

William Lawrence Hawkins

1895–1990

William Hawkins was born in Kentucky on July 27, 1895, as he declared in the signature on nearly all his paintings. He grew up tending livestock and doing chores on his family's prosperous farm, and during those formative years he developed a deep love of animals. His grandfather was the son of a white landowner and his black housekeeper. Hawkins attributed his talents and energy to his "crossed up" heritage—a mix of African American, Native American, and European American.

At the age of 21, Hawkins moved to Columbus, Ohio where he became a jack-of-all-trades, working as a handyman, truck driver, and construction worker, among other things. Although his formal education had ended with the third grade, his curiosity and interest in experimentation stayed with him throughout his life. He began to draw in the 1930s, though what known art works remain are from much later in his career. Using house paints and other scavenged materials, Hawkins first created bold and vibrant renditions of animals and architecture. He constantly scanned newspapers, books, calendars, magazines, advertisements, and other print media for inspiration, amassing a suitcase full of clippings he called his "research." This visual archive was the starting point for nearly all his paintings.

Columbus dealers became aware of Hawkins's work in the 1980s, after one of his paintings was awarded two prizes at the Ohio State Fair. Soon after, he was picked up by a New York gallery, which brought his work to the entire country. Even with this newfound attention, Hawkins continued to prefer working with modest, and often found, materials. His single brush was nearly bristleless, and his suitcase continued to brim with scraps of printed materials.

Hawkins's work is distinguished by its bold color and design and directly engages twentieth-century and contemporary artistic practices and issues. For example, his handling of paint is similar to Jackson Pollock's practice of applying paint on a horizontal surface, and his use of commercial imagery places his work in dialogue with artists such as Stuart Davis, Andy Warhol, and Ed Ruscha. Hawkins, however, developed these techniques himself, typically for reasons unlike those of trained artists.

Of the hundreds of artworks created during Hawkins's life, this guide explores nine works included in the landmark exhibition, *William Hawkins: An Imaginative Geography*, organized by the Figge Art Museum (Davenport, IA) in 2018, and curated by Susan Mitchell Crawley. Hawkins's work, with dual roots in everyday surroundings and popular media, has strong appeal to audiences of all ages. As a self-taught artist of color, his accomplishments serve as inspiration for people of all ages and ethnicities, demonstrating that they too can contribute their creative voices to evolving visual conversations.



Jerusalem of the Bible #1, 1984

Enamel on Masonite

33 x 46 ¼ inches

Collection of Siri von Reis

Jerusalem of the Bible #1, 1984

William Hawkins's *Jerusalem of the Bible #1* takes in a sweeping view of the biblical city of Jerusalem, inspired by a painted panorama of a scene from *Smithsonian* magazine. Throughout his career, the main catalyst for Hawkins's art was the collection of mass media images stored in his research suitcase. For this work, he reinterpreted the source, painting a scene that transcends time, yet is rooted in reality.

Jerusalem of the Bible #1 bursts with energy and life. Fields painted in rich hues of brown and bright green surround warm yellow buildings crowded on the rolling hillsides. Areas of color and shape are stacked one on another in horizontal layers. Fields, buildings, and roads are outlined, which not only defines and controls the shapes but also adds vibrant patterns to the overall image. The painting achieves an asymmetrical balance through the visual tension found in the carefully spaced cypress trees in the lower right of the canvas, which is juxtaposed with the crowded buildings in the upper right of the canvas.

Hawkins's practice of making his name, birthplace, and birth date part of his art is unique. In *Jerusalem of the Bible #1*, the dynamic addition of his signature at the bottom of the canvas is repeated in the bold red title line across the top of the image. These opposing lines cap the top and bottom of the picture, but it is the wood strips, nailed directly to the painting, that frame and contain the entire artwork. The multiplicity of shapes, directional lines and stacked images could result in visual chaos, but Hawkins's clever black and brown patterning of the painted frame is like the blinking lights of a Broadway sign, encouraging the viewer's eye to travel around the picture but always return to the central image.



ASK students why they think William Hawkins included his birthday when he signed his paintings, and whether they have a personal signature for their own artwork.

DISCUSS the value of source imagery and the role it can play in making art.

CREATE a personal image in a shoebox or on a phone or computer.



Conquest of the Moon #1, 1984

Enamel on Masonite

48 x 56 1/8 inches

High Museum of Art, T. Marshall Hahn Collection, 1996.27

Conquest of the Moon #1, 1984



Certain moments in history define an era, signifying a major turning point toward an expanded future. One such landmark moment happened on July 20, 1969, when astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon's surface, placed the flag of the United States of America into the ground, and declared "one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." From then on, people had a different perception of the cosmos and our place within it.

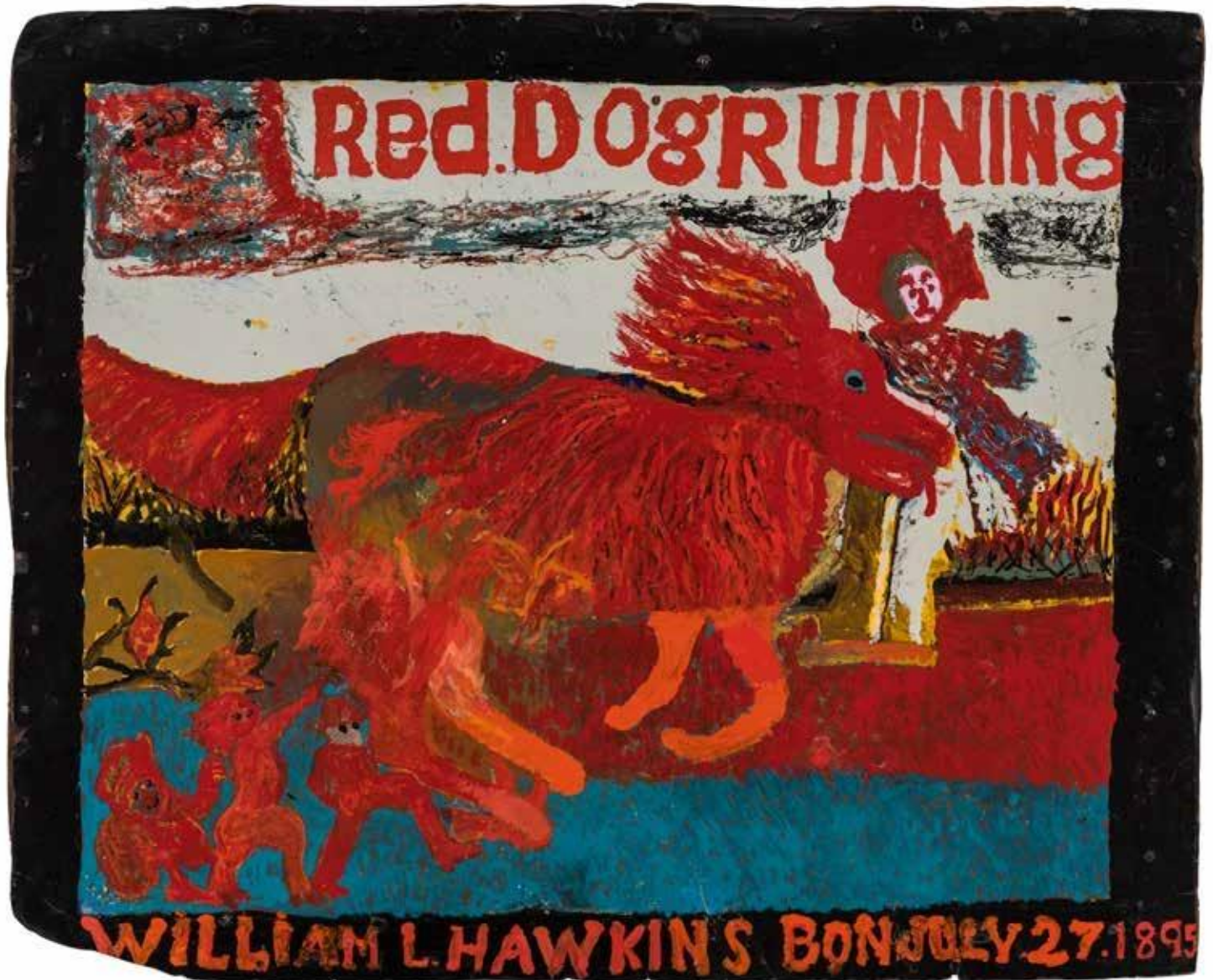
While some artists search for obscure subject matter to bring into the light, Hawkins celebrated the moments and scenes that were at the forefront of our consciousness. Partly, he wanted to highlight subjects he thought would help sell paintings. But it is important to note that he never lapsed into redundancy. Instead, *Conquest of the Moon #1*, exploding in a fantastic and painterly scene looks completely different from his second version of the same subject as well as from his inspiration. For both paintings, Hawkins used as his source another painting: Robert McCall's mural, *A Cosmic View*, installed at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D. C.

Hawkins used vivid colors that contrast with the black background, which evokes a feeling of the boundless void that is space. The rocket blasting off behind the astronaut creates a scene that speaks to humanity's unwavering awe of space travel. Despite the bright greens, reds and yellows Hawkins imposed on the scene, the image is iconic—we recognize it immediately. And we are left with a final puzzle: did Hawkins simply paint facial features on the blank black surface of the helmet shield? Or did he intend to make his astronaut African American? And if so, why?

ASK students what major historical events they've experienced.

DISCUSS how private citizens use cell phones and technology to record events as they are occurring.

CREATE an imaginative moonscape that is inspired by other forms of art.



Red Dog Running #1, 1984

Enamel on found board

40 x 49½ inches

Collection of Siri von Reis

Red Dog Running #1, 1984

Hawkins had a deep love and respect for animals. Growing up on his family's farm, he spent hours drawing animals when he wasn't tending to his chores. His enthusiasm for studying animal life comes through in many of his figurative works; in fact, animals were among the first subjects we find in his earliest extant paintings. While the figures may seem simplified, they emanate an energy and lifelike quality that suggests the movement and vitality of real, individual beings.

Red Dog Running #1 blazes with intensity and dramatic action. The painting is nearly four feet square but looks even larger, dominated by fiery reds layered in thick wavy strokes over deep brown, black, and maroon. The enormous red dog running across the center of the painting, with its ears and tail flying back, wide, frantic gaze and lolling tongue appears to be in a desperate flight. Flame-like forms in the background crackle, while small red figures seem to grab at the distraught dog's legs. These features form a soaring diagonal that slices through the heavy horizontal band in the middle of the picture, enhancing the dynamic forward motion of the dog. The diagonal movement ends at the upper right of the painting, with a fiery-headed figure cutting into a scrubby band of thick smoke. Enhanced by the energy of Hawkins's masterful brushstrokes and his intuitive sense for visual storytelling, the dog appears ready to crash out of the picture, seeking safety.



In a later version of the scene, *Red Dog Running #3*, Hawkins revisited the subject matter to create a series of paintings. In both artworks, the large red dog bounds through the center of the painting. What other similarities do you see? How do the paintings differ?

Red Dog Running #3, 1984, enamel on board
48 x 60 inches, Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio:
Gift of an anonymous donor, 1986.24

ASK students whether they think animals are good subjects for artmaking, and what subjects inspire their artworks.

DISCUSS how and why some artists work in series.

CREATE a series of pictures using one subject, noting the differences in the artworks from first to last.



Last Supper #6, 1986

Enamel, cornmeal, glitter, and collage on Masonite

24½ x 48 inches

Collection of Robert A. Roth

Last Supper #6, 1986

As with many religious themes in art, the Last Supper has been painted in various versions by different artists for over a thousand years. But none are quite as well-known as Leonardo da Vinci's 1498 fresco in the convent of Santa Maria della Grazie in Milan, Italy. In fact, Leonardo's version has influenced countless artistic renditions from the Renaissance to the present day. It would be easy to view Hawkins's *Last Supper #6* as one of those, but in fact it is a Last Supper homage three times removed. Hawkins based this artwork on a black velvet painting that he found in someone's trash. The painting, whose artist is unknown, was based on a Brunozetti chromolithograph (a form of color printmaking) that itself was based on Leonardo's *Last Supper*. The unknown artist made some changes, such as depicting Christ and the apostles as black men. Inspired by the manipulations of the unknown artist, Hawkins collaged magazine cutouts of faces and food that made the familiar subject strange, with emotional responses of the apostles ranging from solemnity to joy, to rage.

Hawkins created at least nine versions of the Last Supper, each varying greatly in color, mood, and composition, including the number of figures, place settings, and treatment of the interior space. In this version, he explored collage and added cornmeal to his paint for texture, which heighten the irregularity. Hawkins's Last Supper series is an imaginative revival of a classic Christian theme. The juxtaposition of modern foodstuffs and images of people with the traditional biblical story encourages viewers to reexamine the original meaning and opens the possibility for new insights.



Leonardo da Vinci



Brunozetti

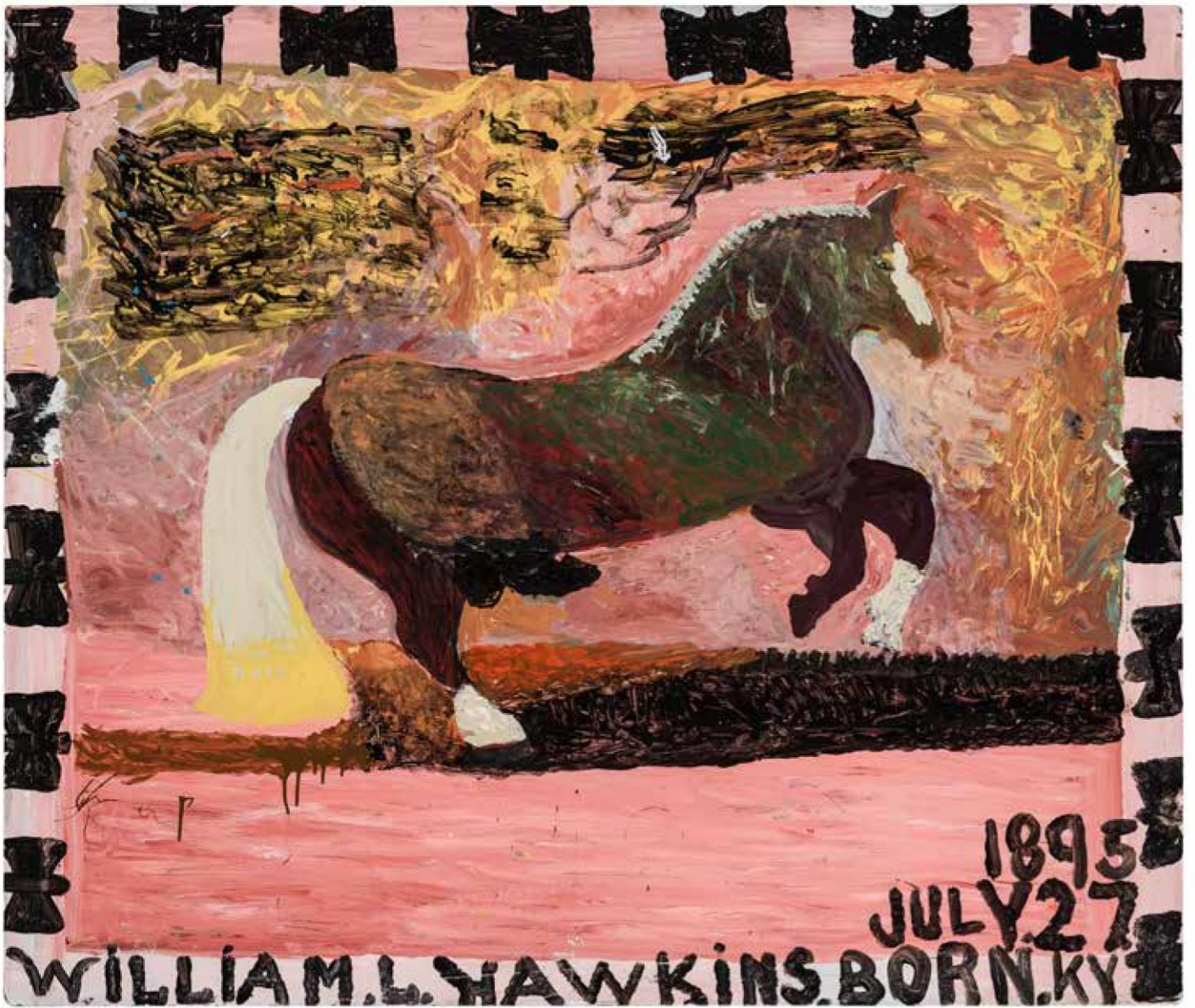


William Hawkins

ASK students whether they think the multiple races and genders of Hawkins's apostle figures represent a Utopian ideal or an updated reflection of the modern era.

DISCUSS how Hawkins modernized this artwork. (Hint: look for contemporary images, such as soup and fruit tarts.)

CREATE a current-day collage, using the theme of the Last Supper.



Rearing Stud Horse, 1987

Enamel on Masonite

47 ¼ x 56 ½ inches

Collection of Serena Altschul

Rearing Stud Horse, 1987

Hawkins's love of horses dates back to his early years on his family's Kentucky farm. In addition to caring for the animals, he experienced much that would contribute to his artistic practice in later years. The imaginative geography of the farmland provided countless opportunities for Hawkins to explore, experiment, and innovate, all traits that he carried with him throughout his life.

Hawkins emphasizes the central figure of the stud horse while enlivening the sky with a fury of painterly gestures. The graceful masculinity of the diagonal pose of the horse implies action and power, while the sunset hues of the painting bring warmth. The horse inhabits a mysterious space. In the background, black markings suggest stalls or stands in a stadium. As a camera blurs moving objects, Hawkins chose to blur the surroundings in abstract mark-making, which seems to slow the moment down and capture the sublime beauty of this great animal rising from the earth.

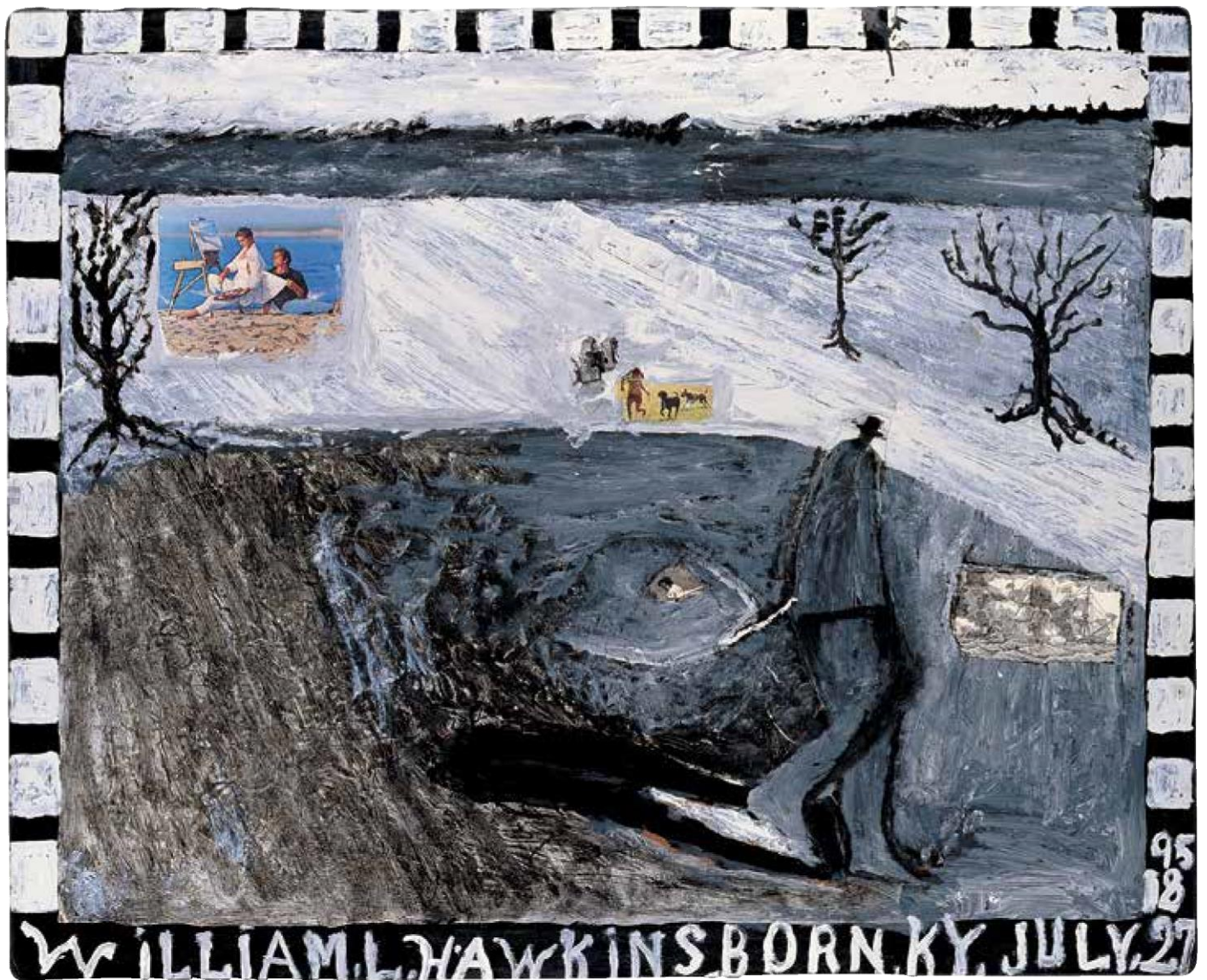
In *Rearing Stud Horse*, Hawkins used a technique called "scumbling," which, without formal training, he had to develop for himself. Scumbling is a painting process where the artist "scrubs" a thin layer of opaque paint over another layer, adding texture and atmosphere to the surface.



ASK students to recall artworks by other artists that feature horses, and to reflect on their similarities and differences of form.

DISCUSS why the form of the horse is so widely admired in American culture.

CREATE a painting using the scumbling technique.



Dust Bowl Collage, 1989

Enamel and collage on Masonite

39¼ x 48 inches

American Folk Art Museum, New York: Blanchard-Hill Collection.

Gift of M. Anne Hill and Edward V. Blanchard, Jr., 1998.10.27

Dust Bowl Collage, 1989

Dust Bowl Collage refers to a bleak time in the history of the United States. In the 1930s, the Midwest Plains States suffered severe drought that resulted in massive dust storms. These storms blew away the topsoil, buried farms, decimated agriculture, and created economic hardships that resulted in mass migration of drought-affected families to other areas of the country, especially to the western states. This migration, in turn, created job shortages and further economic hardships for people already living in the states to which the migrants flowed. It was a decade of profound hardship in our country, which was already suffering the economic privations of the Great Depression.

This painting was inspired by a 1938 photograph taken on an Oklahoma road by Dorothea Lange for the Farm Security Administration. Hawkins applied somber colors using strong, deliberate brushstrokes with a textural, energetic quality at odds with the bleak scene. Bare trees line up along a deserted road that looks as if it will soon be buried by a dust storm visible just on the horizon. Hawkins converted the ordinary farmer from the photograph into a mysterious dark figure with a strangely elongated body, which moves across the painting, encircled by a variety of collaged pictures. Against the figures that still emerge from the grim historical photo he placed color images expressing happiness and peace (a child playing with dogs; a couple relaxing on a sandy beach) as well as danger and turmoil (ships battling on a roiling sea).

The black and white striped border and Hawkins's signature line along the bottom of the painting form a visual barrier that seems to bar escape from this cold, gloomy image. Hawkins's bold approach to life and a desire to lift people up through his artwork inform the majority of his artworks. In *Dust Bowl Collage*, however, the limited color palette he used to paint this desolate scene, combined with the shadowed walking man and swirl of collaged images, create a picture that invites questions but offers no answers.



ASK whether students have faced difficult experiences and how they dealt with them.

DISCUSS the juxtaposition of emotions, from joy to despair, in *Dust Bowl Collage*.

CREATE an artwork that explores a difficult experience or a problem.



Founding Fathers, n.d.

Enamel and collage on board

39½ x 48½ inches

Collection of Dr. Daniel S. Berger, M.D.

Founding Fathers, n.d.

“Founding Fathers” is a term of respect for the patriots, thinkers, and leaders who were pivotal in creating the United States of America, from the beginnings of the American Revolution through the establishment of the Constitution. It may also show up on either side of any debate about contemporary issues that trace their roots to the early days of the United States.

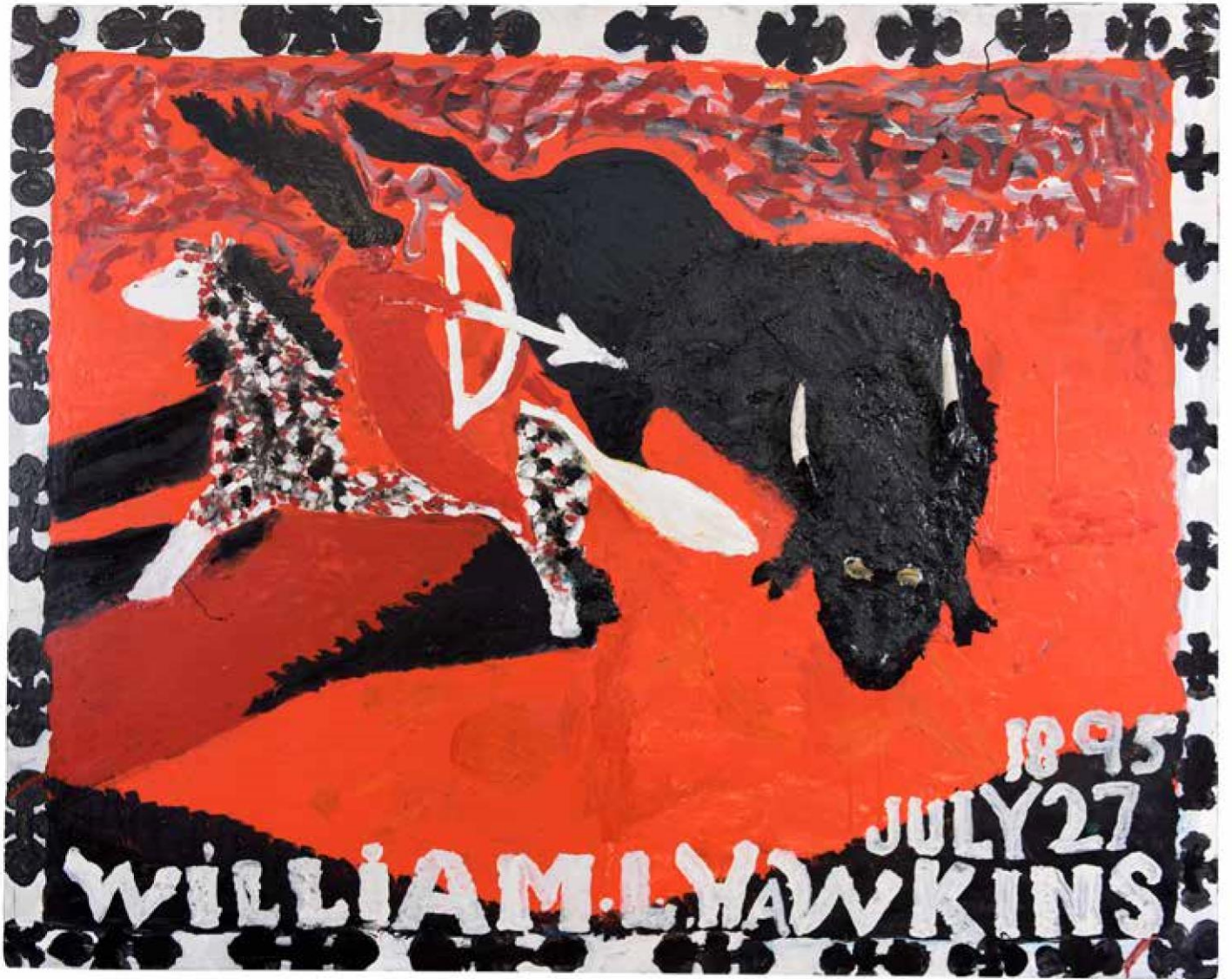
Although Hawkins presented the Founding Fathers as four busts in close proximity—like the composition of Mount Rushmore—the source is said to have been a picture on a cereal box. Because we do not have the cereal box, we cannot be quite sure who the portraits represent, but they may be (from the left) Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and George Washington.

The red, white, and blue color palette reinforces the patriotic theme, while formal pageantry is present in the drapery and the elegant details of the stained glass windows collaged into the background. The painting seems simultaneously quirky and formal, which demands further examination. Is this painting a criticism or a celebration? What did Hawkins hope to express with his choices in color, composition, and subject matter?

ASK students what they think the Founding Fathers would think about American life today.

DISCUSS contemporary cultural figures who influence American culture today.

CREATE a version of the *Founding Fathers* using contemporary cultural icons.



Indian Hunting Buffalo, 1980s

Enamel, collage, found objects, and cornmeal on Masonite

48 x 60 x 3 inches

Private Collection

Indian Hunting Buffalo, 1980s

The tale of the American bison, popularly known as the “buffalo,” is woven into the fabric of this nation’s history. The Plains Indians who hunted the buffalo did so reverently, killing only what they needed and using every part of the great animal. But the westward expansion of farming and ranching coupled with excessive sport hunting by whites decimated bison herds.

By the time Hawkins was born, the American bison was almost extinct. What was never in danger was people’s fascination with the frontier. Dime novels and outdoor theater like *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show* elevated some of the realities faced by pioneers and settlers to the status of legend and myth. This glorification of the West pervades *Indian Hunting a Buffalo*. Squaring off are a bison, a symbol of nature that is at once majestic, powerful, and dangerous, and an American Indian, in tune with nature yet determined to prevail.

Hawkins used several tricks to make this painting exciting. The color red may stimulate adrenaline in the viewer. The diagonal shadows express excitement and energy, and the composition provokes tension. While the Native American fades into the similarly colored background, his bright weapon comes forward. Our eyes are caught between the arrow on the bow and the horns of the great beast, which protrude aggressively into the viewer’s space. The buffalo’s eyes, on the other hand, which were collaged from magazine pictures of human beings, elicit our sympathy.



ASK students to consider the timeless themes of this painting: man versus beast, nature versus progress. What side are you on?

DISCUSS how to be a modern pioneer by exploring new frontiers in art making.

CREATE a painting that includes textural additives like cornmeal or sawdust.



Columbus Skyline, 1989

Enamel, collage, wood, and tin construction

92 x 51 x 33 inches

Collection of Sandra and Gerald Fineberg

Columbus Skyline, 1989

William Hawkins's imposing sculpture, *Columbus Skyline*, suggests a respect for and pride in the city he called home for most of his life. The dramatic heights of the commercial buildings and high-rise apartments that towered above the city's horizon were Hawkins's inspiration for this elaborate assemblage.

Hawkins's constant foraging for discarded wood, metal scraps, paint, and other cast-off materials gave new meaning to the adage that one man's trash is another man's treasure. He masterfully repurposed his finds, giving them new life in powerful and vibrant paintings, unexpected collaged images, and exciting structural fabrications.

Columbus Skyline is a huge and wonderful example of the artistic wealth and aesthetic merit that are hallmarks of Hawkins's recycled art. In this example, Hawkins has skillfully constructed a massive edifice using scrap plywood sheets and wood strips nailed in place to form the upper reaches of soaring, multi-windowed skyscrapers. Black enameled tin, both smooth and corrugated, finishes the structures as roofing and siding on the buildings. A single rust stripe across the top of the highest tower reminds us of both the scrap origins of his art and the transient nature of creation. Hawkins's nearly eight-foot-tall construction pays homage to the strength and architectural character of the city he loved. Built in the year before his death, this sculpture is a testament to the vital imagination and strong creative forces that symbolize William Hawkins's life and art.



ASK students what a skyline is, what it can include (can it include more than just tall buildings?), and how these iconic views help to form a city's identity.

DISCUSS how artists repurpose materials, balancing the history of the materials while giving them new life in the artwork.

CREATE an artwork using repurposed materials.

Want to learn more?

BOOKS and CATALOGS

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PERIODICALS

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Karlins, N. F. "William Hawkins: Outsider, Now Very In," *Artnet* 1997.

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VIDEO

"William Hawkins." YouTube video, 7:44, from *The Mind's Eye*, produced by Breakaway Films, 1987, edited by Zach Wolf, posted by foundationstaart (The Foundation for American Self Taught Artists), June 11, 2010, <https://youtu.be/x5Gzer3x1hY>.

"William Hawkins." Ricco Maresca Gallery Video, edited by Suy Kang, September 2017, <https://www.riccomaresca.com/videos/#videos/22473>

"William Hawkins by Charles Gross." YouTube video, 23:14. Posted by Ricco/Maresca Gallery, November 2017, <https://youtu.be/u6cXLsjkgj0>.

MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES WITH SIGNIFICANT HOLDINGS OF HAWKINS'S WORK

American Folk Art Museum, New York, New York

Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa

Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago, Illinois

Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia

Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D. C.

Ricco/Maresca Gallery, New York, New York

Represents the Hawkins estate

Keny Gallery, Columbus, Ohio

Lindsay Gallery, Columbus, Ohio