



# *Harvest Talk*

1953

by Charles White

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO  
Department of Museum Education  
Division of Student and Teacher Programs  
The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center



# Charles White (American, 1918–1979)

## *Harvest Talk*, 1953

Charcoal, Wolff's carbon drawing pencil, and graphite, with stumping and erasing on board; 66.1 x 99.2 cm.

Restricted gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Hartman, 1991.126

"I've only painted one picture in my entire life," declared Charles White. "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.

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 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 **Works Progress (later Projects) Administration/Federal Arts Project (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 heroes 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 Fellowship** he received in the early 1940s enabled White and his then-wife, sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett (b. 1915), 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 corner-stone 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 this 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 muscle-bound 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 every person, 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 artist 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**. 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 people quietly and courageously overcoming difficulties—visual renditions, in a sense, of the nonviolent approach of civil rights leader **Martin Luther King Jr.** 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.

White continued to receive honors. In 1972, he became the second black person after **Henry Ossawa Tanner** to be elected to the National Academy of Design. Atlanta’s High Museum, whose racial barrier **Hale Woodruff** had broken, 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.”

# Glossary

**DuBois, W.E.B.** (1868–1963): Harvard-educated author, educator, and civil rights advocate who sought full civil, political, and economic rights for African Americans. Cofounder in 1910 of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and editor of its magazine *Crisis* (190–1934). His collection of essays entitled *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is his best-known work.

**Harlem Renaissance:** The creative outburst during the 1920s of literature, music, dance and art centered in the New York City neighborhood of Harlem, which spread to other cities as well, including Chicago's Bronzeville. Also known as the New Negro Movement after **Alain Locke's** watershed book *The New Negro* (1925), which urged black artists to reclaim their ancestral heritage as a means of strengthening and enriching their own expression.

**Hughes, Langston** (1902–1967): American poet and central figure of the **Harlem Renaissance** whose work often used dialect and jazz rhythms to explore African American life, particularly in the city. Among his collections are *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), *One-Way Ticket* (1949), and *Selected Poems* (1959).

**King, Martin Luther Jr.** (1929–1968): Clergyman and civil rights leader whose policy of nonviolent passive resistance first gained national prominence in the mid-1950s, when his boycotts led to desegregation of the bus lines in Montgomery, Alabama. King organized the massive 1963 March on Washington and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. He was assassinated in 1968.

**Locke, Alain** (1886–1954): First African American Rhodes scholar and Howard University philosopher who was a leading spokesperson for the **Harlem Renaissance**. His seminal book, *The New Negro* (1925), urged black artists to reclaim their ancestral heritage as a means of strengthening and enriching their own expressions.

**Mexican muralists:** Inspired by the Mexican Revolution of 1911, a group of artists including José Clemente Orozco (1883–1948) and Diego Rivera (1886–1957) developed a national narrative style incorporating their native heritage of folk traditions and pre-Columbian art in order to create an art that was “of the people.” They executed vast mural cycles—large paintings applied directly to walls and ceilings—whose powerful portrayals of the history and struggles of working class Mexicans influenced the Social Realist style so prevalent in American art during the 1930s and 1940s.

**Julius Rosenwald Fellowship:** Established in 1917 by Julius Rosenwald (1862–1932), chairman of the mail-order house of Sears, Roebuck & Company, to give fellowships, travel grants, and commissions to black and southern white artists and writers. The fund was an example of white philanthropy that aided the flourishing of black culture during the **Harlem Renaissance**.

**Social Realism:** A broad term used to describe diverse styles of representational painting (or literature) whose subject has social or political content. Prevalent in the United States during the Great Depression.

**South Side Community Art Center: WPA/FPA**—funded arts center modeled after the highly successful Harlem Community Center in New York and dedicated in 1941; continues to this day to provide professional training and opportunities for aspiring young artists.

**Works Progress (later Projects) Administration/Federal Arts Project (WPA/FAP):** Federal agencies created in 1933 (WPA) and 1935 (FAP) by Franklin Roosevelt, president from 1933 to 1945, to support artists during the Great Depression. Lasting through the advent of World War II, WPA/FAP was the largest and most well-known governmental agency to assist the arts through its federally sponsored programs, employing at its height some five thousand artists.

For more information on the artists Elizabeth Catlett, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Jacob Lawrence, and Hale Woodruff, see *African American Art at The Art Institute of Chicago*, a teacher manual available through The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center at the Art Institute.

# Classroom Activities & Discussion Questions

- 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 drawings are often protected from smudging by the application of a fixative. After being applied, charcoal can also be changed to a method of erasing. Erasing is done by using a piece of bread or a kneaded eraser and running 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 erasers. Have students practice the same section a few times. Discuss their experience.

- 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, such as those in (figure A) or a few (figure B). Look carefully at sections of *Harvest Talk*. Locate at least five different values.

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?

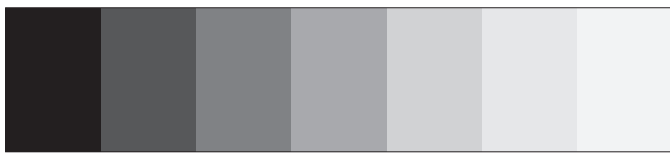


Figure A. Artists can use many values.

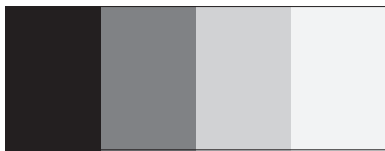


Figure B. Artists can use fewer values.

- 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 and design a poster that takes a stand for a cause or social concern.
- 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.)
- 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 state it is in, such as plowed for planting or tall crops ready for cutting. Place these workers in the same scene in a different season.

