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Lilies, Jaybirds, and George: The Art in Mose T's Trees

Quirky, vibrant, and childlike, the images Mose Tolliver painted on extraordinary surfaces propelled the Montgomery artist from obscurity to folk art fame.

By Anton Haardt

The January 1982 morning dawned brightly on the artist Mose Tolliver, better known by all as Mose T (a nickname he used to sign even his checks), and his wife Willie Mae. A day or two earlier, they had taken the train from Montgomery, Alabama, to Washington, D.C., embarking on what was probably the first trip either of them had ever made to the nation's capital. Although Mose had traveled to Georgia as a serviceman during World War II, he had likely remained in Alabama for the intervening decades. (He liked to make grandiose claims about his worldliness and often bragged about traveling worldwide, but evidence suggests these claims were fanciful.) In honor of the trip, Mose, who normally dressed casually in T-shirts, had a new suit, a lime green ensemble he received as a gift from his friend Granger Carr, and Willie Mae boasted a floral dress and fringed cowboy boots.

The Tollivers' attention to their attire was warranted because they were in Washington to be seen. Mose had been selected as one of only twenty artists nationwide who would be featured in a new exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Titled *Black Folk Art in America: 1930–1980*, the exhibit brought together folk artists and scholars from across the nation, and it helped

establish folk art as an important tradition worthy of being included in museums and galleries worldwide. On this particular morning, the Tollivers were running late for a very important engagement—a scheduled reception at the museum, coordinated with a special exhibit viewing planned for First Lady Nancy Reagan. The morning marked an important turning point in Tolliver's artistic career. A self-taught artist who had, until recently, displayed his paintings in the yard of his Montgomery home, Tolliver would soon have the honor of seeing his artwork hanging in an actual gallery, and he would be allowed to give the First Lady a personalized showing of his work. That is, he would be able to do all this if he could get there on time. Doing so was proving harder than he had planned.

A decade or so earlier in a Montgomery neighborhood, visitors—a young girl strolling up the street on a hot summer day with little else to do or a peculiar misfit from Kansas taking a walk from the nearby Greyhound bus station before hopping the next bus back home—occasionally stumbled on something they did not expect to see: paintings hanging from trees in a local front yard. The paintings—misshapen panels saved from the scrap



Red Mouth Judy, circa 1982, 20 x 21 inches, house paint on plywood. *Red Mouth Judy* is one of the signature females in Tolliver's repertoire. With her full skirt and painted red lips, Judy is ready for a night on the town, according to Tolliver. The bulk of his paintings depict human subjects, usually women. (Collection of Anton Haardt.)



Mose T, surrounded by his creations on the walls of the Anton Haardt Gallery in 1992. (Photo by Henry Cadenhead.)

yard and covered with brightly colored childlike images of humans, flowers, and animals, subjects as diverse as self-portraits and “dinosaur birds”—were the handiwork of local artist Mose T. Over the next three decades, he would rise from obscurity to fame in national folk art circles, and his artwork would hang in much more prestigious sites.

Tolliver’s ascension as an artist was hard-won, and few moments in Tolliver’s childhood suggested the stature he would achieve as an adult. One of twelve children in a family of sharecroppers from Pike Road, Alabama, Tolliver entered the work force as a youngster and never aspired to scholarly pursuits. (Though he was able to sign his name, as evidenced on his artwork, Tolliver never learned to read.) After his family moved to Montgomery when he was a teenager, Tolliver worked as a gardener and handyman before taking a job at McLendon’s Furniture Company. In the late 1960s, Mose was working at the store when he suffered a debilitating and career-ending

accident: his legs were crushed by a falling block of marble. Fortunately for the art world, one of the McLendon sons, an amateur painter, had a suggestion. As Mose remembered it,

Mr. McLendon said, “Why don’t you paint some pictures?” He gave me some paint. That’s when I started to paint. He’d hang them up at his furniture store. He couldn’t sell them, though, not nar’ one. He’d give me his furniture pictures in exchange for my pictures. I’d hang his pictures on the walls here with my pictures. People would buy his pictures right off my wall, but I couldn’t sell any of mine! Nobody liked them back then.

When Tolliver was lucky enough to sell a few paintings, he usually sold them cheap, even on occasion offering three for five dollars. He did not sign his early work, but since the mid-1970s, each of his creations has borne the distinctive lettering of its artist, including a backward “S” in the name Mose. It is possible that Mose began signing his work to mark its increasing value. By the late seventies, his images drew sums approaching twenty-five dollars each. His fees grew in association with his reputation; by this time, officials at the

Montgomery Museum of Art had noticed and begun appreciating Tolliver’s work. In 1981 the museum hosted a solo exhibition for Tolliver, according him a higher status in the art world and exposing him to other collectors and curators. His work was featured in *Transmitters: The Isolate Artist in America* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art later that year, and in 1982 twenty-three works by Tolliver were included in the seminal exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

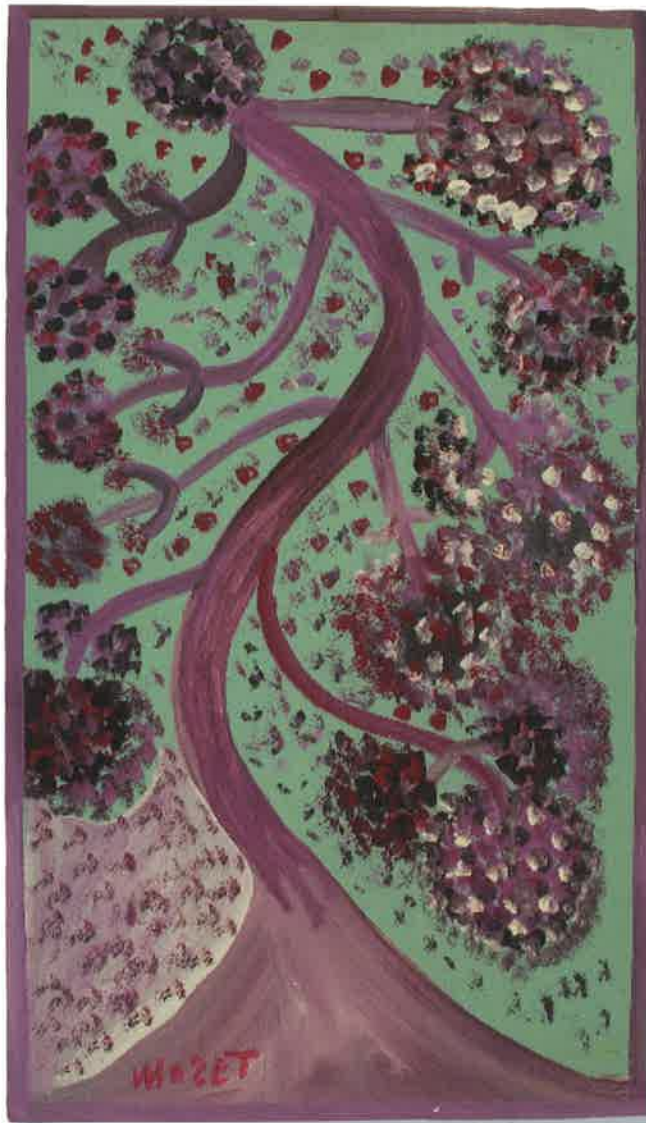
Meeting Nancy Reagan was one of the highlights of the Tollivers’s trip. However, the meeting almost did not happen. On the morning of the meeting, Willie Mae—never one to be swayed from her routine—insisted upon finishing her breakfast before departing. When urged by her companions to hurry, Willie Mae retorted, “I don’t care who we’re going to meet. I’m going to eat my oatmeal first!” Fortunately, the Tollivers arrived at the Corcoran in time, and they were both pleased to see how much the First Lady enjoyed the artwork.

Throughout the festivities, which included lectures, press sessions, and a symposium, the Tollivers remained nonplussed by the excitement (*continued on page 13*)

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George Washington, circa 1993, 12 x 12 inches, house paint on cardboard. Tolliver's work was included in the Corcoran Gallery of Art's landmark exhibit *Black Folk Art in America 1930–1980*. When at the Corcoran, Tolliver encountered Gilbert Stuart's portrait of Washington, and he returned to Montgomery with many new ideas. American icons such as the first president, the Statue of Liberty, and the Empire State Building soon became staples in his ever-expanding repertoire. (Collection of Anton Haardt.)



French Magnolia Lily, circa mid-1970s, 23 ¼ x 13 ½ inches, house paint on paneling. *French Magnolia Lily* was painted in the early 1970s, before Tolliver developed his trademark style. According to Mose, the large blossoms on this flower distinguish it from other lily varieties. Flower subjects make up a sizeable portion of his body of work, and they are among his most symbolic images. Tolliver, who once worked as a gardener in Montgomery, was known for his ecumenical approach to landscaping. On more than one occasion, he took plants from one yard and used them to embellish beds elsewhere in the neighborhood. (Collection of Anton Haardt.)

Scopper Bug, circa 1970, 11 x 16 ½ inches, house paint on canvas with wooden frame. According to Tolliver, “A scopper bug eats books.” Painted around 1970, relatively early in Tolliver’s career, this image represents his work during his experimental period, before he developed the signature style that now characterizes the majority of his paintings. Like nearly all of Tolliver’s works that were created before there was money for pre-cut, store-bought boards on which to paint, *Scopper Bug* incorporates “found” materials—in this case, a recycled canvas frame. (Collection of Anton Haardt.)

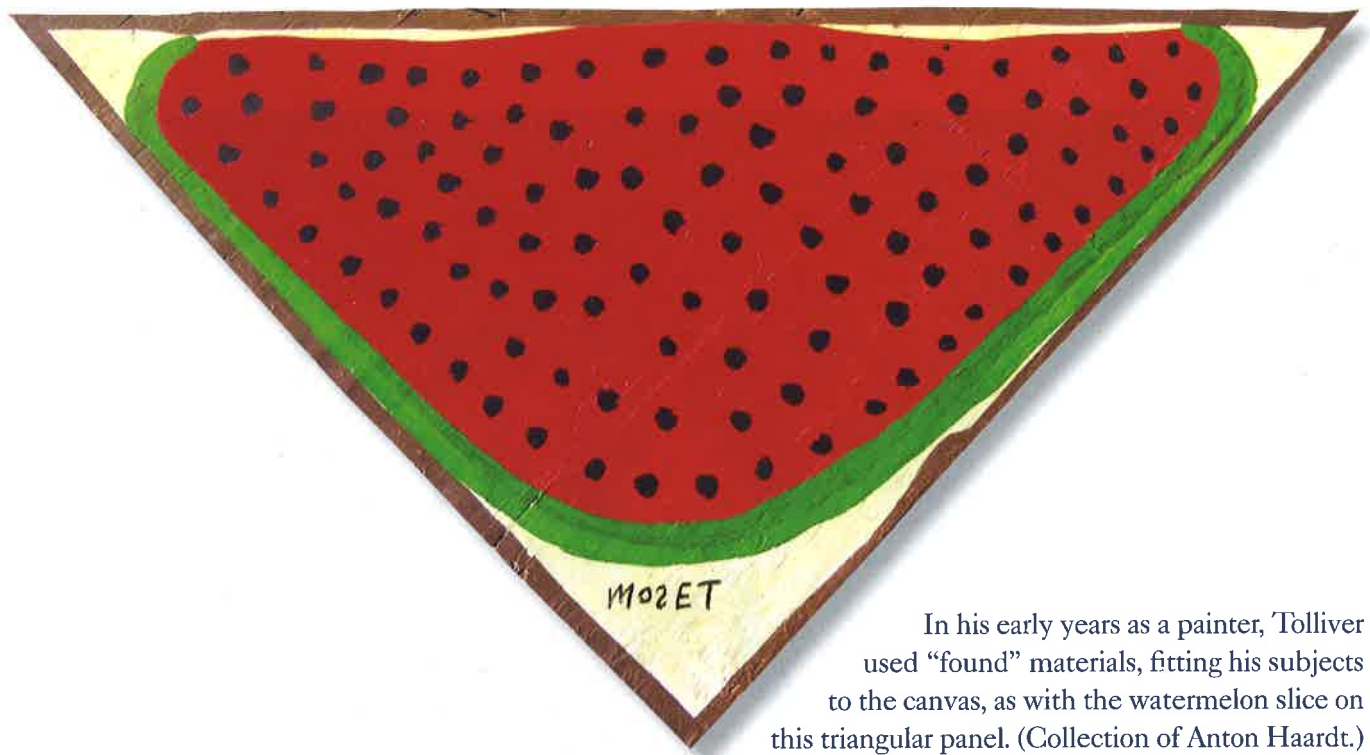


When scholars pressed Mose for lofty statements about his artistic pursuits, he responded, “I don’t care about art. I just want to paint my pictures.”



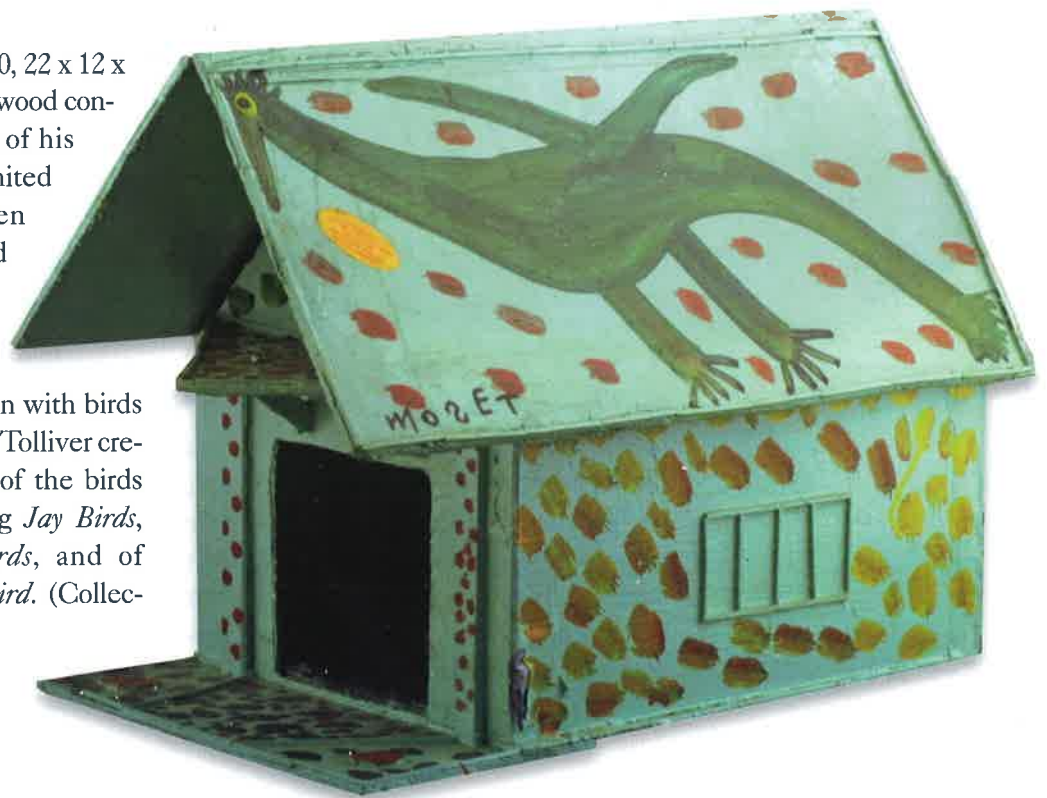
Iris Flowers, circa 1980, 18 x 14 inches, house paint on plastic cafeteria tray. *Iris Flowers* is one of the many floral images Tolliver painted, including pineapple lilies, Japanese lilies, and water lilies. “I took care of all kinds of flowers,” Mose recalled. “Irises, you know, they have flat leaves and make a pretty purple bloom right in the top... Well, really, I like any blooming flower.” (Collection of Anton Haardt.)

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There is nothing better to do.”



In his early years as a painter, Tolliver used “found” materials, fitting his subjects to the canvas, as with the watermelon slice on this triangular panel. (Collection of Anton Haardt.)

Hatching Bird House, circa 1990, 22 x 12 x 18 inches, house paint on plywood construction. In the early days of his career, when Tolliver had limited funds for materials, he often painted on anything he could find, including, in one instance, an old pair of shoes. This birdhouse demonstrates his ongoing fascination with birds and bird life. Over the years, Tolliver created works featuring many of the birds native to his area, including *Jay Birds*, *Mountain Birds*, *Quail Birds*, and of course, his signature *Tico Bird*. (Collection of Anton Haardt.)



and honor of the Corcoran exhibit. When scholars pressed Mose for lofty statements about his artistic pursuits, he responded, "I don't care about art. I just want to paint my pictures." In one press conference, an ambitious reporter asked a lengthy, complex, and leading question. When she paused for the expected response, Mose simply smiled and said politely, "I'm glad to be here. How are you?"

Although Mose's outward appearance was casual, the Corcoran exhibition was important to him professionally because the exposure of a national show increased the prices he was able to collect for his work. While Tolliver was in Washington, friends and unofficial agents arranged for the sale of ten of his paintings for a total of a thousand dollars—the greatest sum Mose had ever received for his artwork and a far cry from the early days when he sold his paintings in three-for-five-dollar bundles. In addition to the financial success of the trip, the Corcoran experience also granted him valuable exposure to important works of art. After the journey to the nation's capital, Mose expanded his repertoire, moving beyond the familiar plants of his Alabama backyard to paint such notables as the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, and George Washington—who would become one of Tolliver's most iconic subjects.

The Corcoran show offered Tolliver much-needed publicity and attention, and it helped introduce him as an important part of the folk art world. He was included in many more exhibitions across the country, and he earned the respect of critics. Robert Bishop, director of the Museum of American Folk Art at the time, named Mose T the equal of some of the art world's greats, saying, "You can hang him beside a Picasso and you have the same creativity and deep personal vision." Over time, prices for Tolliver's artwork continued to increase. In 1990 Sotheby's auctioned three Mose T paintings for \$3,600. Back home in Alabama, his increasing success allowed him to standardize parts of his production process, and he was able to upgrade from painting on salvaged objects to using uniformly cut wooden boards. Family members assisted in the preparation of materials, allowing Tolliver to focus on painting.

Some parts of the artistic process, however, remained exactly as before. Mose still collected tabs from soft drink cans and used them as hangers for paintings. He still dressed casually, although the T-shirts in his collection grew increasingly diverse, as fans from across the country

sent him shirts from their hometowns. Other fans made trips from across the Southeast, driving off with a trunk full of George Washington portraits or more risqué images that Tolliver termed "Scooter Ladies" or "Russian women on exercise racks." The latter images, featuring spread-eagled women, are much more graphic than the bulk of Tolliver's work. Although he denied any sexual content, these paintings routinely featured women in various stages of undress, presenting a striking thematic contrast to portraits of America's first president.

In his later years, Tolliver continued to pursue his artwork, but with less vigor. Willie Mae died in 1991, and the loss of his wife of nearly fifty years simultaneously offered Mose more autonomy and less stability. Willie Mae had kept Mose grounded. Without her, he felt free to indulge, and his artistic success gave him the finances to do so. He had plentiful funds for items that would have been an extravagance in leaner times. He never learned to drive, but purchased himself a Lincoln Continental, and he enjoyed having enough money to buy alcohol at will. He appeared to appreciate this new lifestyle, but it was detrimental to his creative pursuits. Mose proved most artistically productive when in the care of one of his children, especially his daughter Dorothy Jean, his primary caretaker after Willie Mae's death. He once said, "I guess I'll paint for the rest of my life. There is nothing better to do." Mose lived up to his statement, almost working consistently until 2004, when his health prevented him from painting regularly. He remained energized by the memory of his career, however, and when fans asked about some of his more popular subjects, he would smile and answer, "I painted bales of them."

Mose T died on October 30, 2006, after having spent nearly four decades doing exactly what he loved, and making the art world richer for it. He was the last surviving artist from the Corcoran exhibit, and his death drew condolences and obituaries from such media outlets as National Public Radio, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Lee Kogan, director of the Folk Art Institute of the American Folk Art Museum, traveled to Montgomery for the funeral, a rousing, celebratory event. Indeed, there was much to celebrate in the life of Mose Tolliver, who traveled from his origins as a sharecropper to the heights of the folk art world. AH

Adapted from Mose T A to Z: The Folk Art of Mose Tolliver (Saturno Press, 2007) by Anton Haardt.