

ELIJAH PIERCE – FROM THE CURATORS’ STATEMENT

by **E. Jane Connell and Nannette V. Maciejunes**

Elijah Pierce was a savvy observer of contemporary life and very much a product of his time. His upbringing in Mississippi was rooted in the historical, religious, and aesthetic values of the African American community. His life encompassed post-slavery times, the great migrations north, segregation, the civil rights movement, two world wars, and the wars in Korea and Vietnam, Pierce was encouraged since childhood to believe that he had a special calling. He wanted to make history, to have his carvings live on after his death. He believed God charged him to preach through the vehicle of wood carving. His “pulpit” was the Long Street barbershop—the social center of the African American community in Columbus and the secular counterpart to the church. Pierce’s wood carvings are connected not only to a personal religious calling but also to identifiable traditions and values within the complex and multilayered culture of which he was a part: black and white, folk and popular, religious and Masonic, neighborhood and national. The carvings reflect a wide variety of vernacular sources: newspapers, comics, book and magazine illustrations, oral history, popular songs and hymns, current events, and folktales. To this extensive list we can add such means of communication as toasts, jokes, blues songs, and photographs of cultural heroes such as Joe Louis, Booker T. Washington, and Martin Luther King, Jr. . . .

As an artist Pierce can no longer be characterized as a simple creator working solely under divine inspiration, or as an outsider who survived in a complex urban world. As this exhibition takes a closer look at Pierce, it also participates in the reconsideration of a long held popular understanding of folk art. For more than two decades, in many writings and at such gatherings as the Winterthur Conference on American Folk Art of 1977 and the Washington (D.C.) Meeting on Folk Art of 1983, the nature of folk art has been avidly debated in terms of both its aesthetic and cultural meanings. Its sophistication as an art form and importance as a social document have been recognized. In our consideration of the life and art of Pierce, we have sought to illuminate both the aesthetic and social meanings of the artist’s life and work and thus to affirm the connections between folk and art, between cultural and personal artistic expression. . . .

To accomplish this formidable task, we selected 173 works to reflect Pierce’s roles as carver, barber, minister, Mason, and community historian. The core of the exhibition is drawn from the museum’s permanent collections. Other extremely important works from major public and private collections have been added to round out the full chronological, thematic, and stylistic range of Pierce’s oeuvre. Works essential to the study of Pierce are included: religious subjects, such as his masterpieces, the Book of Wood and Crucifixion; autobiographical works; moralizing toles; political subjects; sports subjects; and a sampling of lively animal and figure carvings. While the religious reliefs constitute the largest number of carvings, many secular subjects are featured to provide a necessary balance and more realistic view of Pierce’s oeuvre.

The book that accompanies the exhibition is a compilation of the research and documentation of Pierce which has been undertaken at the museum since 1985. Prefaced with comments by the late Robert Bishop, former director of the Museum of American Folk Art, five essays consider Pierce in terms of a variety of major philosophical and disciplinary approaches to folk art. The essayists are Gerald L. Davis, a folklorist; John F. Moe, a historian; Michael D. Hall, a sculptor; Regenia A. Perry, an art historian; and Aminah Robinson, a Columbus artist to whom Pierce was

a friend and mentor. Through the diverse yet interconnected perspectives of these scholars and artists, Pierce's life and art are examined and celebrated.

Cutting against the stereotype of the anonymous folk artist, the publication includes a chronology of Pierce's life, compiled by art historian Margaret Armbrust Seibert, professor of art history, Columbus College of Art and Design, who conducted fieldwork on the artist during his lifetime. One of the first in-depth chronologies written for a folk artist, this includes all presently available information on Pierce's life, exhibitions, awards, and honors. The book also features an exhaustive bibliography on Pierce, Prepared by Seibert. The array of references found in both the chronology and the bibliography reflects the widespread recognition that Pierce experienced in his lifetime and that continues today.