

# I Carve a Message, a Sermon

## *Elijah Pierce's America at the*

BY KATHY JOHNSON BOWLES

Philadelphia's Barnes Foundation organized *Elijah Pierce's America*, the first major retrospective of Pierce's works since the mid-1990s. The exhibition of 107 artworks was on view from September 27, 2020, through January 18, 2021, and is accompanied by a 208-page full-color catalog. The Herculean task to assemble a near-complete chronicle of Pierce's oeuvre from various public institutions and private collections in a little over a year was a remarkable feat.

The prestige of and resources afforded to the Barnes Foundation filled art-lovers, connoisseurs, and collectors alike with the anticipation of a spectacularly insightful exploration of one of the most important artists (self-taught and otherwise) of the 20th century. The museum's founder Alfred Barnes' commitment to self-taught artists, African-American communities, and expanding the breadth and depth of art appreciation is well known.

*Elijah Pierce's America* included works spanning fifty-plus years and was co-curated by Zoé Whitley, Director of the Chisenhale Gallery, London, and Nancy Ireson, Barnes' Deputy Director for the Collections and Exhibitions and Gund Family Chief Curator. As the viewer traversed the exhibition, the constancy of Pierce's vision became more and more striking. While Pierce's famous large-scale *Book of Wood* (1932) is emblematic, perhaps it is apt to describe the entire exhibition experience as walking through a life-sized, 20th-century version of an illuminated manuscript. Pierce's "pages" were carved with a pocketknife in ordinary wood panels and form fantastic low relief friezes.

Pierce's narrative format might be more commonly seen in comic strips or graphic novel panels. He



saturates the carved wooden surfaces with house paint, which glisten from generously applied shellac and polish, and sparkle with flecks of glitter. The approach reflects a humble yet solemn religious reverence on par with the gold leaf and precious lapis lazuli found on papal treasures. He defies the materials' accessibility with delivering lofty messages about freedom and the humanism needed on earth.

The works in both the exhibition and catalog were organized into seven themes: 'Foundations,' 'Faith & Doubt,' 'Reckoning & Retribution,' 'Striving & Surviving,' 'Sin & Salvation,' 'Joy,' and 'Death: A New Beginning.'

Presidents and  
Convicts, 1941

# Barnes Foundation



Photographs courtesy The Barnes Foundation.

Watergate, c.1975

'Foundations' highlights works illustrating scenes from his family history — slavery, rural life, and his youth spent in Mississippi. The piece, *Slavery Time* (1965–70), carries tremendous emotional weight with vignettes of slave auctions, hard labor in the cotton fields, and beatings. 'Faith & Doubt' includes works, such as *The Story of Job* (c.1936), *Noah's Ark*

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(1944), and *The Power of Prayer* (1960), that seem to function as daily devotionals and seek to offer the viewer hope during dark times. This section also included some of Pierce's three-dimensional diorama-like Biblical scenes, such as the crucifixion and the sacrifice of Isaac.

'Reckoning and Retribution' turned greater attention to Pierce's commentary on American history, politics, the Civil Rights movement, and

popular culture. It is clear with works like *The White House* (1977), *Watergate* (c.1975), and *Police Dog* (c. 1971), Pierce was concerned for the soul of the nation. The works in 'Striving & Surviving' turn to people, events, and organizations of the 20th century. Three-dimensional figures point to the hardships of the early Great Migration. Pierce participated in

the movement c.1919–1923 traveling from Baldwyn, Miss. to, ultimately, Columbus, Ohio. It was an arduous, often dangerous journey whereby he encountered near-death experiences more than once. This section also includes carvings of the Freemason signs and symbols that reference Pierce's membership in the fraternal order and its

importance in his life. Portraits of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as Abraham Lincoln, take on religious icon-status in Pierce's hands.

As one might guess from its title, the section 'Sin & Salvation' imparts judgment as much as instruction. Works focus on the nature of adultery, gossip, gambling, pride, and the general comportment of a 'good' Christian. The contemporary scenes depicted in *Monday Morning Gossip* (1934) and *Barber Shop*



*and the Fight Against Evil* (1933) are particularly masterful and visually striking with dark figures against light green backdrops.

'Joy' is notable for its inclusion of free-standing circus animals, pop culture screen characters such as *Silver* (1952) and *Popeye* (1933), as well as highly-accomplished musical stars *Black Beauty* (Lena Horne) (1940s) and athletic champions—football great Archie Griffin (1976) and a baseball Hall of Famer with his wife in *Mr. and Mrs. Hank Aaron* (1974). While 'Death: A New Beginning' might be an appropriate ending to the exhibition, its juxtaposition with the work in 'Joy' seemed an odd and somewhat jarring segue in the flow of topics and tone.

The exhibition's interpretation was somewhat less satisfying than anticipated. The names of sections tended toward simplistic monikers. The accompanying brief commentary may have left some viewers hungry for more profound revelations. This was more evident in the exhibition's main text panels, which were an edited version of those found in the catalog. Indeed, sometimes missing words made a significant difference. One example was associating the Black Hall of Fame with Ohio University (Athens, Ohio) instead of The Ohio State University (Columbus, Ohio) in the 'Joy' section of the exhibition.

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true in introductory texts for *Striving & Surviving*, where references to the American Dream placed nostalgic and causal side-by-side data about the Great Migration without commentary regarding the profound desperation and oppression Southern Blacks and Pierce, in particular, experienced during the Jim Crow era. The didactic text placed alongside individual labels was similarly wanting; at times, the commentary appeared tangential and a bit too light-hearted, even at odds with the catalog's content and more serious tone. What the exhibition's didactic text lacked, the catalog made up for with informative, thought-provoking essays.

Michael D. Hall, Adjunct Curator of Folk Art and Self-Taught Art at the Columbus Museum of Art, provides a historical view of Pierce's rise as an artist in Columbus, Ohio. He explains that the barber-preacher-artist Elijah Pierce (1892–1984) and his work have been celebrated for nearly half a century by the art establishment. The Ohio State University first exhibited his works in 1971 and the Columbus Museum of Art (then known as Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts) in 1973. Pierce was well known and beloved for his colorful, low relief carvings for many more decades by his peers and the community. His barbershop also served as a studio and gallery. After his death in 1984, the entire contents were purchased and preserved by the Columbus Museum of Art.



Tiger, 1972

During the 50th-anniversary celebration of the Tabernacle Baptist Church's founding, the church partnered with the Columbus Museum of Art to present *Tabernacle Church Remembers Elijah Pierce* in 2001. The exhibition included dozens of small relief panels Assistant Pastor Pierce had created for various church members who needed encouragement during various

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life challenges. As the curators noted in their joint essay, Pierce once explained, "My carvings look nice, but if they don't have a story behind them, what's the use of them. Every piece of work I carve is a message, a sermon."

Assistant Professor in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Sampada Aranke, adeptly explains in scholarly tones that Elijah Pierce speaks of and to an African-American audience. She asserts the importance of Pierce's role as a minister preaching about Black experience and humanity to his congregation through his art works. The works are testimonials and instruction connecting the spiritual and secular, such as *Elijah Escapes the Mob* (1950s). Pierce was acutely aware that his role as an assistant pastor was to contextualize the need for cultural and social reform concerning social justice through the language of spirituality. Aranke's insights only whet the reader's appetite for understanding more about ministers' and Black churches' role in social reform movements.

Curator Nancy Ireson's essay celebrated Pierce's leadership and entrepreneurial spirit. She states, "Pierce took an active role in shaping his biography, that he strove for recognition, and then he used his reputation as a platform. Pierce knew his art had social value and saw that in concert with his actions, it could create change." Ireson cited numerous articles attesting to his social and professional stature, such as the 1939 article "Barber Carves Life of Christ in Wood," his frequent mentions in the *Ohio Sentinel* including the society section, and Pierce's 1980 honorary doctorate from Franklin University in Columbus. Ireson's account of the Prince Hall Freemason's history, its associated prestige in the Black community, and the significance of Pierce's membership were eye-opening reflections.

An art practitioner's approach was taken by Theaster Gates, a social practice installation artist

and professor in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago, in his essay about Pierce. Here, Gates considered Pierce's conflation of the everyday with the spiritual. Fascinating were his reflections on Pierce creating "trinkets filled with power." Though not explicitly said, Gates' ideas conjured images of African power figures and Roman Catholic reliquaries.

Significantly, Gates does not discuss Pierce's artistic practice as associated with craft or the folk art traditions of whittling in the rural South. Perhaps Gates felt that by doing so would further relegate Pierce to a canon outside of art history and modernism, a place where Pierce so rightly belongs.

The Barnes Foundation is to be commended for this critical reconsideration of Elijah Pierce's life's work. The catalog essayists' perspectives, coupled with the hindsight time brings and juxtaposed with the current refocus on social justice, make this an ideal moment to revisit the artist and his work. Elijah Pierce's artistic contributions to American life, and the strength of his uplifting voice, will inspire another generation. Having so many of his works available in one location (and during a pandemic) and a long-lasting historical document in the form of a beautifully designed comprehensive catalog is a testament to the Barnes Foundation's commitment to its mission, vision, and values. ❏

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Elijah Escapes the Mob, 1950s

