

David Zwirner to present the exhibition
Bill Traylor: Works from The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation,
with proceeds benefiting Harlem Children's Zone

February 22–April 13, 2024
537 West 20th Street, 2nd Floor, New York



Bill Traylor, *Man Wearing Maroon and Blue with Bottle*, 1939–1942
All Bill Traylor artwork is used with permission from Bill Traylor Family, Inc.

David Zwirner is pleased to present an exhibition of works by Bill Traylor (c. 1853–1949) at the gallery's 537 West 20th Street location in New York. Marking Traylor's [second solo exhibition with the gallery](#), this presentation is organized in collaboration with The [William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation](#) and is composed of works from the Foundation collection. As part of the Foundation's broader philanthropic mission, proceeds from the sales of works in the exhibition will benefit [Harlem Children's Zone](#).

Born enslaved, Traylor spent much of his life after the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation working as a farm laborer in rural Alabama and, later, as a shoemaker and factory worker in Montgomery. In 1939, at the age of approximately eighty-five, having never previously trained or studied art in any formal way, Traylor began making drawings and works on paper using gouache and other media. Though he continued to make art for the remainder of his life, Traylor was most prolific between 1939 and 1942, creating a body of work that offers a unique and rich registry of his life, experience, and insights.

The works on view in this exhibition will loosely focus on three general themes that are central to the self-taught American artist's oeuvre: animals, figures, and dynamic narrative scenes that have become classified within Traylor's body of work as "exciting events." Rendered in pencil and black charcoal as well as in poster paints that range in color from burnt sienna reds to rich lapis blues, Traylor's distinctive

imagery mixes subjects and iconography from the American South with a strong formalistic treatment of color, shape, and surface. These compositions abstract and distill the world as Traylor experienced it into evocative displays of daily life that are at times filled with joy and exuberance and at others with tension and terror—visually enlivening an era defined by Jim Crow laws and post-Reconstruction racial violence and inequality. As art historian Richard J. Powell notes, “The reason why [Traylor’s] works are so exciting and so vital for us is that they erupt, and they erupt with a kind of passion and a verve and an insistence on telling the story.”¹

Together, these works embody the central elements of Traylor’s practice: in their simplified yet lively compositions, focused palettes, and use of vernacular materials such as supports from found cardboard, they exemplify the subtle complexity and nuanced subversiveness of the artist’s oeuvre. It is through the directness of their depictions that Traylor’s subjects possess their vitality and contemporary relevance; against his deliberately blank backgrounds, the figures, animals, and visual narratives ask to be considered apart from much historical or geographical context. More than just chronicling his observations of a specific time and place, Traylor witnessed—and captured through his art—a world that feels absolutely contemporary. As esteemed art collector William Louis-Dreyfus has noted, “Traylor’s approach to the page, to the old cardboard surfaces he found and his incorporation of scratches, discoloration, tears and irregular shapes of his boards reveal a compositional master at work. From the age of eighty-four to eighty-seven, Bill Traylor produced a body of work which is as American and as important to America’s artistic contribution as are the scrupulously exquisite watercolors of Winslow Homer or the structured paint drippings of Jackson Pollock.”²

Julia Louis-Dreyfus states: “My father was never shy about what he believed in, and, more than anything, he believed in art and justice. That he has found this way to marry those two beliefs is a sweet miracle for him.”

“It is an honor to present a second exhibition dedicated to the work of Bill Traylor and to be doing so with The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation, which has championed the artist’s legacy for over fifty years. As a former teacher, I am particularly excited that proceeds from this exhibition will support Harlem Children’s Zone, which has made such an immense contribution to students in New York City and continues to do so under the incredible leadership of CEO, Kwame Owusu-Kesse, and president, Geoffrey Canada,” states Lucas Zwirner, who organized the exhibition alongside David Zwirner gallery senior director Jonathan Laib.

Kwame Owusu-Kesse, the chief executive officer of Harlem Children’s Zone, states, “While art is a useful tool for teaching our scholars about our history, it also serves as an invaluable mechanism for teaching our scholars about the importance of creativity and innovation. We are thrilled to continue our partnership with WLDF as we both work toward ending intergenerational poverty.”

Established in 2013, The William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation is dedicated to the mission of educating the public about the importance of art and increasing public awareness of self-taught and emerging artists. The Foundation houses the art collection of its eponymous benefactor, the late William Louis-Dreyfus,

¹ Richard J. Powell in *Bill Traylor: Chasing Ghosts* (2018), directed by Jeffrey Wolf and produced by Breakaway Films.

² William Louis-Dreyfus quoted in *The Artist’s Hand: Selections from the William Louis-Dreyfus Foundation*. Exh. cat. (Naples, Florida: The Watson Gallery at Naples Art, 2022), p. 65.

who amassed more than 3,500 works by contemporary, emerging, and self-taught artists over a span of fifty years. The collection is viewable online at <https://www.wldfoundation.org/> and is open to the public by appointment.

In 2015, the Foundation announced its intention to donate proceeds to Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) when it sells works from its collection. HCZ is a pioneering nonprofit that aims to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty through on-the-ground, all-around programming that provides and enhances opportunities for children, families, and communities to thrive in school, work, and life. HCZ serves more than 22,500 children and families annually within the ninety-seven-block area of the Zone's Harlem-based programming, opening pathways to mobility and prosperity with childhood, education, and career programs, community outreach, and wellness initiatives. Serving as a model for other low-income communities, HCZ is transforming the way we fight poverty across the nation and around the world.

Bill Traylor was born around 1853 on a plantation in rural Alabama. In the late 1920s, after seventy years of plantation and farm life, he moved, on his own, to Montgomery. Roughly 1,200 works of Traylor's are extant, many of which came from Charles Shannon, a prominent white Montgomery artist, who met Traylor in 1939 and began to collect and save his work.

During the last decade of his life, Traylor's art was featured in a handful of exhibitions in Montgomery and other locations, but it was not until the late 1970s that he began to achieve widespread recognition. Thirty-six of his works were included in *Black Folk Art in America 1930–1980*, a traveling exhibition that debuted in 1982 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and traveled to seven additional venues through 1984. Since then, Traylor's art has been featured in solo exhibitions and significant thematic group shows at prominent museums including the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts (1982 and 1994–1995); High Museum of Art, Atlanta (1983 and 2012); Randolph Gallery of the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center (1988); Ginza Art Space Tokyo (1991; traveled to Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1992); Kunstmuseum, Bern, Switzerland (1998; traveled to Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 1999); Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, Illinois (2004–2005); and the American Folk Art Museum, New York (2013), among others. In 2018, the Smithsonian American Art Museum organized *Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor*, an overarching retrospective of the artist's life and work. From 2019 to 2023, works by Traylor were on view at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in the "Masters of Popular Painting" gallery as part of *Collection 1880s–1940s*, one of the inaugural exhibitions in the museum's new spaces following its multi-year renovation.

In addition, Traylor's works are included in the collections of notable museums and public institutions including the High Museum of Art, Atlanta; The Menil Collection, Houston; Milwaukee Art Museum; Morris Museum of Art, Augusta, Georgia; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others.

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