“I've only painted one picture in my entire life,” declared Charles White once. “I see my totality of 300 years of history of black people through one little fraction ... a family ... my family.... I don't try to record it, but use it symbolically to make a broad universal statement about the search for dignity... the history of humanity.” Harvest Talk, 1953, makes that universal statement. [See slide 13]

White’s particular history exemplifies, in many ways, the African American artist of the mid-twentieth century. His great-grandmother was a Trinidad slave-wife whose white master brought her to Mississippi and fathered her ten illegitimate children. White was raised by his mother, a domestic worker since she was eight. On his mother’s first job, she had to be lifted up on a box to wash the dishes in other peoples’ houses. Three of White’s uncles and two cousins had been lynched.

Born and raised on Chicago’s South Side, White was gifted as a child and studied art at settlement house art classes as well as at The Art Institute of Chicago. In between after-school jobs to get through the Great Depression, he found refuge in the museum galleries. During this formative period, he also discovered the writings of Alain Locke at the neighborhood library; he also met Chicago’s black cultural leaders. In 1937, White won a scholarship to The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. By the time he was twenty-two, he proclaimed: “The old masters pioneered in the technical field. I am interested in creating a style that is much more powerful, that will take in the technical and, at the same time, say what I have to say. Painting is the only weapon I have with which to fight what I resent.”

A job with the WPA/FAP, offered him the opportunity to work professionally with other artists. Relatively little money was spent on this federally funded arts program, yet during the 1930s and 1940s, it started and sustained the careers of many artists—particularly African Americans. White’s first murals, for the Chicago Public Library (now lost) and Virginia’s Hampton Institute, depicted black heros in a heavily stylized and symbolic technique. He also was involved with the founding of the federally-funded South Side Community Art Center in Chicago.

With WPA/FAP exposure came recognition. The Julius Rosenwald Fund fellowship he received the early 1940s enabled White and his then-wife, sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett (b. 1919) [see pages 64-66], to tour the rural South. Beaten for entering a New Orleans restaurant, White encountered the brutalities of segregation firsthand. “I began to understand the beauty of my people’s speech, their poetry, their folklore, their dance and their music,” he said, adding, “as well as their staunchness, morality and courage.”

Living in Mexico in the mid-1940s deepened White’s social commitment.
White and Catlett worked at Mexico City's Taller de Gráfica Popular, or People's Graphic Arts Workshop, that espoused the populist political ideals that were the cornerstone of post-revolutionary Mexico. At the graphics studio, White learned, in his words, "how to do better what I wanted to express... to impress... the masses of the black population." He drew his inspiration from the great Mexican muralists—Diego Rivera (1886-1957), José Orozco (1883-1949), and David Siqueiros (1896-1974)—and their Social Realist depictions of the history and struggles of the working classes.

The experiences of both his southern journey and his stay in Mexico are distilled in the Art Institute’s large, beautifully rendered drawing. Here we see two southern rural farmhands as they sharpen a scythe in silence during fall harvest. Their powerful figures recall those of revolutionary Mexican murals, and are made more imposing by their placement so close to the front of the picture. Through the use of his masterful technique, White has instilled in their heroic forms a deep humanity, almost a spiritual beauty. With his assured sense of line and subtle tonalities, he captures the particularities of these workers—their worn and wrinkled clothing, their strong hands and arms musclebound from years of hard labor in the fields. He also renders something more general, more ideal—their dignified composure, their strength, their all-seeing gaze.

In the beautifully evocative landscape with its deep perspective, White once again conveys the grand sweep of the terrain as well as its specifics, such as single blades of grass. In the true tradition of Social Realism, Harvest Talk portrays both a tangible reality and a political ideal. About his method, White declared: "I use Negro subject matter because Negroes are closest to me. But I am trying to express a universal feeling through them.... This does not mean I am a man without anger—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."

The Art Institute drawing represents White’s mature style, developed between 1950 and 1963. During this period, he began to shift his focus from black leaders of the past to ordinary men and women, such as the rural farmworkers here. These meticulously depicted subjects become everyperson, the real heroes of the human struggle. During this period, White switched largely to black-and-white drawings and prints. He felt a skillfully rendered black-and-white image had sharper impact. Also, his message could reach millions because prints could be more easily reproduced and sold at affordable prices.

White had moved to New York by the time he made Harvest Talk in 1953. He had been drafted during the war but developed tuberculosis which would afflict him periodically throughout the remainder of his life. Divorced from Elizabeth Catlett and remarried, he began to receive recognition, both in New York and abroad. White showed regularly at American
Contemporary Artists (ACA) gallery. Among his acquaintances were such noted African Americans as W.E.B. DuBois*, Langston Hughes*, and Jacob Lawrence. [See pages 33-37] The Whitney Museum of American Art purchased an artwork in 1952, the same year that The Metropolitan Museum of Art included his work in a group exhibition. In 1955, he was awarded the John Hay Whitney Fellowship.

In 1956, White and his wife moved to California for health reasons. In 1961, both Atlanta University and Howard University in Washington, D.C. purchased White's work. In 1965, he began teaching at Otis Institute of Art in Los Angeles. Around this time, the emerging civil rights movement triggered moving depictions by White of anonymous blacks quietly and courageously overcoming difficulties—visual renditions, in a sense, of the nonviolent approach of civil rights leader Martin Luther King*. In the late 1960s, White discovered some pre-Civil War posters advertising for runaway slaves. He transformed these haunting artifacts into his compelling Wanted series. [See Figure 13] As shown here, the artist created his deeply humane portraits of black men and women, using the wrinkled, aged relics as background.

White continued to receive honors. In 1972, he became the second black after Henry Ossawa Tanner to be elected to the National Academy of Design. [See pages 17-21] Atlanta's High Museum, whose racial barrier Hale Woodruff had broken [see pages 22-25], presented the artist with a major retrospective in 1976. White died in California three years later. As art historian James Porter* said in his introduction to a 1967 book of White's work, Images of Dignity: “I like to think of Charles White ... as an artist who, more than any other, has found a way of embodying in his art the very texture of the Negro experience as found in life in America.”

Figure 13.
Charles White,
Wanted Poster No. 3,
Slide Thirteen: Charles White

1. This drawing is made with charcoal. Charcoal, produced by reducing wood to carbon in heated chambers, is cut into pieces. Charcoal can be used to create the structure of a work and establish a variety of tones. Charcoal can be used to create the structure of a work and establish a variety of tones. Charcoal drawings are often protected from smudging by the application of a fixative. After being applied, charcoal can also be changed by a method of erasing. Erasing is done by using a piece of bread or a kneaded eraser and rubbing it across the surface. These methods can be used in the final stages of making a drawing to accentuate lines or strengthen certain areas.

Have students become familiar with charcoal and erasers. Provide students with these materials and drawing paper. Have students choose a section of Harvest Talk to recreate using charcoal and erasing. Have students practice the same section a few times. Discuss their experience.

2. Charles White used many values in this drawing. The term value is used in art to describe the lightness or darkness of lines, shapes, and colors. Artists can use many values (figure A) or a few (figure B). Look carefully at sections of Harvest Talk. Locate at least five different values.

![Value Range A](image1)

![Value Range B](image2)

3. Artists use values in various ways. White has shaded objects to make them look three-dimensional (not flat). Shading is a very gradual change from light to dark values. Describe where you see shading in Harvest Talk. How does White’s use of value affect the work’s meaning?

4. Charles White wanted to reach African Americans with artworks that would give them confidence and pride in themselves. White’s hero is the everyday person who lives his life in dignity. What characteristics of a hero does he portray? How is this achieved through pose, setting, or facial expression? Does the artist make a social comment? Have students discuss a current social issue in their school such as cheating, gangs, discrimination or drugs. Have students design a poster that takes a stand for a cause or social concern.

5. Discuss how the artist placed the two figures in the picture frame. The figures are so large that the hat of one worker is cut off and his strong arm looks as though it is resting on the edge of the frame. How does their placement in the frame make us think about these two workers? (They are larger than life, prominent men, strong in muscle, and strong in character.)

6. Have your students be researchers. Imagine scholars are disputing the title Harvest Talk and are claiming it depicts a different season. Have your students provide evidence found in this painting that supports the original title. Have students chart their careful observations, noting the types of clouds, strength, and direction of the wind in the field, dress of the workers, describe the tool and its purpose, describe the field and what stage it is in, such as plowed for planting or tall crops for cutting. Place these workers in the same scene in a different season.