

# AN UNLIKELY BLACK PICASSO

By Richard Portis, M.D.



Courtesy, Jay Johnson Gallery, New York

**If you think of folk art as being grandmotherly or childlike, Mose Tolliver may come as a shocker**

"If you're strong enough, there are no precedents," wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Mose Tolliver has been called the "black Picasso," but folk art expert Richard Gasperi of New Orleans believes that the comparison is unnecessary, if not wholly unjustified. "Mose is just a strong artist, a powerful artist," he says. In his *Folk Painters of America*, Robert Bishop wrote that Tolliver "paints a world that is only his own. Single, quasi-representational figures, hauntingly abstracted, are placed in a reality that is the private domain of the artist, accessible only through his art."

Another connoisseur of Tolliver's work, S. Dorris Dickinson, a retired archaeologist and psychoanalytic scholar, thinks that the artist's paintings spring from Jungian, West



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African archetypes. "And Picasso was influenced by the West Africans," Dickinson says. He contrasts Tolliver's work with that of a more famous living black folk painter, Clementine Hunter, of Natchitoches, Louisiana. "Clementine's paintings are more like Cezanne-Cubistic, with figures doing things . . . telling a story," Dickinson says.

Tolliver, or MOZET, as he signs his work, has attracted quite a following in the 10 years since he began painting. He grew up on an Alabama dirt farm and worked in a Montgomery furniture store until a half-ton block of marble fell on his feet, crushing them and putting him on crutches for life. He turned to painting (with the encouragement of a former employer), and his works can be seen throughout the nation and in England and France. In 1982, his paintings were shown at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, an event attended by the First Lady.

Occupying a prominent position on the wall in his living room in Montgomery is a photograph of Mose sitting in a wheelchair, wearing a spiffy suit, with Nancy Reagan striking a regal pose beside him.

"She was a nice lady, a nice lady," Tolliver says of Mrs. Reagan. "Some folks say she's mean, but she was nice to me."

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Mose lives and paints in his modest, two-story house near downtown Montgomery. His home is shared by his stout and handsome wife Willie Mae and some of their 11 children and 21 grandchildren.

I visited him recently and found him sitting on his front porch watching the paint dry on his latest creation, the colorful *Snake Horse*. The house was easy to spot because other paintings were displayed on the porch wall. Mose was a most kind and gracious host, moody and somewhat distracted, but friendly.

### Home Sweet Phantasmagoria

Inside the house, the two front rooms were filled with his paintings, creating a startling effect. The word that came to mind was "phantasmagoria." I had encountered that word before but never before felt the need to use it.

Mose's work falls into the category of folk art because he is untrained and uneducated—no art school diploma—but his paintings are not grandmotherly or childlike. He doesn't draw little figures picking cotton or hanging out the laundry or those sorts of things. His style is unique. Anyone who has ever seen one of his paintings would never have any trouble identifying his work again. In a folk art quiz, the Mose paintings would be a cinch.

Mose uses house paint (Kem-Tone) and generally paints on scraps of wood or cardboard. They are not usually perfect squares or even rectangles either,

The strength of Tolliver's images, which occupy the entire surface of his pictures, is the overriding characteristic of his work, as in *Marten*, house paint on wood, 14 x 24 inches, and *Telma*, previous page, also house paint on wood, 15 x 20 inches.



Courtesy Jay Johnson Gallery, New York

making level hanging difficult. He does add the ring from a flip-top beer can to the back of his pictures for hanging, but the ring is not always in the middle.

Mose paints wildly fantastic images—animals, plants, ladies, men, or combinations of these things. He also creates wonderful neologisms; if anyone followed Mose around long enough, he would discover a lot of nouns and adjectives not found in Webster's. Here are a few titles I jotted down as he pointed at the paintings (he does not read or write): *Lady Wearing Sproup Dress*, *Deerpig*, *Moose Lady*, *Strude Lady*, *French Sadnus Horse*, *Woofman*, *Foxcat*, *Gooseman on Prayer Rocker*, *Mountain Volkswagen*, *Big Time Charlie*, and *Frenchhopper*.

He delves into the erotic with portrayals of female figures straddling disembodied male genitalia, which he delicately labels *Ladies on Scooters* (sometimes he calls the phalluses tricycles, water-skates, or stickbats). Given Mose's predilection for the imaginary, his rather bland and representational portrait of George Washington seems incongruous. Perhaps it was painted in honor of the artist's July 4 birthday. One Mose expert guesses that Mose copied this from a traditional portrait of Washington and hence the work did not erupt from his limbic system.

There is some controversy over the year of Mose's birth. Various publications list it as 1915, circa 1915, and 1920. I think the problem is that, for some time, Mose has been saying that he's 65. On my visit in the summer of 1983, he said he was 65. His wife shook her head. "He was 65 a long time ago," she said. He is on Social Security, but it took three years of visits to the federal building and finally the testimony of a midwife to get his benefits started. Of his nascence to a family of tenant farmers in Pike Road, Alabama, Mose says, "They didn't keep any records back then." I wondered how old the midwife must have been.

### "Just Me" or the Boogerman?

James Alexander, a sculptor and art teacher at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, had this to say about Mose in the *Atlanta Art Papers*: "Perhaps [his] ignorance of the canons of making art and the bias against its histories are the very strength of Mose T's paintings. One senses the same personal expression that one feels walking along Simon Rodia's Towers in the Watts section in Los Angeles or through the Silver Forest of Clarence Schmidt in Woodstock, New York. The strength in these works is, simultaneously, the sense of raw expression they possess and the contrived sense of academic restriction they lack."

Alexander continued: "Uninhibited by what is



Carl Palmer/Collection of Dr. Robert Bishop

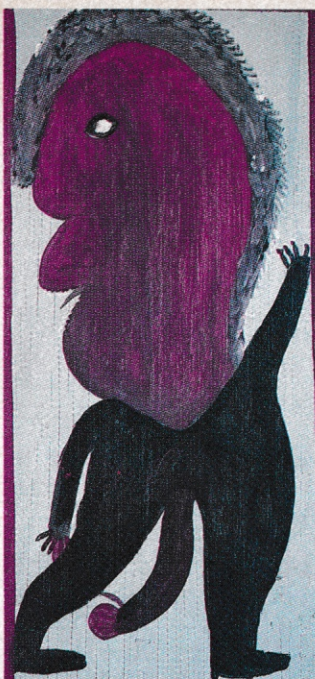
*Erotic Moose Lady* shows a female figure straddling a disembodied phallus. House paint on plywood, 15 x 17 inches.

Clownlike head of *In a Dream* sports a mortarboard that terminates in powerful verticals framing the head. One of his larger pictures, it is house paint on wood, 24 x 25 inches.



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*Portrait of Charles Restone*, left, house paint on plywood, 13 x 27½ inches. Artist, above, is house paint on canvas, 20 x 24 inches.

expected, perhaps the most damaging aspect of formal training, Mose can explore with paint his fantastical view of the animal and plant domains. The artist continues to paint what he conceives rather than what he perceives—the stem of a single plant may terminate with a star-shaped flower at the top and sprout completely different blossoms on lower branches.”

Mose’s most striking works are his self-portraits, all similar but for their different hues: grim, toothy, predatory abstractions of the human face that are chilling and scary. Mose calls these faces *Just Me*. He smiles when telling me this, betraying none of the emotions that must accompany such a self-image. Over the years, these renderings have evolved. What used to be a knoblike projection from his brow has turned into an unmistakable sharp horn that impales the left upper quadrant of the picture.

Dickinson believes that Tolliver may be identifying with Moses. “Like Dionysus, Moses was supposed to have had horns,” Dickinson said. “In fact, the Michelangelo statue of Moses in the Church of St. Peter in Chains in Rome shows the pair of horns. The ancients believed that man carried his seed in his head, so horns were an extension of the brain. Maybe Mose is liberating himself from infantile fantasies by bringing them into consciousness.”

Dickinson quoted Jung: “Every relationship to the archetype, whether through experience or simply through the spoken word, is a ‘stirring,’ that is to say, it works because it releases in us a mightier

voice than our own. He who speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices.”

Could be. I also thought that the horn and the fangs and the evil-looking eyes could be a function of Tolliver’s sense of humor and irony. If I had to name his series of self-portraits, I would call it *Boogerman*.

Mose shows little interest in the works of other artists, although he is familiar with the granddaddy of American black folk painters, Bill Traylor. Traylor, who died in 1949, also was from Montgomery. He painted and carved there while sitting on a sidewalk bench. “I used to see him, sitting there carving with a knife, but I didn’t know who he was. I didn’t know he was an artist,” Mose says.

Mose used to paint up to 10 pictures a day but has slowed down some. Rheumatism has attacked various joints, and he has occasional postauricular shooting pains. “But my eyes are good; nothing wrong with my eyes.”

He has an unorthodox approach to the mechanics of painting. He works while sitting on the edge of his bed, tableau resting on lap. As he paints, he spins the picture around, defying the tradition of applying paint to a canvas on an easel.

His works can be found at the Jay Johnson America’s Folk Heritage Gallery at 1044 Madison Avenue in New York, and at the Gasperi Folk Art Gallery, 831 St. Peter Street in New Orleans.

Mose says his paintings have been sold to collectors from 47 states. He can’t remember the names of the three states that didn’t have any. □