

## IMAGES OF THINGS UNKNOWN: THE WORK OF BILL TRAYLOR \*

*Mechal Sobel*  
(Haifa)

Bill Traylor, born in 1854, was enslaved until the end of the Civil War. After the war Traylor remained on the plantation where he had been born, working as a farm hand and sharecropper until he was about eighty.<sup>1</sup> In 1935, when all his children had left, his second wife was dead, and, as he termed them, "my white folks" were dead as well, Traylor left the plantation, and traveled some forty miles south to Montgomery, Alabama. A tall (6'4"), powerful looking man, Traylor was suffering from rheumatism and probably diabetes as well, and walked with great difficulty, using two canes. Nevertheless, he found employment in a Montgomery shoe factory for a while, but was soon jobless and homeless. Given some fifteen dollars a month "relief" by the Federal government, he found a place to sleep in a funeral home in the black area of downtown Montgomery (rolling out a pallet at night and leaving when the place was opened in the morning), ate his meals (and used the restroom) at a nearby restaurant, and spent his days sitting on a box in a protected spot nearby.<sup>2</sup> It was there that Charles Shannon, a young white painter, who was sketching in the black community, saw him drawing in the spring of 1939. Over the next three years he drew every day, all day, and often into the night, creating, in all, perhaps some 1,800 pictures. Shannon, fascinated by what Traylor was

---

\* This essay was written in 1996. Since that time a great deal has been written about Traylor's work, but little about Traylor's worldview and values. See the wonderful volume edited by Josef Helfenstein and Roman Kursmeyer, *Deep Blues: Bill Traylor, 1854-1949*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999.

<sup>1</sup> See Census 1900, Lowndes County, Alabama, vvi 36 sheet 9. There Bill Traylor is listed as born 1856, but is reported to have been born in 1854 by Charles Shannon and in the 1870 Alabama Census. See interview with Charles Shannon in Frank Maresca and Robert Ricco, *Bill Traylor: His Art, His Life*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1991. p. 5. *Alabama Census, Lowndes County*, Beat Number 3, page 30, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

<sup>2</sup> Traylor was given Old Age Assistance on February 6, 1936. His age was reported as 80, and his dwelling as the Ross Funeral Home.

doing, brought Traylor poster colors, and bought many of his works for five or ten cents.<sup>3</sup>

Within a year of meeting Traylor, Charles Shannon arranged for an exhibition of his paintings in the loft used by "New South"-- an innovative cultural project involving writers and painters in Montgomery that Shannon was involved with. The following year (1941) Shannon brought a collection of Traylor's works to New York City, and arranged for another one-man show at the Fieldstone School. Shannon tried, but failed to interest commercial galleries and the Museum of Modern Art in displaying Traylor's work. Traylor himself showed little interest in what Shannon was doing with the paintings. He seemed to regard the paintings he saw at his "own" show in Montgomery in 1940 not as an extension of himself, but rather as having a reality that was separate from himself: He expressed surprise and delight at several, but showed no recognition that they were "his".<sup>4</sup> Shannon says he never mentioned the show again. Traylor did hang his works on lines and fences for others to see, and took the change offered in payment. However, when Shannon once tried to give him \$25.00 paid to Shannon by a collector, Traylor told Shannon to hold on to it for him, and never asked for it.<sup>5</sup> Until mid 1942, Traylor apparently continued to paint with the same combination of intensity and calm concern that he had shown at the outset. At that point life changed for both men: Shannon was inducted into the U.S. Army and Traylor moved North to live with a daughter in Detroit. During the next few years, Traylor apparently moved about a good deal, living or visiting with children in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. Recent reports from grandchildren, who were very young at the time, suggest that he painted in some of these locations, although no pictures were saved. Over this time his health deteriorated, and when one leg was became gangrenous, it was amputated. Later Shannon recorded a rare emotional report that Traylor shared with him. Traylor told him that "I begged them to let me go out the way I came in."

---

<sup>3</sup> Charles Shannon preserved and promoted these works. Charles Shannon's ownership of all of Traylor's works was recently challenged by the black descendants of Bill Traylor, who had not saved any of his paintings, and did not know that they were valued by others until a museum exhibition was seen by a grand-daughter. The family eventually sued Shannon for some share of the Traylor's in Shannon's possession. In 1993 the case was settled, with Shannon ordered to give the family 12 paintings.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Shannon, "The Folk Art of Bill Traylor," *Southern Works on Paper, 1900-1950*, Southern Arts Federation, Atlanta, 1981. p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Shannon reported that a daughter requested the money after Traylor's death. Shannon in Maresca and Ricco, *op.cit.*

Returning to Alabama, Traylor tried to relocate to what was apparently the spot he felt was best for his work and his life, his street-corner workshop in the midst of the bustle of the black community in downtown Montgomery. He was not allowed to carry on independently; the welfare agency he had received funds from, learning he had a daughter in the city, forced him to move in with her. Shannon reported that he did do some drawing with charcoal while there, but that he accomplished very little and that the quality of the work was less interesting than what he had done before.<sup>6</sup> He was apparently depressed, and longed for the street life and the constant work he had done in its midst. His health continued to deteriorate, and he died in the ward of a black nursing home, in October of 1949.<sup>7</sup>

Shannon writes that he packed up the vast number of Traylor paintings that he had, and moved with them several times. In the 1970s he felt that the art world had changed significantly, and that it was likely that Traylor would be appreciated in a new way. Indeed, in 1979 Shannon succeeded in having his work shown at R.H. Oosterom, a NYC gallery, and in 1982, a true 'breakthrough' occurred when a number of his works were included in the show "Black Folk Art In America, 1930-1980," mounted by the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C. Traylor was considered "the hit of the show." The popularity (and the prices) of his works have risen consistently since that time.

Traylor's paintings now hang in many museums, and his works have been very widely reviewed by art critics, but aside from several very suggestive, but limited, analyses, almost everything that has been written about his pictures has been descriptive.<sup>8</sup> His paintings have been viewed as both very simple and very complex. They have been compared to the works of Picasso, and it has also been recognized that they incorporate elements of traditional African art. However, there has been no real analysis of how Traylor's art might have developed in the complex ways it did or of the

---

<sup>6</sup> Shannon maintains that he did little and what he did was poor. A reporter who saw him at this location, took his photograph in front of many pictures, and said he desperately wanted paints, and would do pictures for anyone who brought paints to him, for ten to twenty five cents.

<sup>7</sup> Marcia Weber, a gallery owner in Montgomery, has collected extensive evidence relating to the life and work of Bill Traylor, and I want to thank her for sharing her materials with me. Weber reports that St. Jude's Cemetery records indicate that Bill Traylor was buried there in October of 1949. Charles Shannon has reported that Traylor died in 1947. See Shannon, in Maresca and Ricco, *op.cit.*

<sup>8</sup> As noted above, this article was written in 1995. Of the works written since then see in particular the volume edited by Helfenstein and Kurzmeyer, and Miriam Rogers Fowler, "A Glimpse at William "Bill" Traylor," in *Bill Traylor*, O'Kane Gallery, University of Houston Houston, Texas, 2001.

worldview of its creator. Dan Cameron, whose analysis is one of the richest, appreciated the "great dignity" of Traylor's paintings, and had the "palpable feeling that they have achieved this dignity at the cost of deep personal suffering." However, he could go no further in his analysis of their symbolism than to suggest the similarity of some of his images with Ashanti warrior-figures or with the Haitian picturing of the top-hatted cemetery spirit, Baron Samedi.<sup>9</sup> Cameron, recognizing Traylor's genius, fears that searching for the "sources" of elements of his work will reduce him to his parts, as it were, rather than respecting him whole.

While Traylor is indeed sometimes reduced in stature by being viewed as in the "Folk Tradition," John Michael Vlach, reserving this term only for those whose art form is clearly traditional, avers that Traylor was not continuing any folk tradition, and places him instead in a class he termed "obsessive artists".<sup>10</sup> That Traylor painted every day, and all day, for some three years, was apparently true. Did he show an obsessive need to repeat the same drawing or the same topic? Although he returned to basic themes many times, the paintings vary in subject and in execution, within a limited, but significant, range - including "noble and dignified" animals as well as threatening ones as well as single men and women (occasionally white but generally black), who often seem to be attracted to each other and yet hold each other at a distance. He painted some pleasant events but more often "figural constructions" that suggest violence would soon take place.

Within these constructions, the human figures move gracefully through their space, rhythmically deployed over and under the architectural forms, as if following skillfully designed choreography. They stretch, blend, scurry and gesture with an intensity that seems weirdly comical and belies their destructive activity.<sup>11</sup>

This humor is significant: with it Traylor reveals an important part of himself and, in part, fulfills Hans Kohut's criteria for a healthy self.

---

<sup>9</sup> Dan Cameron, "History and Bill Traylor," *Arts Magazine*, October, 1985, p. 45-51.

<sup>10</sup> On "Folk Tradition" see, for example, the essay in the exhibition catalogue, Margaret Lynne Ausfeld, *Bill Traylor*, Montgomery Museum of Fine Art, Montgomery, Alabama, 1982.

<sup>11</sup> Lynne Ausfeld, *op.cit.*

Shannon, virtually the only recorded witness to Traylor's character, has noted that "As a man Traylor was right with himself."<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding these and other perceptive comments, the extensive body of Traylor's work, although now recognized as very valuable, has not been adequately analyzed. It is recognized that Traylor moved rapidly from drawing simple objects, to animals of great character; that he then began picturing narrative events. From these often complicated stories, he moved on to highly symbolic drawings that, for example, depicted men with trees growing from their limbs as well as 'tree-like' constructions that fairly clearly represent human beings. Far too little attention has been paid to the nature of this symbolism or to the worldview exemplified in virtually all the drawings

Mikhail Bakhtin, referring to works of art, maintained that

In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding - in time, in space, in culture.<sup>13</sup>

While I am certainly located outside Traylor's time, and space, I feel I should confess that in some very significant way Traylor's works have gotten inside me: I am obsessed with them. I have prints of his in almost every room of my house, and in my office. Photographs of him surround me as well. I've traveled to Alabama in hopes of talking with old people who might have known him when he was old and they were quite young. I've visited Benton, the town closest to his plantation home, and attended a local black church. I've even talked on a local black radio program, hoping to reach a wider audience of people who might have known of him. So that while my distance from the subject is very great, my involvement is also fairly deep. I feel compelled to speak of my understanding of his images.

The first gambit I want to suggest to understand creatively (or perhaps more "responsibly" analyze) the work of Traylor, is to address the nature of his signifying universe - the "rhetorical and symbolic vocabulary"

---

<sup>12</sup> Charles Shannon, cited by Meredith Walker, "Bill Taylor: Freed Slave and Folk Artist", *Alabama Heritage*, Fall, 1989. p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> "...[O]ur real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are *others*.", in Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas, Austin, 1986. p. 7. See Deborah J. Haynes, *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts*, Cambridge University, Cambridge, 1995.

or "storehouse of signifying capacities potentially available to" him.<sup>14</sup> We have only a limited number of clues to that signifying universe from Traylor's recorded words, but many more from his pictures. We also have a number of narratives of other blacks who lived through similar circumstances, and 'circumstantial evidence' that can be used to infer a good deal about his signifying universe, and world view.

It is apparently not known when Traylor's family was brought to America. White Traylor's have reported that his father, William, was "from Georgia", and his mother, Sally, "from Virginia".<sup>15</sup> (Bill was clearly named after his father, and named a daughter after his mother.) It seems likely that he was third generation American, if not more. While he probably grew up with parents and siblings, both real and fictive kin, and many black children, the white family remembers him as having been close to Marion Hartwell Traylor (1862-1904), son of the man who had purchased the Alabama plantation he was born on, and owner of Bill Traylor's parents and of Bill Traylor.<sup>16</sup> This evidence suggests that Bill Traylor's world, while it is likely to have been overwhelmingly black, was, in some small part, a mixed black-white one in early childhood.<sup>17</sup>

The black people enslaved on the Traylor property walked some five miles into the town of Benton to attend a Baptist church. (The white Traylor's went to Mt. Gilead Church in Trickem.) While it is most likely that Bill went with black kin to the Benton church, and experienced revivals, as well as baptisms in the nearby river, as an old man Bill Traylor was known not to be religious, and in fact a newspaper reporter claimed Traylor told him that "he doesn't know if there is a heaven or not, and that spirits don't talk to him."<sup>18</sup> The black universe of belief and practice was, however, an integral part of his "rhetorical and symbolic vocabulary". He learned very rapidly how to express this universe with a simply drawn but

---

<sup>14</sup> Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry*, Yale University, New Haven, 1982. p. 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> Rosa Lyon Traylor (widow of John B. Traylor, Marion's son) to Traylor's grandchild, Martha Deeks, July 1992.

<sup>16</sup> The original settler was George Hartwell Traylor, born in South Carolina in 1801. He moved to the Alabama site in 1825 or 1826, and died in 1881. Census of 1900 lists at least two other black Traylor families on the same property. It is likely they were close relatives, although unrelated slaves of the family may have "carried" the same last name.

<sup>17</sup> See the autobiography of Samuel Clagett Busey (1828-1901) for a white man's description of his friendships with two black children: "An Autobiographical Sketch of Early Life" published in Busey, *A Souvenir...*, Washington, D.C., n.p., 1896. p. 18-80.

<sup>18</sup> *The Montgomery Advertiser*, March 31, 1940. His granddaughter reported that she did not know of his going to church.

very complicated symbolism. In doing this he broke through a "wall of silence for his spirit".<sup>19</sup>

The most powerful evidence for this is that Traylor, who was neither saved nor seeking salvation in traditional Christian terms, painted the crucifixion.<sup>20</sup> His Christ, whose arms *are* the wooden crucifix, is, so far as I know, the first painting of a *black* Jesus by an American, and the only one extant by an ex-slave. Traylor, who had been a slave when a child, and a share cropper in the worst period of Jim Crow, "Lynch" and the Great Depression, whose two wives were dead, whose some twenty children were scattered, created a savior whose body grew out of and into the wood of his cross. In doing this, Traylor, whose silences with whites, at least, were great, speaks to us powerfully. This figure suggests the meaning Jesus had for him: His Jesus was black kin, but was neither the tortured bleeding Christ, or the untried babe in arms. He was the yoke and the rooted tree and the black man at the same time as he was a silent Christ whose face is turned away.

Traylor also depicted black congregations, each around a circle.<sup>21</sup> Inside of each circle was a figure - apparently a preacher, while outside or bordering each circle were figures, some more realistic, some more ethereal - perhaps the saved and the not saved, or live spirits and the dead. Here the Christian and the African merge identifiably. Africans brought to America their circle dances and circle symbolism and revitalized them with Christian meaning.<sup>22</sup> In 1865 William Allen described a shout such as Traylor is likely to have seen and participated in:

For some time one can hear, though at a good distance, the vociferous exhortation or prayer of the presiding elder or of the brother who has a gift that way....and at regular intervals one hears the elder "deaconing" a hymnbook, hymn, which is sung two lines at a time, and whose wailing cadences, borne on the night air, are indescribably melancholy. But the benches are pushed back to the wall when the formal meeting is over, and old

---

<sup>19</sup> The phrase is from Chaim Aron Kaplan's *Warsaw Diary*, and is cited by George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966*, Faber and Faber, London, 1967. p. 185.

<sup>20</sup> Traylor actually painted several crucifixion scenes. These comments are about the one that is pictured in Maresca and Ricco, *op.cit.*, p. 92.

<sup>21</sup> See pictures in Maresca and Ricco, *op.cit.*, p. 88, 141.

<sup>22</sup> On the circle see Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, Oxford University, Oxford. p. 19

and young, men and women, ...all stand up in the middle of the floor, and when the "sperichil" is struck up, begin first walking and by-and-by shuffling round, one after the other, in a ring. The foot is hardly taken from the floor, and the progression is mainly due to a jerking hitching motion,.... Sometimes they dance silently, sometimes as they shuffle they sing....<sup>23</sup>

Thomas Higginson described the shouts he witnessed in his Black Regiment in 1862 as far more exciting events:

...men begin to quiver and dance, other join, a circle forms, winding monotonously round some one in the centre; some 'heel and toe' tumultuously, others merely tremble and stagger on, others stoop and rise, others whirl, others caper sideways, all keep steadily circling like dervishes....<sup>24</sup>

In Traylor's circles, the "some one" in the center appears to be a Christian minister, his symbolic marking often his top hat, but he points with a very African motion: an extended and raised arm and a pointing finger.<sup>25</sup> In the ancient paintings in the cave of Mbafu, in Bas-Zaïre, the central, most important figure, lifts both his arms, one hand holding a small stick and the other a large staff, signifying that "...he sends his words towards cosmos, where God and the ancestors will judge him by his deeds."<sup>26</sup> Men, pointing fingers or staffs, dominate a large number of Traylor's paintings. They are sending out their words from his painful world. It is not clear who is to be judged, although so many are clearly being pursued for their sinful ways - drinkers are most prominent among them. Drinking is the subject of a very large number of Traylor's drawings,

---

<sup>23</sup> William F. Allen, *Slave Songs in the U.S.*, A. Simpson, New York, 1867. XIII-XIV.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, Collier Books, New York, 1962. p. 41.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Ferris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds*, National Gallery Art, Washington, D.C., 1982. p. 172.

<sup>26</sup> Thompson, *Four Moments*, p. 46.



and drink was apparently once a problem for Traylor himself. He told Shannon that "What little sense I did had whiskey took away."<sup>27</sup> In the pictures, many others, perhaps guilty of other crimes, or perhaps victims of drunken violators, run from the wrath and imminent violence of their top-hatted antagonists, who often hold hatchets in their raised hands. Traylor identified one of the men chasing a possum as a drunken preacher, so that it is very possible he saw some of these other pursuers as inebriated, and the pursued as victims rather than sinners.

While many of Traylor's works have preacher-like figures, there is not an obvious Christian content in most. On the contrary, most of Traylor's works seem to be secular. However, one of the most extraordinary aspects that those commenting on Traylor's work have overlooked thus far, is his depicting of small figures tied by cords or sticks to many of his larger figures.<sup>28</sup> I believe these small figures are the visual representations of the "little me" - an African perception of a separable soul. "The African might say that 'in each thing is another thing', and that 'in every man there is a little man'."<sup>29</sup> Many African Americans of Traylor's generation reported that in trance experiences "a little me had come out of the big me, and traveled to hell and to heaven." They said that "there is a man in a man," and that "... I saw myself in two bodies. Little me was standing looking down on the old" me, and "Little Mary came out of Old Mary."<sup>30</sup>

When African Americans recognized that there had always been this little soul inside them, it was often an enormously strengthening realization. It tied them to their African past, and at the same time it promised a better future. It is very important to recognize that Traylor seems to portray this African and African American experience of soul life. While the little me has been written about and referred to in autobiographies

---

<sup>27</sup> Charles Shannon, Bill Taylor's Triumph, *Art and Antiquities*, February, 1988. p. 61.

<sup>28</sup> See Maresca and Ricco, *op.cit.*, p.86 and the picture accompanying this essay.

<sup>29</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Psychology: A Comparative Study of Psychological and Religious Thought*, Lutterworth Press, London.1951. p. 17, 18.

<sup>30</sup> See A.P. Watson and C.H. Johnson, eds. *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Negro Ex-Slaves*, Pilgrim Press, Philadelphia, 1969. p. 63, 151; Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1979. p. 108-111. See Ralph Ellison, "Flying Home" 1944, for his use of little me image. Harold Bloom discusses the use made of this concept by W.E.B. DuBois, Elijah Muhammad, and others, in *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1992. p. 238-243.

as well as in fiction, Traylor's is the only pictorial rendering by a modern artist that I know of.<sup>31</sup>

What did Bill Traylor understand as the purpose or function of his picturing of these soul-figures and of his art in general? He is reported to have said of those who purchased pictures from him, "Sometimes they buys 'em when they don't even need 'em."<sup>32</sup> Who needed them? What need could they fulfill? I believe that Traylor understood that he himself needed them, and that they enabled him to realize actions he could not realize in any other way. His telling comment that: "I wanted to be plowing so bad today. I draw'd me a man plowing," suggests the personal role that they played.

I would suggest that, in order to understand Traylor's universe better, we approach these paintings *as if* they were Kongo *Minkisi* - objects invested with power. *Minkisi* were BaKongo containers for forces that could help people. Traditionally they were "wooden figures, clay pots, large snail shells, and bundles wrapped in raffia cloth."<sup>33</sup> Traylor's drawings were certainly not traditional *Minkisi*, and I am *not* suggesting that Traylor regarded them as *Minkisi*, but he did recognize their power to affect changes in him. I think it can be shown that Traylor may well have intended them to help other people as well, and that his construction of his pictures paralleled the construction of *Minkisi*.

Luc DeHeusch has defined a *minkisi* as containing "spirits of the dead metonymically caught in a metaphorical trap."<sup>34</sup> There can be no doubt but that Traylor caught the spirits of dead animals. His pictures were his traps. In many cases he identified his subjects. They were real to him - animals he had lived with and known. He talked of their character and behavior: One mule he noted was a sullen animal, another, prideful. "Gits that pride from his mama," he said.<sup>35</sup> What of people? Were particular people caught in his traps as well? (And did Bill Traylor get his pride from his mama?) His granddaughter recounts that when she asked him to draw

---

<sup>31</sup> There is a colonial drawing of an African with a small figure between his legs that may well be a rendering of a little me figure. See Elizabeth Reilly, *Dictionary of Colonial American Printers' Ornaments*.

<sup>32</sup> Traylor, cited by Shannon, in Maresca and Ricco, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> *Astonishment and Power: Kongo Minkisi and the Art of Renée Stout*, National Museum of Art, April 28, 1993 and January 2, 1994.

<sup>34</sup> Cited by Wyatt MacGaffey, "Complexity, Astonishment and Power: The Visual Vocabulary of Kongo Minkisi," in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14, 1988. p. 190.

<sup>35</sup> Traylor, cited by Shannon, in Maresca and Ricco, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

her a lady, he responded by drawing her *as a lady*. Was he presenting her with a realizable future? I suspect that virtually all his figures represented particular people he had known. I think he saw his work as demanding his truth telling, much as a written autobiography might. His narrative pictures were narrating events he had experienced, and his visual statements, were statements he believed to be true. In some cases he was probably giving advice, in most pictures there were strong warnings of probable outcomes.

"A *minkisi*...was basically a container for the forces represented in it," much as the body was believed to be a housing for the little me, or spirit. "The visual impression of containedness is itself one of the basic metaphors [of *Minkisi*], a physical representation of the idea that the powers in question have been captured and remain under control; also that their action is to capture and control hostile forces."<sup>36</sup> As can still be seen in many of the pictures, Traylor began drawing each human figure as a box. Human beings as box-like containers, empty containers and boxes, and containers in which there are confined human beings are the basic visual metaphors in Traylor's drawings. The impression of containedness in vessels is overwhelming in his works as it is in *Minkisi*. So many of the people he pictured are restrained in small spaces and cannot get free.

Traditional *Minkisi* often contained the head or feathers of a bird. Birds are very often at the head of other African constructions as well. In many African cultures "Spiritual forces are associated with birds."<sup>37</sup> A bird is often on the head of a healer's staff, to show how powerful the healer is. A bird represents the Yoruba god of herbal medicine, Osanyin. The Yoruba believe that a bird also represents the soul, and this symbolism traveled with Yoruba to Cuba, the West Indies and North America.<sup>38</sup> It is therefore not surprising that birds appear in a great number of Traylor's works. They are most often at the top, moving to the right: They are going in the right direction, signaling spiritual growth.

Traditional *Minkisi* were also often constructed in the shape of a black, male, dog, "which signifies aggressive intent by its bared teeth...."<sup>39</sup> "A dog or dog-like *Minkisi* is often used by Kongo mystics to see beyond our world."<sup>40</sup> Enormous black, male, dogs, with ferocious bared teeth,

---

<sup>36</sup> MacGaffey, "Complexity", p. 191.

<sup>37</sup> MacGaffey, "Complexity", p. 193. See also Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, Vintage Books, New York, 1984.

<sup>38</sup> Thompson, *Flash*, p. 11

<sup>39</sup> MacGaffey, "Complexity", p. 199

<sup>40</sup> Thompson, *Flash*, p. 121.

abound in Traylor's works. They overwhelm the men 'leading them'. [Figure 1]



**Figure 1: Bill Taylor (1852?-1949) - Untitled (House with Figures, Animals) - July 1939**  
Colored pencil, pencil/cardboard - 22x13 1/2"  
Courtesy Luise Ross Gallery, New York

In many parts of Africa, "masquerades are thought of as spirits made visible." Traylor also made spirits visible, both by masking them, and by unmasking them. And he knew that the pictures (which he saw as having a life of their own, apart from himself) could help others to unmask themselves.

Apart from the role that his paintings may have played in his own life, and the power that they may have encompassed for those who knew their symbolism, several of Traylor's paintings seem to document both rituals and paraphernalia that are, so far as I know, not known to have existed in Alabama in his period. Traylor's paintings of costumed bodies and masked faces suggest rituals whites did not see and that historians do not have knowledge of. Were they part of 'plays' for the dead? Traylor's depiction of what can be viewed as a three-dimensional libation vessel (with a bird at its top) takes on its meaning only when compared with other African artifacts.<sup>41</sup> Many of Traylor's paintings contain clay vessels, pictured by themselves, on tables, as well as on a man's head. Thompson reminds us that "Clay pots have... always been classical containers of *minkisi*."<sup>42</sup> Black Alabamans no doubt practiced rites that we have no record of.

Traylor's pictures also suggest that Voudou practitioners had been part of his world. Designs that have been recorded in Haiti find a simplified echo in his work: I identify what I believe to be the table set for ritual acts, and at least one visual symbol, a symbol similar to an ancient African sign of "a fork in the road with a diamond-form glyph in its center...[which is] a sign of the cosmos...."that recurs repeatedly in both Haitian Voudou and in many of Traylor's works.<sup>43</sup> Many of Traylor's geometrical constructions resemble other Voudou symbols, *Vèvè* drawn to summon a spirit.<sup>44</sup> A Voudou vocabulary was extant, and it would appear that Traylor knew parts of it. Perhaps Traylor had written in the sand, or with charcoal, long before he sat on his box in Montgomery. It is known that he worked with a surveying team in the 1880s. It is likely that he experimented with writing

---

<sup>41</sup> See Maresca and Ricco, *op.cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>42</sup> Thompson, *Flash*, p.121.

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, *Moments*, p. 45; See Maresca and Ricco, *op.cit.*, p. 39, 44.

<sup>44</sup> What may be the sign of Legba, the central pole of a Voudou temple, and the sign of "water from above" can be found in many paintings. See Milo Rigaud, *Ve-Ve: Diagrammes Rituels Du Voudou*, French and European Publications Inc., New York, 1974. p. 73, 459, 471, 472; Maresca and Ricco, *op.cit.*, p. 23, 105, 153. Thompson, *Four Moments*, p. 155. In Haiti, such drawings are made on the ground with chalk or cornmeal. Masonic symbols may also have influenced Traylor. Masons drew images on the ground, including circles, and harnesses similar to those he pictured on dogs. Today, many blacks in the area of Benton are members of the Masons.

in some form, on the ground, or with homemade charcoal, such as he used to draw when he was an old man. I think it is highly likely that he had seen other African Americans do power writing, and "knew," with a part of himself, that he was doing this as well. In part, his participation in this African tradition may well have been done without conscious awareness. He was doing what he had to do, and bringing all of himself to the task. One of his pictures also eerily echoes an African pictograph: what Shannon labeled "Man behind bars" can be read as the Ejagham pictograph "Man being whipped."<sup>45</sup> His self was, in great part, African, but we have no knowledge of how consciously aware he was of this. It is very likely that, as Thompson documents for parts of Africa and the West Indies, enslaved African Americans drew pictographs and Voodoo symbols, and passed on an African American symbolic universe by visual as well as by oral and kinesthetic means.

Traylor's early pictures show animals of power, strength and beauty, but his dogs were already ominous. When he began to draw people, great tension was introduced. (His plowing man, himself in essence, is one of the few tension-free pictures of people.) His small homes, described by some as picturing black life, are almost always containers for drinkers, boxes from which the drinkers do not emerge. Birds on the roof seem to signal that their souls have been judged wanting, as do the many "little me" or perhaps "ghost"-soul figures. The former slaves interviewed by the W.P.A. widely spoke of "ghosts." Henry Cheatem described how a "big brindle dog" ghost had appeared to his wicked father. His father snapped his fingers at the dog, and then suddenly died. "Some folks say dat dere ain't no sich things as gostes, but I know dere is, 'caze dere is good spirits an' bad spirits."<sup>46</sup> Traylor's constructions picture such spirits - little me figures, huge menacing dogs, and spirit birds: They warn of death and destruction.

Dan Cameron has described a "poignant" picture done after Traylor's leg had been amputated, a period in which his work "shows a marked loss of definition and compositional energy":

*Self-Portrait with Woman* shows him one-legged, floating with shoes adjacent to his companion's knees...and gesticulating wildly, eyes rolling. She is half-akimbo, clutching an umbrella; her head is pulled back turkey-like from Traylor's, as if he, in

---

<sup>45</sup> Thompson, *Flash*, p. 245.

<sup>46</sup> Henry Cheatem "Alabama and Indiana Narratives", in *The American Slave Composite Autobiography*, ed. George P. Rawick, Greenwood, Westport, Conn., 1972. Vol. 6, p. 70.

mid-sentence, still emanated last night's  
whiskey.<sup>47</sup>

The work of Bill Traylor, some 1,200 drawings done between 1939 and 1942, can be seen as naïf and yet wonderfully modern, as it has been widely appreciated. But I think we have a responsibility to see it in the light of an African American signifying system or worldview. In this perspective, it is an archive of memory and of creativity; of communal and personal development; and of joy and great pain.

---

<sup>47</sup> Cameron, "History and Bill Traylor," in *Arts Magazine*, October, 1985. p. 47.