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It has taken a while, but the art world in the United States is starting to notice Frank Calloway. A muralist who toils daily with felt pens and crayons over scrolls of butcher's paper, he has a perspective that by any standard is unique. His work, in fact, is a kind of archaeology, an exploration of an America long vanished.

Any investigation of the life of Calloway himself also adds intrigue to appreciation of his works. He has lived since 1952 in a variety of state mental hospitals in his native Alabama. That's half of his lifetime. And therein is the other astonishing detail. Yes, you have done the sums right – Calloway is 112 years old.

"He draws all day long except for the time that he spends in activity and eating his meals," reports Nedra Moncrief-Craig, director of the Alice M Kidd Nursing Facility in Tuscaloosa. "That's what he loves to do."

Vividly coloured and sometimes bordered by strings of numbers, the murals have a childlike quality that has captivated some admirers. They offer a glimpse back to the agrarian Deep South that Calloway remembers from the days of his youth in the early 20th century. He conjures wheezing steam tractors, old-fashioned cranes and farm animals being loaded into wagons. For years, Calloway would give his creations away, to friends and nursing staff. Or he would sell them for a token \$50. Recently, however, administrators began to wonder if what he was painting had a much greater value, perhaps thousands of dollars each. Since 2006, his works have been entrusted to a guardian, Zondra Taylor Hutto, a local lawyer.

Museums and galleries are meanwhile beginning to sit up and take note. First there was the Kentuck Museum of Northport, Alabama, which exhibited a few Calloway pieces two years ago. However, in a much more significant milestone, the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore is planning a major exhibition of its own this autumn featuring 18 Calloway scrolls, some of which are 30ft long.

Calloway has been invited to attend the exhibition's opening and at the moment he intends to go. It will be his first time on an aeroplane and, as far anyone can know, his first trip beyond the borders of Alabama.

Details of his past are sketchy. He knows he was born on 2 July 1896 but has no living family. He left school while still small, playing at home as a "little bitty, little boy" and later taking physical jobs from farming to laying railway tracks, cutting lumber and assisting a blacksmith. The drawing habit began early. "I couldn't get time to go to school much," he said in a recent interview with the Associated Press. "A school teacher put me to drawing a long time ago, drawing pictures." The law forbids his doctors from revealing too much of his medical history, but it appears Calloway was diagnosed many years ago with schizophrenia. There is no little pride at the hospital where he lives about his talent. "Most people see his age," said Ms Moncrief-Craig. "You know, what I see is his ability, the beauty that he actually puts on paper, that comes out of him and his mind."

Rebecca Hoffberger, director of the Visionary museum in Baltimore, met Calloway for the first time this year. "I was dazzled by his choice of colour," she said. "Also, there's a rhythm to it, maybe dictated by the long sheets of paper he works on, that makes it seem like he's just going on and on, recording the memories of his life." Ms Hoffberger was also intrigued by Calloway's fascination with numbers. Aside from the numerals that sometimes border his pictures, he has other notebooks filled with them. And sometimes, she says, he will pause in mid conversation to cite the multiplication tables. But it is the vivid imagery of the works and the wide-open face of the painter that convinced her that he was worth showcasing back in Baltimore. "There's a presence with him, I'm telling you, that feels angelic," she concludes.

It's a thrilling time for Ms Hutto too, as he gains a far greater audience. "His art overcomes boundaries," she said. "People may say, 'Well, he's a folk artist. I don't like folk art'. But if you ever meet him, there is such life in what he creates, and you can't look at one of his paintings without seeing that smile, without seeing that gentle man."

The world's oldest...

Blogger

When Olive Riley got to the age of 107 she decided to look around for a new hobby, and wanted to try something a bit different. Encouraged by a friend, the great-great-grandmother from Australia became a blogger, posting more than 70 entries until her death this month, aged 108. Her "blob", as she took to calling it, often consisted of tales of her life, and covered the Great Depression and two world wars.

Marathon runner

Last April Buster Martin completed the London Marathon in just under 10 hours, claiming that at 101, he was the oldest ever runner to complete the distance. Guinness World Records has so far refused to recognise the feat, citing his failure to produce a birth certificate amid reports that he was only 94. Martin, who says he now has a passport confirming his age, also claims he drank seven pints of ale during the race.

Parachute jumper

When friends at his local football club in Australia dared Frank Moody to jump out of a plane, they thought Mr Moody was old enough to know better. However Mr Moody, aged 101, decided to take up the challenge, and in 2004 he made the 3,000-metre jump in tandem. Mr Moody, who beat the previous record holder by seven years, celebrated by returning to the club for a pint of Guinness.

