Come up with campaign slogan ideas for him.

**Making Art (cont.)**

Design a poster that includes your slogan or a grouping of words that communicate your values or message. Will your poster include a face? Will it just have text? Share and discuss your ideas with a partner. Then, sketch your poster out with pencil. Think about how color can help communicate your message. Think about the design of the letters too.

**Reflection**

Share your posters with the class. What catches your eye about each one? What would make you vote for that person?

Both Charles White's portrait and Shepard Fairey's poster show Bradley and Obama in a positive light. But we know that images (and slogans) are not always truthful. How do we know whether or not a political leader is honest and ethical? When watching or reading the news, what do we have to consider? Do you believe everything you hear and see? How can you check to see if something is true? Why is it important to consult multiple sources of information?

**Curriculum Connections**

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.K-12.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade [insert grade level] topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

National Core Arts Standards (NCAS)

VA:Re7.2.3 Determine messages communicated by an image.

VA:Re7.2.6 Analyze ways that visual components and cultural associations suggested by images influence ideas, emotions, and actions.

## **Classroom Activity** **America's Most Wanted**

<b>Essential Question</b>	Using critical and creative thinking, how can we respond to art with poetry?
<b>Grades</b>	6–12
<b>Time</b>	One or two class periods
<b>Art Concepts</b>	Figurative language, call and response
<b>Materials</b>	Lined paper, pencils, digital projection or printed copies of Charles White's <i>Wanted Poster Series #14a</i> (1970), see <a href="https://collections.lacma.org/node/237740">https://collections.lacma.org/node/237740</a>
<b>Talking About Art</b>	<p>Art is a window into the human experience. When viewing or reading works from artists of the past, we draw connections to the present. This is what has come to be known as “call and response.” For instance, in 1969, Charles Gordone’s play <i>No Place to Be Somebody</i>, a tale of racial tension, success, and disappointment, premiered Off-Broadway. Fifty years later, director Richard Lawson revived the Pulitzer Prize-winning script and added modern images to symbolize the relevance of Gordone’s message in today’s society. The year has changed, but the cultural climate has not. Racism is still an issue we are facing in the 21st century.</p> <p>Gordone’s play is the “call,” and Lawson’s interpretation of it is the “response.” Today we will be writing response poems to Charles White’s lithograph <i>Wanted Poster Series #14a</i>, created in 1970. Before we do that, let’s go over the basics of what makes a great poem.</p> <p>Figurative language elevates a good poem to a great poem. Some elements of figurative language we will review are similes, metaphors, and sensory details. A simile is a figure of speech that compares two things using the words “like” or “as.” Whereas a metaphor simply states that one thing is another.</p> <p>Example:</p> <p><i>Similes</i></p> <p>“My couch is like a giant marshmallow.” “My fingers are as cold as icicles.” “My apartment makes me feel as safe as if I were living in a fortress.”</p> <p><i>Metaphors</i></p> <p>“I like sinking into my marshmallow couch.” “I have five icicles on each hand.” “My apartment is my fortress.”</p> <p>Sensory details help the audience experience what the poet is experiencing. Make sure your reader can either SEE, SMELL, TASTE, FEEL, or HEAR what you are writing about. In this way, you have more of an emotional buy-in from your reader and they feel more connected to your text.</p>

**Talking About Art**  
(cont.)

Poems don't have to rhyme, but they can. The best poems share some aspect of Truth as it relates to the human experience. We have all felt sad, happy, scared, or lonely at times. Your work should reflect this.

Spend one full minute looking closely at Charles White's *Wanted Poster Series #14a*. What are your first reactions to this image? What do the two faces have in common? What is the significance of the dates? What do you think the "X" might symbolize? Refer to the corresponding essay in the packet for more information about the artwork.

In what ways has the history illustrated in White's lithograph repeated itself? Does this image have cultural significance today?

**Making Art**

Write a response poem to *Wanted Poster Series #14a*.

Prompt 1: Write a poem to history. For example, what would you say to the year 1619?

Prompt 2: Write a poem to the future. For example, what would you say to the year 2059?

Prompt 3: Write a poem to the child in the artwork. What would you say to them? What would you ask?

**Reflection**

Ten minutes of class time will be allowed for students to share their poetry aloud with the classroom. Some questions to consider: How does your poem relate to Charles White's artwork? How did the artwork make you aware of a greater universal truth?

**Curriculum Connections**

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.5 With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6-12.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3.D Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2.D Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary, and techniques such as metaphor, simile, and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic.



## **Classroom Activity**

### **Universal Consciousness**

<b>Essential Question</b>	How did Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech inspire artist Charles White? How can his words inspire us to write poetry?
<b>Grades</b>	6–12
<b>Time</b>	One class period
<b>Art Concepts</b>	Composition, poetry, mood, compare and contrast
<b>Materials</b>	Pencils, erasers, pens, colored markers, lined paper, white paper, audio recording of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, audio recordings of "Reverend King" and "The Sun" from the album <i>Cosmic Music</i> by Alice and John Coltrane
<b>Talking About Art</b>	<p>Charles White was committed to using his artwork to uplift viewers, uncover forgotten histories, and communicate universal truths. He found inspiration in civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, basing his artwork <i>I Have a Dream</i> on it. Listen to King's speech and write down words or phrases that jump out at you. Why are those words and phrases significant? What do they mean to you? Then, look closely at Charles White's lithograph <i>I Have a Dream</i>. In what ways is it similar to King's speech? In what ways is it different? How would you describe it? What words come to mind when you look at it? How can you tell White's artwork is a response to King's words (aside from the title)? How do the speech and the artwork affect you and your understanding of American history?</p>
<b>Making Art</b>	<p>Begin by thinking of three ideas or themes that are expressed in both MLK's speech and Charles White's artwork. Ideas include "hope," "love," and "strength." You are welcome to choose other words that come to mind.</p> <p>Then, create three columns on your paper with each of the ideas or themes you chose written at the top. In each column, write down words (you can include things like people's names, images, and symbols) that you associate with each. You can also write down sensory details. How does each idea or theme sound, taste, or feel? What verbs do you associate with each of them? As you write, listen to the jazz songs "Reverend King" and "The Sun" from the <i>Cosmic Music</i> album by Alice and John Coltrane. These songs were also inspired by King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Let the rhythms of the music be another source of inspiration.</p> <p>Read over the lists of words you have created. Which of the three words has the most word associations? Use that list to guide you as you craft a free verse poem (no particular structure or rhyme scheme) on a separate sheet of paper. Go deeper into specific images and sensory details, incorporate new word associations, add in phrases or quotes, unique punctuation, rhymes, etc. When you have a rough draft of your poem, read it out loud to yourself or to a partner. After hearing it out loud, make edits. Just as White found his own way to express the themes of MLK's message, think about how your poem expresses its main theme or idea.</p> <p>Then, emulate the relationship between MLK's speech and White's artwork. Swap poems with a partner and create illustrations/drawings inspired by what the other person wrote. Think about how you will express the main ideas of the poem visually. What is the relationship between word and image?</p>

**Reflection**

The poems can be shared by producing a poetry reading. First, rehearse your poems at home the night before. Then, dim/turn off classroom lights, use a “spotlight” and microphone on the “stage” area, read the poems out loud, and then discuss them as a group. The poems and illustrations can also be shared and discussed in pairs or small groups.

What did your classmates’ poems make you think about or feel? How were they similar to or different from MLK’s speech and White’s artwork?

**Curriculum Connections**

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3.D Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.5 With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-12.6 Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

National Core Arts Standards (NCAS)

VA:Re7.2.6 Analyze ways that visual components and cultural associations suggested by images influence ideas, emotions, and actions.

## Resources

### Books for Students and Teachers

*Charles White: A Retrospective*

Sarah Kelly Oehler and Esther Adler

This catalog accompanies the special exhibition *Charles White: A Retrospective* and traces the artist's career from his emergence in Chicago to his mature practice as an artist, activist, and educator in New York and Los Angeles.

*Charles White: Black Pope*

Esther Adler

This volume explores the artist's practice and strategies through consideration of key works.

*Grandpa and the Library: How Charles White Learned to Paint*

C. Ian White

Written and illustrated by Charles White's son, C. Ian White, this personal story traces the childhood influences that inspired young Charles to become an artist and a teacher. Grades K and up

*Juneteenth for Mazie*

Floyd Cooper

In this book, a father shares an important holiday with his daughter: the day African Americans were emancipated from slavery. Grades K and up

*Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black History*

Vashti Harrison

This book introduces young readers to forty women and girls who broke barriers of race and gender. Grades 3 and up

*Look What Brown Can Do!*

T. Marie Harris, illustrated by Neda Ivanova

This book is full of inspirational messages that support children of color and encourage them to pursue their dreams. Includes examples of prominent black figures. Grades K and up

*The New Negro: An Interpretation*

Alain LeRoy Locke

This anthology, first published in 1925, includes fiction, poetry, and essays on African and African-American art and literature. Grades 9 and up

### Online Resources

"The Best of Our Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Resources"

Teaching Tolerance

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/the-best-of-our-dr-martin-luther-king-jr-resources>

"Bridging the Divide: Tom Bradley and the Politics of Race"

This documentary tells the compelling story of Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley—the first African American mayor elected in a major U.S. city with an overwhelmingly white majority.

<https://www.kanopy.com/product/bridging-divide>

"Charles White: A Retrospective" (Audio)

Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)

<https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/54>

"'I Have a Dream,' Address Delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom"

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>

"The Man Who Taught a Generation of Black Artists Gets His Own Retrospective"

New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/28/t-magazine/art/charles-white-moma-retrospective.html>

“More Than a Name: Teaching Historic Firsts”

Teaching Tolerance

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/more-than-a-name-teaching-historic-firsts>

“Pressure + Ink: Lithography Process”

The Museum of Modern Art

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUXDItQfqSA>

“Steve King Shows Why We Need Black History Month”

Teaching Tolerance

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/steve-king-shows-why-we-need-black-history-month>