

VISIONS



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VISIONARY
ART MUSEUM

14 ART, SCIENCE, & PHILOSOPHY



THE BOSTON VISIONARY
WELTANS

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AND STILL COUNTING. . .

By the records of the State of Alabama, Frank Calloway has lived in three centuries: the 19th, the 20th, and the 21st. In the first two, he was anonymous. But in this, the 21st century, the boy who was born poor, black and fatherless in Montgomery, the state capital, 112 years ago (and who has been committed for the last half of his life to the buildings and grounds of Alabama's infamous state mental hospital in Tuscaloosa) began to be recognized as perhaps the oldest working artist in the world. He and his art have begun to be regarded as a treasure.

And so at the beginning of October, with a retinue of caretakers and officials from Bryce Hospital and the Alabama Department of Mental Health, he boarded a commercial airliner for the first time, to come to the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, where some of the murals of early 20th century life that he draws on long rolls of brown butcher block paper were hanging at the center of the show about to open, *The Marriage of Art, Science and Philosophy*.

It is the first exhibition of his work in a museum outside Alabama, or in any museum of self taught art, the first major exhibition of his work anywhere. Frank Calloway is getting to be sort of famous. But it has been a slow bloom. The records at Bryce Hospital, where he was brought in 1952 after being found wandering and confused—and where he became part of a segregated and overwhelmed system which held 5,000 inmates and only three psychiatrists at its worst, be-



fore being taken over by the federal courts in 1971—state that he had been born July 2, 1896, and had no known living family when he arrived.

The details of his childhood are hazy. Mr. Calloway can remember his mother sewing together pieces of cloth to make quilts—"picture quilts"—when he was a little boy, in a wooden house with two rooms, an outhouse, no electricity, a pail to dip in a nearby spring for water, and a kitchen with a wood-burning fireplace, in a section called "Manor Bottom." His father wasn't there. "I said, Mama, who is my daddy?" he remembered, sitting in his wheelchair at

breakfast in his hotel dining room, the morning after he landed in Baltimore.

He is a large man with broad, gentle features and eyes, a soft voice, patient good humor, and no complaints. "For an old man," he smiled, "I feel pretty good." He is a little hard of hearing. He needs help eating. His mother died when he was five or six, he said, his father when he was ten or twelve. He quit school in the third grade. "I had to do hard work," he explained, "digging ditches, cutting logs at the sawmill, hauling lumber."

In 1952, when Mr. Calloway was committed to Bryce—the year AVAM founder and director Rebecca Hoffberger was born—the 200-acre hospital campus still had its own crops and vegetable gardens, orchards, birds and animals. The patients tended them. Mr. Calloway worked in the fields and on the grounds. When U. S. District Judge Frank Johnson banished that system, replacing manual labor with arts and crafts, Mr. Calloway began to draw with the cray-

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by DUDLEY CLENDINEN

ons and markers he was given. He didn't want to do anything else, and he didn't want to stop, so the staff began giving him 30-foot long rolls of brown butcher paper.

He began to make long murals of people in houses, buildings and buses, working men on their trucks, paddle wheel steamboats, locomotives and trains, and their crews. He had a method.

"I make a mark, and then add some others to it—the way you build a house," he said. But before he began to draw, he seemed always to write long series of lines of multiplied numbers at the bottom of the paper. "That's how many bricks I need to build the house," Mr. Calloway replied, when someone asked him what the numbers were. He has a talent for multiplying large sums in his head, and the numbers and drawings were parts of a whole, like an engineer's calculations in the margins of a rendering.

The Alice M. Kidd nursing home on the Bryce campus long ago became Frank Calloway's home, its staff and remaining inmate patients his family. After a few years, nurses and doctors at Bryce, and others who saw them, began asking to buy the drawings. The staff sold them for \$50 apiece. Then the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts hung some in a 2000 showing of the work of 30 state mental health patients. The commissioner of the state mental health system hung one in his conference room in Montgomery. The Alabama state telephone directory used one for its cover. The director of Alice Kidd decided to stop selling them.

When Rebecca Hoffberger, earlier this year, heard about Frank Calloway, his complex calculations, and his art, she called, and then went to Tuscaloosa to visit him, and, of course, fell in love. The thousands of patients have dwindled to few dozen, most of them old. Bryce, under federal court supervision for more than 30 years, stopped admitting new patients decades ago.

There is now talk of the complex being sold. If it were, that would send Mr. Calloway and the other old men and women into foster care.

For now, Mr. Calloway has a room to himself on the campus where he has lived for almost sixty years, and a special table of his own by a long window, just steps away from his door, where he works each day at his art. He doesn't take naps in the afternoon, he said.

"I go to bed at bedtime, eight or nine o'clock. I get up about six," he said.

He works each day, because—like his mother—he has pictures in his head. She made picture quilts. He draws. He still remembers.

"I see her sometimes," he said. "I be sitting up on a truck, and she be walking close to the truck, looking up at me." He smiled his gentle smile. He sees the pictures in his mind, and watches life around him. Zondra Taylor Hutto, Mr. Calloway's state guardian, and Nedra Moncrief-Craig, the director of Alice Kidd, arranged to take him to the top of a tall building on the water in Gulf Shores, Alabama, because he wanted to see the ocean. Many very old people hate change but Frank Calloway wanted to come to Baltimore.

"You can't turn down nothing," he said, with his gentle smile, at breakfast. "Everything is brand new to your soul."

