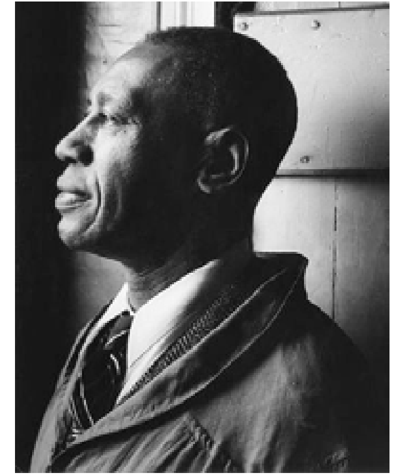
HORACE PIPPIN'S SUNDAY MORNING BREAKFAST

By Robert Cozzolino

A veteran of World War I who started making art around the age of 40, Horace Pippin went from exhibiting at a community art center in 1937 to achieving international renown in less than a decade. Pippin started painting for his own enjoyment, developed a broad range of subject matter, and resisted pressure to paint to a market. In his short but intense career, Pippin was claimed and promoted by powerful personalities in the art world, including collector Dr. Albert Barnes, curators Christian Brinton and Holger Cahill, critics Sidney Janis and Selden Rodman, artists Julius Bloch, Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones and N.C. Wyeth, and dealers Edith Halpert and Robert Carlen. Carlen enthusiastically promoted Pippin to collectors and curators but his proprietary attitude about the artist was limiting and exploitative to some observers.[1]

Among Pippin's most eager collectors were Hollywood personalities, including Edward G. Robinson, Charles Laughton, and director Albert Lewin, who owned *Sunday Morning Breakfast*. Lewin made a series of dark, highly aestheticized literary films exploring art and illusion, including adaptations of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945) and Guy de Maupassant's *Bel Ami* (1947). Lewin's friendships among artists and composers led him to commission original work for his films. Pippin's reputation was such that he was among twelve artists Lewin invited to participate in an international competition to determine the painting that would appear in *The Private Affairs of Bel Ami.* Pippin, along with artists such as Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, and Dorothea Tanning, made a painting depicting the Temptation of Saint Anthony for the competition.[2]

Pippin was a formidable defender of his agency against white art world interests and expectations. This was a courageous and confident stance in a society that sanctioned prejudice towards African Americans. He accepted commissions and made powerful images about political and social injustice. Savvy enough to understand the tastes of specific collectors, Pippin nudged Carlen to offer particular paintings to Barnes. Barnes became one of the most devoted supporters of Pippin, establishing links and introductions that provided new opportunities for the artist beyond the Philadelphia area. Pippin spent time at the Foundation but seems to have been only mildly impressed by what he found there and resisted the pedagogy of its school. Artist Claude Clarke, who studied at the Barnes Foundation from 1939–44 recalled that Pippin "was impressed by some of the things that he saw at the foundation but he felt that after he had seen enough he went back to what he was doing . . . Sometimes Barnes would call [Pippin] to give him a suggestion and then Pippin would say to Barnes, 'Do I tell you how to run your foundation? Don't tell me how to paint.'"[3]



Horace Pippin

This image of Pippin contrasts with the way in which he was depicted in the media during his lifetime and the manner in which his work has often been characterized. Pippin is often discussed as a self-taught exemplary; in the 1940s he was "primitive" and "naïve" and today though the terms have changed, he remains tucked down beneath that rubric. The persistence of this discourse around Pippin's place reveals how his legacy has been steered towards assumptions of difference for market reasons as much as a lingering racial agenda in the art world. As late as the time of the landmark exhibition *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (1976)

a writer asserted, “Horace Pippin was a true primitive and as such his work is self contained and scarcely affected by the culture of his time.”[4] Artist Kerry James Marshall describes the predicament, not only for Pippin but other black artists, of having their achievements inherently qualified by being subdivided into separate categories rather than considered simply “American artists.” For Marshall what is at stake is a loss of the agency Pippin exerted, despite the environment in which he worked. Because art historical narratives have been controlled by those with specific agendas (“Pippin is ultra modern” or “Pippin is an intuitive naïve”), “The cost to Black people world wide for not being the drivers of this kind of modernism has been very high since at least the fifteenth century. Must we always be passengers carried along on the highways of progress, or can we drive ourselves toward tomorrow?”[5]

Sunday Morning Breakfast reveals the degree to which Pippin achieved a balance of observation and memory, vernacular subject and social critique, interlocking forms and tactile detail. It is one of about a dozen attentively made warm interiors that Pippin painted in the 1940s depicting Black families at home in single multi-use rooms. Each is filled with gestures of affection, evidence of hand-made objects such as tablecloths, clothing and rugs, and notes of specificity that bring each scenario to life. *Sunday Morning Breakfast* includes details that trigger the senses: a kettle whistling on boil, steam emanating from its spout, a steady orange glow from the stove, steam rising from the freshly plated food about to be served to the eager children at the table, and a fancy clock that once can imagine ticking out the time. Other objects around the room suggest stories

about the history and culture of the family shown: a good luck horseshoe pointed skyward above the door, fallen plaster and a torn curtain, and elaborately patterned rugs that add color to the environment.

From Pippin's admission, these interiors seem to have been in part based on memories of his childhood in Goshen, New York.[6] They may relate to his statement about inspiration and process that, "The pictures I have already painted come to me in my mind, and if to me it is a worth while [sic] picture I paint it. I go over the picture several times in my mind and when I am ready to paint it I have all the details I need."[7] Pippin was raised by strong and determined female family members, his father absent from the picture. As a result, perhaps, most of these paintings center on women. This is the rare interior that includes an adult male. He sits at the periphery of the scene, taking off his shoes after returning home or preparing to leave for a day of work. Although included as part of the family, his sour expression and physical disconnection from the woman and children suggest psychological distance. While it is tempting to read an autobiographical reflection in this figure, Pippin could simply be showing the genre vignette of a grumpy man wishing he could return to bed.

Pippin's carefully designed interiors provided his audience a glimpse of the "integrity and nuances of African American life" in a way that contrasted with caricatured imagery in popular culture.[8] Pippin's interiors, like the artist himself, reflected a community gradually defining its role in an American society that sought to impose definition from the outside. While absent of explicit

references to the historical events addressed in his other work *Sunday Morning Breakfast* advanced a political position for an audience full of assumptions and contradictions. By showing his predominantly white art world audience the ordinary routine of a nurturing and potentially productive black family, he refused to reinforce the prevalent images of African American life he countered throughout his career.

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1 See Judith E. Stein, "An American Original," in Judith E. Stein, et, al. *I Tell My Heart: The Art of Horace Pippin* (The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia and Universe Publishing, 1993), 32-33.
2 For more on Lewin see Susan Felleman, *Botticelli in Hollywood: The Films of Albert Lewin* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997). For more on the Bel Ami competition see Robert Cozzolino, "Every Picture Should Be A Prayer: The Art of Ivan Albright." Ph.D dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2006, chapter 4.
3 Clarke, quoted in Stein, "An American Original," 15.
4 David C. Driskell, *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 69.
5 Kerry James Marshall, "Horace Pippin: The Way I See Him," in Audrey Lewis, ed., *Horace Pippin: The Way I See It* (Brandywine River Museum of Art, and Scala Publishers, Inc., 2015), 5.
6 Judith Wilson, "At Work and at Play," in Stein, et al. *I Tell My Heart,* p. 143.
7 "Horace Pippin," in Holger Cahill et al., *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938), 125.
8 John W. Roberts, "Horace Pippin and the African American Vernacular," *Cultural Critique* 41 (Winter, 1999), 22-23.