

Basic Detail Report



Caged Bird

Date

1966

Primary Maker

Walter Williams

Medium

Color woodcut

Description

Walter Williams often depicted Black children in fields or in nature, against vibrantly colored skies and with animals or flowers. Artist and scholar David Driskell described Williams's use of "nature as metaphor: the birds in flight ... symbolize the freedom that African

Americans desired to have to move about freely, undisturbed." The foreground of *Caged Bird* shows a seated child, a cage and a bird. A rolling cabin with a figure standing in the doorway and what appears to be fields of cotton can be seen in the background. The relationship between the bird and the cage is ambiguous: is the bird trapped in the cage, or has it been released and has spread its wings ready to join its fellows in the sky? Born in Brooklyn, New York, Williams experienced a fraught and distressing childhood. His mother, who had encouraged his artistic passions, died of pneumonia when he was five years old, leaving the artist to live with his strict father and stepmother. Later, he was drafted into the army where he served in France burying soldiers. Upon his return to the US, he used the GI Bill to attend the Brooklyn Museum Art School where he studied under artists Ben Shahn (1898–1969) and Reuben Tam (1916–1991). Many of Williams's artworks reflect the struggles of his youth and the freedom he longed for as a child. He said, "All my life I have been painting one picture. It is one that reflects my own image and the inner thoughts of my mind. I feel the naivete of a child when I paint yet I have the passions of the father that I am. I am an artist who is full of love for the world and all the images it holds."

Dimensions

Composition: 18 1/8 in. × 24 in. (46 × 61 cm) Sheet: 21 5/8 × 27 1/2 in. (54.9 × 69.9 cm) Frame: 30 × 40 in. (76.2 × 101.6 cm)