

He was born a slave, and died penniless. Now forgers are ruining his artistic legacy

Steven Spielberg and Alice Walker love Bill Traylor's work. But dozens of fakes are circulating, writes *Dalya Alberge*

When Steven Spielberg finished filming Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, her novel about the struggles of African American women in the last century, he gave Walker a drawing. It was by Bill Traylor, who died in 1949, having faced his own struggles as a black man born into slavery in Alabama, working on plantations and living on the streets.

That drawing, titled *Man on White*, *Woman on Red*, sold at Christie's New York in January for \$507,000. Now that record-breaking price, along with interest sparked by a recent exhibition at the Smithsonian in Washington, is causing concern among art experts. Many of them hailed Traylor as one of a number of black artists who are getting long-overdue recognition, but now they fear this achievement threatens to be overshadowed by what they describe as a "proliferation" of forgeries.

Richard Polsky, a specialist in art authentication, told the *Observer* that he has spotted dozens of forgeries circulating in the market, while there are only about 1,200 known genuine drawings: "There's a fear that the forgeries will detract from his [Traylor's] legacy."

Traylor was in his 80s when he first started drawing on scraps of cardboard and other material scavenged from the streets. Many of his works depict silhouettes of people and animals and reflect the pain of life as well as its humour.

"He was young when he was liberated from slavery, but the pain has to be there when you've been another man's property, and he was always in poverty," said Polsky.

Traylor was homeless, living at one point in an undertaker's shop. In his drawings, he was a great observer of the state of the Deep South. They show everyday street life, people arguing, a preacher preaching, a man getting drunk holding a bottle of whisky, a dog chasing a cat. "It was such ordinary stuff, but there was a truth," said Polsky.

Traylor's talent was spotted by Charles Shannon, a white artist in his 20s, who befriended him after seeing him on the streets of Montgomery in 1939. Although Shannon had limited funds, he gave Traylor money, paint and pencils, and preserved around 1,200 drawings, even mounting a local show. In 1942, Shannon turned



ABOVE
Traylor's Man on White, Woman on Red.
Christie's

down an offer of a dollar for the small drawings and two dollars for the larger ones from the then director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

But Polsky recalled that, as recently as 1984, when he showed Traylor's drawings in the gallery he was running in San Francisco, he struggled to sell anything: "You couldn't give them away."

Interest in Traylor rose, however. Even before the Christie's sale, his major drawings were already selling for six-figure sums and forgeries were emerging. His work hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York, among other collections, but the \$507,000 sale "blew things open", Polsky said.

Spielberg is believed to have

Stephen Spielberg gave Alice Walker, right, the drawing after completing the film The Color Purple.



come across his Walker gift through a New York gallery, Hirschl & Adler Modern, listed as the previous owner in the Christie's sale catalogue.

Ahead of the Christie's sale, Walker recalled Spielberg's words in giving her the drawing: "He was hopeful he said, with a smile, that when I saw the film, I wouldn't feel like the angry *Woman on Red*. I answered, with a laugh, 'I hope so too.'" He need not have worried. She described his film as "a masterpiece" and the drawing as "a gift from someone I consider a genius with soul". Last December, in explaining her decision to sell it, she said: "My spirit tells me it is time for it to find a new home."

Polsky, owner of Richard Polsky Art Authentication, focuses on celebrated American artists including Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

He is now taking on Traylor, having been approached by fellow specialists.

Carl Hammer, a gallery owner in Chicago, who has shown Traylor's work since 1980, called the forgeries "very disconcerting".

He described Traylor's drawings as "the embodiment of his



experience of being a slave", noting that they were much more "soulful" than the forged versions: "Too often, the forger's works have an almost silly, gimmicky, too playful quality to them. Traylor's work is the cumulative end result of a man whose life experienced slavery, being black and living in the South under 'Jim Crow'.

"Whatever humour Traylor may have imbued into any of his pieces, it had a dark and sombre edge to it.

Most forgers see depictions of the Black South in the way that a majority of mid-20th-century white folks viewed the Black experience."

He paid tribute to Shannon for discovering the work and for supporting Traylor in his late years with his own limited funds: "Had that not happened, the work probably would never have been discovered and would have been lost, burned or thrown away."

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BELOW
One of the fake art works that recently came on the market.