



### **Charles White, 1918 - 1979**

Born in Chicago in 1918, Charles W. White is one of America's most renowned and recognized African-American & Social Realist artists. Charles White worked primarily in black & white or sepia & white drawings, paintings, and lithographs. His artwork encompassed an incredibly skilled draftsmanship and artistic sensitivity and power that has reached and moved millions.

His meticulously executed drawings and paintings speak of and affirm the humanity and beauty of African American people and culture. Common subjects of his artwork included scenes depicting African-American history in the United States, socio-economic struggles, human relationships, and portraits.

Artist Charles White and his wife Frances Barrett moved to California in 1956, which was the beginning of White's career as a Los Angeles artist. He had several shows in Los Angeles, and was represented by the Heritage Gallery. White received numerous honors and awards and has been exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago, Whitney Museum, Metropolitan Museum, Smithsonian Institution, National Academy of Design, and elsewhere throughout the world. He was elected to the National Academy of Design in 1972. The Heritage Gallery had represented the artwork of Charles White from the early 1960s, when Mr. Horowitz provided Mr. White his first show in Los Angeles, California.

<http://www.heritagegallery.com/charles-white.html>

### **Charles White Biography - Images of Dignity (edited from a self-biographical entry by Charles White)**

I was born in Chicago, Illinois on April 2, 1918. Both of my parents were from the South. My father, a railroad and steel worker, was a Creek Indian. The Creeks had been centered mostly in Georgia, where they were hounded and discriminated against like anyone else with a skin darker than white. My mother came from Mississippi. All her folks were farmers. Her own mother, my grandmother, had been a slave, the illegitimate daughter of a white master. I am not proud of this one white man who was one of my great-grandfathers. He was of a much lower order of humanity than those whose lineage was directly African.

Of my parents, it was my mother to whom I was closest. My father died when I was eight. My mother later married again, but she parted from my stepfather when I was thirteen, and from that time on we looked after one another. She loved music and art. When I was seven years old she bought me a set of oil paints, and I painted my first picture, which she still has. When I was nine, she bought me a violin and got me a music teacher. I scratched away on the instrument for about seven years, but my all-consuming interest was painting and My disturbed feelings sometimes broke out into open defiance,

and in studies such as history I came to be known as a "problem." To explain how this happened, I have to go back a little. When I grew too big to be carried by my mother to the homes where she worked as a servant, she would leave me for two or three hours in the public library. I became a voracious reader, and continued this throughout my school years. I went through everything in the children's section, and then, at the age of twelve, begged the librarian for a card that would permit me to enter the section where there were more advanced books, and to check out four books instead of two. I again read practically every book on the shelves, at first starting with the authors whose names began with the letter "a" and hoping to work up to "z." And I accidentally came upon books that had information that had never been imparted to me in school.

I discovered that the Negro people had played a proud role in history. A book that fascinated me, and opened up new vistas, was Doctor Alain Locke's, "The New Negro." I had never realized that Negro people had done so much in the world of culture, that they had contributed so much to the development of America that they had even been among the discoverers of the continent.

For a while I kept this newfound knowledge to myself. It became a kind of secret life, a new world of facts and ideas in diametric opposition to what was being taught in the classrooms and textbooks as unquestionable truth. But then, the clash began to come out in the open.

I grew to dislike school intensely. Playing truant, I would go to the Art Institute of Chicago and wander about its art galleries, looking at paintings, and dreaming of becoming an artist. Outside of my art teachers, who would come to my rescue when I got into trouble, I was very lonely in school. But I did find a small group of students struggling to break down discriminatory practices in school, and joined them.

In these years I also began to feel more confidence in myself. I became friends with a white fellow student whose father was a professional sign painter. During this time I also sketched incessantly, at lunchtime or in whatever spare time I could find in the evenings. I drew whatever I saw; the people I knew, the streets about my home, events that had happened. And I discovered that there were other Negro artists in Chicago. I read in a Negro newspaper of a Negro art group called the Arts Crafts Guild, which met every Sunday. I was fifteen at the time. I timidly took a few drawings to their meeting, and was admitted. They met every week, mostly to work from a model, or from scenes in the streets, and criticized each other's work. They had community exhibitions, and thus some of my work was first publicly seen, in places like a Negro Baptist church, a Young Men's Christian Association house, a Settlement House or Boys Club. We would occasionally take over a vacant lot for our exhibitions.

When I was nineteen and just out of high school, the most exciting event of my artistic career up to that time took place. I won a statewide competition for high school graduates, the prize being a full scholarship to the Chicago Art Institute. I still had to make a living working at night and vacation times, but was able to finish the two-year course in one year. With this expert technical instruction behind me, I felt that I was really set on the road to becoming a full-fledged artist. But how was I to make a living and still find enough time to draw and paint? At this point, the W.P.A. (Works Progress Administration) arts project beckoned.

To be accepted on the project, one had to prove possession of the requisite skills, and also had to be unemployed, unable to find work, on relief, and a pauper, without any suitable possessions. The latter part of this was easy. But when it came to be accepted as an artist, racism again showed its face. The director of the Illinois art project did not think that Negro people could be artists, and on the entire

project there was but one Negro. And so my first lesson on the project dealt not so much with paint as with the role of the unions in fighting for the rights of working people. I became active in Artists Union committees and also took part in the work of the League against War and Fascism, and the organizations for support of the republican government of Spain. It was obvious that the welfare of the Negro people, the progress of all the working people, and the cause of democracy were linked together. And this was also the basis for the progress of art. The artist could not spend his life in his studio. He had to play a role in social life.

--Charles White, shared by Fran White. April 26, 1982

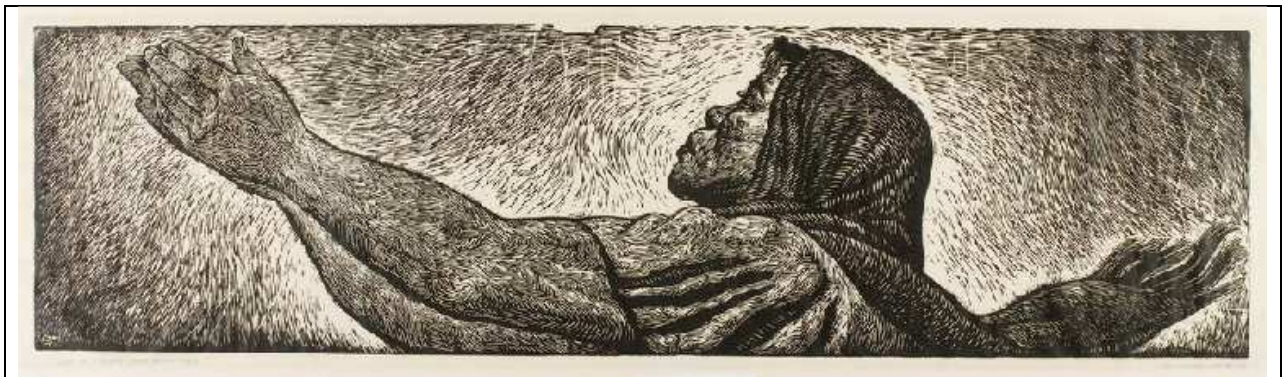
Excerpt from : <http://www.charleswhite-imagesofdignity.org/bio.html>

### **MIA Label for Sacred Exhibition – Sacred Walking**

**Just a Closer Walk with Thee, 1959**

**North America, United States**

**Linocut, P.99.12.2**



Walking as a metaphor for spiritual fulfillment is the subject of *Just a closer Walk with Thee*, a rare linoleum cut by renowned African-American artist Charles W. White. The print borrows its title from the traditional gospel song of the same name, a song thought to have originated from southern African-American churches of the second half of the nineteenth century. In more recent years, the song has become something of a fixture of popular music, especially among jazz musicians. White's powerful image of a black woman gazing toward heaven, arms outstretched, beseeching Jesus to grant her humble plea to walk beside Him, functions as the visual counterpart to the song's playful lyrics. Though symbolic, the spiritual action of walking with Jesus provides believers with a personally sustaining means to express their faith and devotion.

Just a closer walk with Thee,  
Grant it, Jesus, is my plea,  
Daily walking close to Thee,  
Let it be, dear Lord, let it be.