Although as a child Horace Pippin favored drawing over schoolwork, he declared that World War I (1914-1918) “brought out all the art in me.” He served in the celebrated all-black 369th Regiment in France, one of the few African American units allowed to see combat—spending, in fact, more time at the front than any other American troops. While stationed at the front, a German sniper shot Pippin in the right arm. Upon discharge to his birthplace of West Chester, Pennsylvania, the permanently disabled Pippin found himself unable to do much more than deliver laundry taken in by his new wife. As a form of therapy—and to keep himself busy—the thirty-year-old veteran turned once again to his childhood passion. Using his left hand to guide his injured right arm, which had a steel plate in the shoulder, he slowly and laboriously began to produce pictures. “It brought me back to my old self,” he exclaimed.

Cabin in the Cotton, c. 1930s, comes years later [see slide 8], as Pippin’s initial works included scenes of his combat experience, as well as calendar-style images of his native Brandywine Valley in Pennsylvania. His first painting took three years to complete and depicted Armistice Day, on November 11, 1918, which Pippin never actually witnessed because he was recuperating in the hospital. Nor did the end of the First World War occur as Pippin imaginatively portrayed it. In his picture of the cease-fire, he painted one of his desires, integrating what were in reality segregated troops, placing African Americans side-by-side with whites.

Pippin depicted another one of his fantasies in the Art Institute’s engaging picture of a cabin on a cotton plantation in the Deep South. He had made only one brief visit to the South, in 1925, which probably did not include a visit to a plantation. But his grandmother had been a slave before the Civil War and used to tell him stories about the Old South. “Pictures just come to my mind,” he once said. “I think them out with my brain and then I tell my heart to go ahead.”

Done before 1937, Cabin in the Cotton is one of Pippin’s earliest works after settling down to paint in earnest. We can already see what would become the unschooled artist’s hallmarks: a direct, naive style characterized by flattened spaces and simplified patterns and forms. The artist lovingly weaves together these rudimentary shapes—layered logs, the zig-zagged fence, the puffy balls of cotton—much like stitched-together designs in old-fashioned quilts. His colors are strong and literal—blue for the sky, white for cotton, green for the ground. Pippin worked extremely slowly, stroking on layer after layer of paint. Here, the brushstrokes are so densely applied that the paint almost resembles tar. The scene is charmingly sentimental. A mother and child sit in front of a log cabin in a farmyard set against the backdrop of a sea of cotton. The mother takes in the sun while her child frolics with a dog. Anecdotal details abound. Barnyard fowl roam around,
an ax is poised to chop wood, and there is a cookstove, on which we can imagine a pot gently bubbling.

But cotton as a crop does not look this way when it is opened. Moreover, blacks were hardly content in the cotton fields, and this nostalgic image corresponds instead to the huge popularity of romanticized southern themes around this time. Blacks and whites flocked to see both the musical (1927) and the film (1929) *Show Boat*, about love aboard a Mississippi showboat. Considered an American classic today, the folk opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935) told the sad tale of love and loss in a black section of Charleston, South Carolina. And *Gone with the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell’s saga about the Civil War and Reconstruction in the South, is still revered, both as a book (1936) and a film (1939). In addition, Pippin may have been influenced by a film, also entitled *Cabin in the Cotton*, that was released in 1932. The artist apparently was fond of this theme because he made three more variations of the subject in 1944.

Pippin’s original version played a crucial role in the self-taught artist’s meteoric success at age forty-nine. On view in a cobbler’s window in early 1937, *Cabin in the Cotton* caught the attention of artist and illustrator N.C. Wyeth (1882-1944), father of the now even more famous Andrew Wyeth (b. 1917). N.C. Wyeth encouraged Pippin to show the painting in the Chester County Art Association’s annual exhibition that May. There it was so well received that the Association invited Pippin for a one-man show the next month. *Curators* from The Museum of Modern Art in New York saw the show and immediately asked Pippin to participate in the museum’s 1938 *Masters of Popular Painting* exhibition, one of several exhibitions at the time reflecting the current interest in folk art. The Art Institute’s painting was one of four of Pippin’s works included in the exhibition in New York that went on to travel to other cities.

Pippin’s good fortune did not end there. During his first commercial exhibition at a Philadelphia gallery in 1940, the gallery owner’s daughter recalled: “Barnes [Albert Barnes of the noted *Barnes Collection*] and his friend [the film star] Charles Laughton had been drinking at Barnes’s house in Merion, [Pennsylvania,] and Laughton wanted to buy [a] Pippin, right then. Father got up and took the picture out to them in the middle of the night.” The work purchased by Laughton would eventually become the Art Institute’s painting, but first Laughton brought *Cabin in the Cotton* to Hollywood, starting the purchase of Pippin’s work there.

Dr. Barnes, in fact, had written the catalogue introduction to Pippin’s 1940 Philadelphia show. The collector glowingly—but somewhat patronizingly—proclaimed that “[Pippin’s] work has the simplicity, directness, sincerity, naïveté, and vivid drama of a story told by an unspoiled Negro in his own
words. It is probably not too much to say that he is the first important Negro painter to appear on the American scene." The mercurial Barnes seemed to have forgotten about such prominent black precursors as Henry Ossawa Tanner and Aaron Douglas, not to mention such noted contemporaries as Richmond Barthé and Archibald J. Motley, Jr. [See pages 17-21, 26-29, 42-44, and 45-48]

Pippin reached the height of his success during the years of World War II (1939-1945), when he was considered the most acclaimed self-taught artist in America. Museums avidly bought his paintings, and magazines such as Life, Vogue, Time, and The New Yorker wrote about him. The Arts Club of Chicago and the San Francisco Museum of Art held one-man exhibitions, while The Art Institute of Chicago, Washington’s Corcoran Gallery of Art, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts featured his work in their annual exhibitions. His collectors ranged from America’s gentry to Hollywood producers and stars.

His subject matter now included intimate domestic interiors, colorful floral still lifes, and historical and biblical scenes that, at times, convey a moral anti-war or anti-racist thrust. The war was raging; U.S. troops were still segregated; at home, separate and unequal conditions continued to prevail. A deeply spiritual man, Pippin bemoaned: “The world is in a Bad way at this time. I mean war. And men have never loved one another. There is trouble every place you Go today.”

Pippin also painted compelling portraits. His innate grasp of color, composition, and form are revealed in this striking self-portrait from 1941. [See figure 7] He intuitively simplifies the image to reveal its essence. Tall and genial, with a fine sense of humor, Pippin himself was a community-spirited man. Here, he presents himself seated before an easel with a painting we cannot see. In the center of the picture is his shrivelled right arm, which he could not move above his shoulder.

Pippin’s remarkable career was, unfortunately, short-lived. He died in his sleep from a stroke in July 1946. Five unfinished canvases were found in Pippin’s studio at the time of his death. The unschooled artist had pursued his distinctive personal vision for some sixteen brief but dazzling years. “My opinion of art is that a man should have a love for it,” he once proclaimed, “because ... he paints from his heart and mind. To me it seems impossible for another to teach one of Art.”
Figure 7
Horace Pippin.
*Self Portrait*, 1941.
Oil on canvas mounted on cardboard, 14 x 11". Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, Room of Contemporary Art Fund, 1942.
Slide Eight: Horace Pippin

1. Pippin painted several pictures of events and places that he never witnessed, such as Armistice Day, the end of World War I in 1918, and the South. How do his paintings differ from the realities? Which works of art in this manual are products of the artists’ imaginations? Which are based on memory? And which are the result of direct observation?

2. Have students research the all-black 369th Regiment in which Pippin served during World War I in France?

3. Pippin was an unschooled artist who received no formal training in painting. Are there elements in Cabin in the Cotton that appear to be naïve or awkward? Given his lack of training, why did Pippin receive great accolades for his work? Why is it appreciated by museums today? (This relates to the 20th-century belief that the unschooled artist is closer to the source of inspiration, instead of being laden with the techniques and concerns of the art world.)

4. Relate the following Langston Hughes poem to Cabin in the Cotton. Consider subject matter and the importance of storytelling in Pippin’s life.

   *Aunt Sue’s Stories*

   Aunt Sue has a head full of stories.  
   Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories.  
   Summer nights on the front porch  
   Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her bosom  
   And tells him stories.

   Black slaves  
   Working in the hot sun,  
   And black slaves  
   Walking in the dewy night,  
   And black slaves  
   Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river  
   Mingle themselves softly

   In the flow of old Aunt Sue’s voice,  
   Mingle themselves softly  
   In the dark shadows that cross and recross  
   Aunt Sue’s stories.

   And the dark-faced child, listening,  
   Knows that Aunt Sue’s stories are real stories.  
   He knows that Aunt Sue  
   Never got her stories out of any book at all,  
   But that they came  
   Right out of her own life.

   And the dark-faced child is quiet  
   Of a summer night  
   Listening to Aunt Sue’s stories

5. Have students examine the application of paint on Cabin in the Cotton. How do the varied surfaces that Pippin created relate to the objects that they depict?