

# Chicago Tribune

## 'Outsider' Artist, And His Art, Still A Mystery

By Jay Pridmore  
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It seems like a good time to ask what "outsider art" really has to teach the world, now that its popularity is making it more mainstream. It's a question that more people will ask this month-Black History Month-as the Art Institute opens "Force of a Dream: The Drawings of Joseph Yoakum," the museum's first exhibit on Chicago's first recognized "outsider."

One of the men who discovered Yoakum says that answers don't come easily. "It is the most fragile kind of art," said Tom Brand, a printer and painter who saw Yoakum's drawings in a basement coffeehouse on the South Side and broached the idea of the artist's first gallery exhibit, which took place at the now-defunct Sherbeyn Gallery on North Clark Street in 1968.

What Brand means is that you can't analyze outsiders, or imitate them, without losing something. "Once you become aware of the process, everything changes," he said. It is as if the outsider cracks under the weight of teachers, critics and most especially self-consciousness.

Therein lies the charm of these 100 drawings by Yoakum, who never cracked. He died in 1972, not long after he was "discovered" and exhibited. Yoakum drew landscapes and portraits while seeming to be blissfully unconcerned with the rest of world. If anything, he was amused that scholars studied him. He might have told them they were looking in the wrong place for lessons about the artistic process. His drawings-childlike yet haunting-are often mysterious beyond words.

Mystery also shrouds Yoakum's personal history, which is remembered as a mix of fact and fiction. He said he was born on an Indian reservation (in either 1886 or 1888) and was a Navajo, though he also described himself as an "old black man." Early in life, he said, he ran off and joined the circus where he might have gotten his start in art by drawing circus posters. He said that he became personal valet to John Ringling, the famous impresario.

By 1908 he was on the road or at sea "as a hobo and stowaway" who visited every continent, he said, except Antarctica.

As many of his landscapes depict places as diverse as the Himalayas, Argentina and the Columbia River in Oregon, his early travels would explain this range of subjects. In addition to traveling, he fought in World War I, he said, with the armies that "drove Von Hindenberg back out of France."

His discovered drawings were all made after he settled in Chicago with a second wife at a relatively old age. Some accounts indicate that he began drawing, with crayons, chalks and colored pencils, as late as 1962, when he was in his 70s.

His subjects were the people and places of his memory and perhaps his imagination. He said that he was inspired by God, and each drawing was "a spiritual unfoldment."

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The mysteries of Yoakum's past probably will never be resolved. But just as his travels seem to have a blend of real experiences and imagined ones, his drawings have a similar otherworldly mark.

When painter Jim Nutt, a leader of the "Chicago Imagists," was introduced to Yoakum's drawings (then called "primitive" or "naive") in the 1960s, he thought he saw faces hidden in the landscapes. Yoakum would only admit, "If you think they are there, then they are."

At the Art Institute, Mark Pascale, who has curated the current show, finds something "highly consistent" about the works produced by Yoakum, which is different from some "outsiders"-in some other cases, an artist's work might range from amazingly powerful to scratchings on a pad. "Yoakum controlled every aspect of the surface," Pascale said. He believes that Yoakum's gift was stronger and more intense than that of many other outsiders.

The question is: What is that gift and where did it come from? There are no final answers.

Among clues is Yoakum's intense spirituality. "The Bible is my biggest storybook," he said, and there are biblical scenes in his work. He prayed every day. He also drew nearly every day during the relatively short time he was an artist.

Technique was inconsequential, apparently. Inspiration was everything. "I paint in anything that will make a color," he said on another occasion. "What I don't get, God didn't intend me to have, and what I get is God's blessing."

Yoakum was a great idealist. "Why can't people realize that we're all God-made and sustained and become more considerable (sic) toward each other and make this world a decent place to live in again," he told reporter Norman Mark in a 1967 article in the *Chicago Daily News*. Drawing for him seems to have been a way to imagine a harmonious world.

If Yoakum's idealism was ever challenged, it must have been shortly after his work was discovered by the commercial art business.

His works were selling, and some were going for \$200 and more.

But reports are that he never realized much in the way of money from his art or his newly found fame, which led to a one-man exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York just before his death in 1972.

Despite everything he kept on drawing as if it were an intense psychological need. "I had to do something, or I'd go crazy," he said.

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"Force of a Dream: The Drawings of Joseph Yoakum" runs from Feb. 11 to Aug. 6 at the Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan Ave. Museum hours are 10:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. weekdays (until 8 p.m. Tuesdays); 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays; and noon to 5 p.m. Sundays. Suggested admission to the museum is \$6.50, \$3.25 for students, seniors and children. Tuesdays are free to all. For information call 312-443-3600.