Elijah Pierce was born the youngest son of a former slave on a Mississippi farm on March 5, 1892. He began carving at an early age when his father gave him his first pocketknife. By age seven, Elijah Pierce began carving little wooden farm animals. His uncle, Lewis Wallace, inspired and instructed him in the art of carving. His Uncle Lewis taught him how to work with wood, what kind of wood to use, and how to enjoy carving. As a child, Pierce loved to go out into the woods by the creek bank with his dog to fish and to whittle animals or other small figurines from wood scraps he’d find on the forest floor. He enjoyed giving away his carvings to the kids in school and thus he began his lifelong practice of giving away his carved pieces to people who admired his work or to people he felt could benefit from it.

In his teens, Pierce decided he didn’t want to be a farmer. However, he had taken an interest in barbering. Pierce began hanging out at a local barbershop in Baldwyn, Mississippi and it was there that he learned his trade. Pierce liked barbering. It was a trade that would allow him to have some independence and he could get a job anywhere.

In his early twenties, Pierce married Zetta Palm. They were very happy together. Pierce had work as a barber and they had a little home. At the end of a year, Zetta died shortly after the birth of their son, Willie, ca. 1915. In the late 1910’s and early 1920’s, Pierce lived a hobolike existence hitching rides on boxcars and working as an itinerant laborer for the railroad. He would visit his mother in Baldwyn and she encouraged him to follow his religious calling. In 1920, Pierce received his preacher’s license from his home church of Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Baldwyn.

Eventually, Pierce decided to join the migration to the cities in the north. In Danville, Illinois, Pierce met Cornelia Houeston who would become his second wife. Cornelia was from Columbus, Ohio. When Cornelia returned to Columbus in 1923, Pierce missed her greatly and he followed her there. They were married in September 1923.

During his marriage with Cornelia, Pierce found work as a barber and began to carve wood seriously. One year during the late 1920’s, Pierce carved a small elephant for Cornelia’s birthday. She liked it so much that he promised her an entire zoo. He began carving animals in earnest and many were sold or given away. For Pierce, these individual animal carvings each had their own story. They represented the beasts of Genesis or creatures from the folktales of Pierce’s youth.

By the early 1930’s, he began mounting his three-dimensional figures on cardboard or wooden backgrounds. In 1932, Pierce completed the Book of Wood which he considered his best work. The book was originally carved as individual scenes and tells the story of Jesus carved in bas-relief. Cornelia and Elijah held “sacred art demonstrations” to explain the meaning of the Book of Wood. Panels from the Book of Wood are currently on display at the Columbus Museum of Art in the Eye Spy exhibit.
Cornelia Pierce died of cancer in 1948 at the age of sixty-one. In 1951, Pierce became self-employed with the opening his own barbershop at 483 E. Long St. A year later, he married Estelle Greene who was then forty-six. They complemented each other and Pierce’s work as an artist and lay minister continued to grow.

His barbershop on Long Street was a hospitable gathering place. Customers would come not only for haircuts, but to discuss the news of the day. Pierce was quite engaged in the life of the local community and of the nation. His secular carvings show his love of baseball, boxing, comics and the movies. They also reflect his interest in national politics and his appreciation for American heroes who fought for justice and liberty. Through his carvings Pierce told his own life story and chronicled the African-American experience. He also carved stories with universal themes. He seldom distinguished the race of his figures - he thought of them as everyman.

It wasn’t until the early 1970’s that Pierce became known outside the local community. Boris Gruenwald, a sculptor and graduate student at Ohio State University, discovered Elijah Pierce’s work in a Columbus YMCA exhibition. Gruenwald met with Pierce told him that he was going to make sure the world knew of his art. The two would become dear friends and Gruenwald organized several important exhibitions. Within a few years Pierce was known both nationally and internationally in the world of folk art. Pierce was honored to participate in exhibitions at galleries such as the Krannert Art Museum, the Phyllis Kind Gallery of New York, the National Museum of American Art, and the Renwick Gallery. In 1973, Pierce won first prize in the International Meeting of Naive Art in Zagreb, Yugoslavia. In 1982, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded him a National Heritage Fellowship as one of 15 master traditional artists.

In a 1979 article from *New York Times Magazine*, Bob Bishop of the Museum of American Folk Art in New York explained, “There are 500 woodcarvers working today in the United States who are technically as proficient as Pierce, but none can equal the power of Pierce’s personal vision.” Tom Armstrong of the Whitney Museum in Pennsylvania added, “Pierce’s strength is based on his religion and his concept of the importance of the individual. He reduces what he wants to say to the simplest forms and compositions. They are decorative, direct, bold and amusing. He uses glitter and all kinds of devices to make his message clear. It gives his work an immediacy that’s very appealing.”

Elijah Pierce died May 7, 1984. Although much was written about the impact he made with his art, the people who knew him all said that what they will remember most is the kind, gentle, and humorous man who was a friend, a spiritual advisor, and a mentor to so many.

After his death, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Performing and Cultural Arts Complex recognized his work by naming the Elijah Pierce Gallery in his honor. The Columbus Museum of Art now owns the vast majority of Pierce’s carvings - over 300 pieces.

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Berry, Steve. “Artist Carved Niche in World.” Columbus Dispatch (May 8, 1984), p. 5 B.

Beaulieu, Lovell. “Students Building Ark Are Inspired By Carver.” Columbus Dispatch 12 (Feb. 12, 1993), p. 3 C.

Constable, Lesley. “Elijah Pierce’s Works Bursting With Humanity: the Columbus Folk Artist’s Woodcarvings Reach Out to ‘Universal Man’.” Columbus Dispatch (Jan 31, 1993), p. 8 G.


“Elijah Pierce, acclaimed woodcarver dies; funeral set for Friday.” Columbus Call and Post (May 10, 1984), p. 1 A.


“Elijah Pierce Carved a Niche in the Community and the World.” Columbus Dispatch (Jan. 14, 1998), p. 6 E.

Ellis, Mark. “Famous Woodcarver Buried.” Columbus Dispatch (May 12, 1984), p. 8 B.

Gilson, Nancy. “Carving From the Soul; Exhibit Celebrates the Spirit that Come Out of Elijah Pierce’s Woodwork.” Columbus Dispatch (Jan. 24, 1993), p. 1 G.

Gilson, Nancy. “Love for Folk Artist Behind ‘Elijah’s Angel’.” Columbus Dispatch (Nov. 12, 1992), p. 8 B.


McClaran, Michael. “Essays Take Look Inside ‘Outsider’ Art: Elijah Pierce’s work is seen as guided by Southern black culture.” Columbus Dispatch (May 22, 1994), p. 6 D.


“Pierce.” Columbus Dispatch (May 9, 1984), p. 8 F.

“Religious Roots Anchor Pierce Art Exhibition.” Call and Post (Feb. 4, 1993), p. 1 C.

Stephens, Steve. “Grants Benefit Documents, Artists Work.” Columbus Dispatch (March 5, 1993), p. 2 B.

Note: Articles with links are available online. All other articles are available in the Educational Resources Center (Columbus Hall) at Columbus State Community College. Ask for assistance at the Reference Desk (287-2460).


Michael Hall writes of the community and culture that speaks in the folk art of Elijah Pierce.
730 E42
Holland Cotter of the *New York Times* writes of the book, “It treats [Pierce]...like the complex, witty, reflective man he was, a product of a specific time and place..., whose passionate engagement in the world around and above him remains a lesson and a delight.

F R813e
A touching story of friendship between a young Jewish boy and Elijah Pierce, a Christian woodcarver. Rosen drew inspiration for the story from his own experience meeting Elijah Pierce. Robinson is a Columbus artist who was a friend and student of Pierce.

Ref 709.2 R813m
The Rosenaks, who have been collecting contemporary American folk art since 1973, have compiled an encyclopedia of background information on 257 artists. Elijah Pierce is included in this record of American folk art.

Note: Books are available from the Educational Resources Center (Columbus Hall) at Columbus State Community College. Ask for assistance at the Reference Desk (287-2460).


**Elijah Pierce (1892 - 1984)**

**American Folk Art**

*We have additional works by this artist in our inventory. Please inquire. Click on a thumbnail below to see an enlarged view and detailed information:*
Elijah Pierce was recognized as America’s foremost wood carver of 20th century folk art by Dr.
Robert Bishop, founding Director of the Museum of American Folk Art. The artist was born in Baldwin, Mississippi, where he was raised on a farm. Elijah began to carve at the age of seven. His maternal uncle, Lewis Wallace, was a chair and basket maker. He taught Elijah how to work with wood. He also enjoyed baseball and dancing. In 1920, Elijah was issued a preacher's license. Pierce followed his girlfriend, Cornelia Houeston to Columbus in 1923, where he became a barber and married Cornelia. During the 1930s and 1940s, he preached throughout the Midwest and South during the summers at carnivals and fairs. He often brought his carvings along with him to use as teaching tools.

The subjects of Pierce's carvings are religious narratives pertaining to the Old and New Testament of the Bible, African-inspired fables, Freemasonry symbols, African-American heroes (Abe Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Joe Louis, etc.), and a veritable "Noah's Ark" of animals. His early carvings from the 1920s through the 1940s were spare, concise, flat, and mellow in coloration. The carvings created later, in the 1950s and 1960s, were more complex compositionally, more rounded in form, and more deeply incised than his earliest carvings. As Elijah's work became better known to the local and national art community in the early 1970s, his repertoire of subjects expanded, partially to accommodate his admirers to whom he gave many fine small free standing carvings as mementos. Also, his narrative carvings broadened in subject matter to chronicle the uneasy racial and political environment associated with the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and Watergate. He also depicted more popular images, such as Archie Griffin, the Heisman trophy winner from The Ohio State University.

Pierce's wry wit and keen insight into the temptations of modern, media-driven life is evident in many of his carvings from the 1960s through the early 1980s. As the artist began to lose his dexterity and became weaker in the late 1970s, he met a young folk artist, Leroy Almon, who became his friend and protégé.

Selected One Person Exhibitions:
- Bernard Danenberg Gallery, New York, 1972
- Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio, 1973
- Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1982
- Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, 1993-1994 (traveled to five venues)

Selected Museum Collections:
- Akron Museum of Art, Ohio
- The Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio
- High Museum of Art, Atlanta
- Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin
- Museum of Folk Art, New York
- The New Orleans Museum of Art, Louisiana
- Schumacher Gallery, Capital University, Columbus, Ohio
- The Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, Columbus
Elijah Pierce was born on March 5, 1892, into a farm family near Baldwyn, in northeastern Mississippi. His father was a former slave. When he was nine, his older brother Tom gave him a pocketknife. "When I was a boy I was always carving," he said. "I'd look at a tree, and I could hardly help it. I'd start carving. I carved pictures of cows, hogs, dogs, Indians with a bow and arrow shooting, girls' names ... most anything I could think to put on the bark of a tree."

His siblings stayed on the farm, but Pierce didn't like farmwork. He left home in his teens, with a nickel in his pocket, "to see the bright city lights." In 1924 he moved to Columbus, Ohio, where he worked as a barber. He opened his own shop, which he operated until he retired in 1978. Pierce also preached in Baptist churches and continued carving. "One day I got a little piece of wood and I made an elephant," he recalled. "My wife liked it, and she put a ribbon around its neck and put it up on the mantel ... and I told her, 'If you like that, I'll carve you a whole zoo,' and started to carve every kind of animal I'd ever seen, in pictures, or what I could think of, and from then on, I could see a picture that I liked, or a person would tell me a story; sometimes I'd hear a song or go to church and hear a man preach a sermon, and a picture would form in my mind, and — oh, sometimes it may be four or five weeks, that picture'd come back to me, and I'd get me a piece of wood and start to carve it."

Each summer, Pierce and his wife would load their car with his carvings and travel, displaying his work at fairs, shops, and churches. He would tell the story behind each piece to those who gathered. "Every piece of work I got carved is a message, a sermon, you might say," he said. Many of Pierce's works had religious themes. Perhaps his most extensive and powerful creation was "The Book of Wood," completed in 1932. It includes 33 scenes from the life of Christ. Other carvings depict folk tales, sports and political figures, and scenes from the artist's own life. "Slavery Time" is a panoramic view of plantation life, including a slave auction.
In 1968, an Ohio State University professor attended an exhibit that featured Pierce's work and began a campaign to have the artist recognized. After that, he won numerous honors and his work was widely exhibited. He graciously received a steady stream of visitors to his shop, which he converted to a gallery when he retired. < 1982 NEA Heritage Fellows
Elijah Pierce, Ecclesiastical Artist

By Betty Garrett Deeds

"And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour." &endash; Ecclesiastes 2:10
On March 5, 1892, Elijah Pierce, the son of a slave, was born on a cotton farm in Baldwyn, Mississippi. He described his father as "a thoroughbred farmer who believed in growing his food." But Elijah wasn't born to work the fields: "My two brothers liked to farm, but I didn't. Guess I was peculiar. I didn't like to play with other boys. I liked the woods. I would go there with my dogs and my pocket knives."

His father gave him his first pocket knife early, and by the time he was seven, an uncle had instructed him in the best kinds of wood to use from what could be found on the forest floor and taught him how to carve simple little wooden farm animals. Pierce also recalled, "When I'd find a smooth-bark tree, I'd carve on it &endash; Indians or an arrow and heart or a girl's name &endash; whatever I thought of."

Not tied to the land as his father and brothers were, he "always wanted to travel the world from place to place." As a teenager, he hung around the local barbershop in Baldwyn and learned how to make a living from the trade. But he had restless feet and a traveling mind and also hitched rides on trains and worked at transient jobs for railroads.
"About 1912, best I can remember, I got off a train and saw a straight hickory stick by the side of the road. I liked it, cut it down and carved a cane. It's the first thing I can remember carving besides the trees at home."

Pierce would return home to visit his mother, who encouraged his religious leanings as well as his barber's work. He needed that strength when Zetta Palm, the woman he had married, died in 1915 after giving birth to a son, Will. "In 1920, he received a preacher's license from the Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Baldwyn.

By this time, the adult Pierce was 6' 2" with the regal bearing of both a Masai warrior and an Old Testament King. There was a sculpted quality about his body and bearing, and he drew the admiration of many young women he met as he traveled the country, stopping from time to time to barber again.

It was in Chicago that he met a young woman from Columbus, Cornelia Houeston, who made him reconsider the virtues of being footloose. "I said I'd never marry (again) ... but one day I told the man I worked for to find another barber, and I got on a train to Columbus."

Apparently he signaled his intentions ahead. In September, 1923, "When I got here, she spoke to me like I'd just been down the street. 'Oh, good morning, Elijah, how are you?' I said I'd decided to marry her after all. She thought awhile, then said, 'Put on your hat then, and let's go down to the courthouse.'"

Pierce always chuckled with deep satisfaction when he recalled that after they married, "that Nigra woman finally kissed me and said, 'Now you're mine and I'm yours.' We went back to her house, and she said, 'Don't you want a bath to wash that Illinois dirt off you?"

"I didn't," he confessed, "but seemed like she was gonna be the boss, so I did. She got a brush and went to scrubbin' my neck. Hooey! I thought I was ruined. But that woman was a lifesaver. She had more sense than me. Then on, everything I put my hands on turned to work and money."

"I never had $1000 cash in my life till I found she saved it from what I gave her by the week (as a barber). Had it in teacups and pots and tied up in hankychiefs, and one day rolled it out on the bed and showed me."

"I'd been shootin' pool and stuff with the fellas, but after that, I helped her save the second thousand." We stayed together 33 years and bought this place (the shop on East Long Street) and a brick house. I tell you, there ain't nothin' in the world any better than a good woman and nothin' any worse than a bad one."
During the '20s, Cornelia "saw a little elephant and liked it, so I carved her one like it for Christmas. She put it on a chain around her neck. I said, 'You like that thing that well, I'll carve you a zoo.' And I did. Then fellas would come in to the barber shop and say, 'Can you carve such and such an animal?' or some other thing, and I'd try that."

In the intervals when no customer was occupying his barber chairs, he sat on a Victorian straight-back chair and carved the increasing range of his visions of daily American life with figures from his black heritage. They ranged from his first car, "a coupe that made me feel like a airplane," Joe Louis and Marian Anderson, and his own version of Alexander Hamilton's mansion, which he had once visited and greatly admired.

He built a miniature duplicate of it and filled it with carved chandeliers, mantels and rocking chairs, filling the rooms with such diverse figures as a black lady with one shoe off, "under the influence, you might say."

Aside from his uncle's early basic pointers, Pierce never had training. Asked what he worked with, he explained, "A pocket knife mostly ... this twin Hinkle. I gave $16.54 for it, it's German and it's the best ever made. I also use a chisel, a piece of broken glass to cut things down, and sandpaper. Those are my tools. When I'm done carving, I use paint, shellac and polish to make the work stand out." Hair tonic and the tools of his barber's skills filled the shelves alongside them.

During the Depression, Elijah traveled around to fairs and exhibits and sold a few figures, but gave away most of them as "little souvenirs" for friends and customers, who, in turn, would bring him pieces of wood for carving material.

About this time, the man who was a licensed Baptist minister but had repressed his "calling to preach" for some 20 years, became obsessed with his childhood religious teachings. He began to carve his versions of the Garden of Eden in 1929, then Noah's Ark, peopling them with primitive figures of his choice, often "preaching a couple of sermons and talking about them as they came to me."

He also began mounting his three-dimensional figures on cardboard and wooden backgrounds, and with this technique compiled a personal vision of the New Testament which he called simply "The Book of Wood." Completed in 1932, it comprised seven enormous "pages" with 33 bas-relief carvings delineating scenes of "highlights from the 33 years of Jesus' life."

The images have a mystical eloquence, depicting such objects as a Rose of Sharon floating over Jesus healing a mass of "the sick, the lame and the halt." Jesus' skin is black in some of the figures, but Elijah eschewed social commentary, saying merely,
"It's in the grain of the wood." Sometimes Pierce and his wife conducted "sacred art demonstrations" to explain the meanings of the Book's contents to visitors. Occasionally, the barber/preacher conceded to feeling some regret at the lack of recognition given his sculpting, and especially his "failure to preach and heal the sick and be a great man for my country and my race." However, it could truly be said that he was following his calling as a preacher while pursuing his artistic visions. Between haircuts.

There were a few newspaper articles about him in the '40s, some by the late Citizen-Journal columnist Ben Hayes, who often shook his head sardonically at the irony of Elijah's practicing his art "only a block away" from the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, which was either unaware of or unheeding of the greatness so near it.

The only exhibits Elijah held were in churches, and he claimed to "give little thought" to what would come of his efforts. "I enjoy this for the work of it." That alone, along with the devotion of Cornelia through 33 years of marriage until her death of cancer in 1948, sustained his artistic drive.

In 1952, he married another remarkable lady named Estelle Greene, whom he described as "my kinky-headed woman. I say she ain't worth a dime, but I wouldn't take a thousand for her."

Although he continued working in his barbershop at 483 E. Long Street for decades, Estelle also encouraged him to grow as an artist and a lay minister. However, it was not until the early '70s, by which time he was using one room at 534 E. Long Street for his barber's work and another at the east corner of Emmett Alley to store his carvings, that decades of public unawareness of his other work gave way to small but crucial recognition that a great folk artist was working here in Columbus.

In 1970 or 1971, Pierce's carvings were entered in a Golden Age Hobby Show, sponsored by the now vanished Columbus Citizen-Journal, at the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, a block away from Pierce's own stations at the cross, so to speak, and the red and white striped barber pole depicting his known profession.

Boris Gruenwald, a Yugoslavian graduate student in sculpture at Ohio State University, saw them there or at a YMCA exhibition and "said this work had to be where people could see it," Pierce explained simply. "That was real nice of him." They became close, lifelong friends. Through Gruenwald's influence, an exhibit of Elijah's art was staged at OSU's Hopkins Hall in 1971. On posters outside, for the first time, he was labeled ELIJAH PIERCE, FOLK ARTIST.
Sculptor Frank Gallo, whose work had been featured on the cover of Time Magazine, was then a visiting artist at OSU, and when he saw the show there, remarked, "Beside him (Pierce), I feel like a poseur, an imitator. He is motivated solely by love for what he does, and his work has both naivete and a deep understanding of his subjects." He arranged to have 76 of Elijah's creations exhibited at the University of Illinois in December, 1971.

At the time, Pierce marveled, "These teachers at the university kept on askin' how I can carve. And I told them, that's just how things are shown to me. God guides the hands."

Whatever one does or doesn't believe about the guidance of events, the seeds of Elijah Pierce's talent-sprung from the earth of that Mississippi cotton farm in the previous century - blossomed after those breakthrough showings in 1971. It was as if the Red Sea parted, and people suddenly gained wide access to the folk artist's long-hidden talents.

His work was shown at the Bernard Danenberg Galleries and other elite venues in New York shortly after the University of Illinois exhibit, and then, in February, 1972, at the prestigious Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Critics hailed and hosannaed the talents of the newly found artist, Elijah Pierce, then 80.

"Was that show in New York exciting?" Pierce echoed someone's question. "Oh, wasn't it! We had tickets on TWA paid for and all, and oh honey, we had a party. It was swell. They treated us as white and nice as Mr. Nixon. After the show, there were nearly 1000 people in a big room, all them artists and celebrities had seen the work and welcomed me and said such nice things. People shook my hand till it cramped. I had to punch my wife in the ribs a little and ask, 'They talkin' about me?'"

Finally, in November, 1972, Pierce's carvings and sculptures were exhibited at the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts. Mahonri Sharp Young, then CGFA Director, made this astute observation: "You can always go over to Elijah Pierce's barber shop on Long Street and see for yourself that everything [he does] is absolutely real. Long Street is the 125th St. of Columbus, but there is not that much bustle. Mr. Pierce did not learn his work from us or anyone else. He used to set up his wares at country fairs, and, in a way, he still does; he is a preacher, and he likes to talk about his vivid carvings (and) their meaning for him. On one side of the highway you find love, peace, happiness, home, content and success: on the other, confusion, woe, pain and hell house. Your life is a book, and every day a page."

In 1973, Pierce won first prize at the International Meeting of Naïve Art in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, and other great honors paved the way to his receiving a 1982 award from...
the National Endowment for the Arts' National Heritage Fellowship as one of 15 master traditional artists.

A sculpted monument to perseverance, he is now a prophet who is honored in his own land. From the current CGFA permanent collection of about 300 of his sculptures and paintings to an Elijah Pierce collection permanently housed at The Martin Luther King Center here, his creations can be appreciated by and an inspiration to uncounted generations of Columbus people yet to be born.

The belated acclaim from intelligentsia who verified his being a "genuine folk artist" gave him tremendous joy, but he also noted without rancor: "For 30 or 40 years, only a few of your people (whites) knew about me. Now I know the joy of making other people happy. The Good Lord has blessed me. People are calling me a celebrity, but the Bible says you have to humble yourself to be exalted. I'm just the same old Elijah Pierce."

But in a conversation with a friend not long before his death on May 7, 1984, at the age of 92, he laughed slyly, "You know, I'm famous now." The laughter grew in both. "If I'd a known this all those years ago, I woulda bought a bigger hat."

He never did, though. In private, he hewed to his eyeshade, which enabled light to focus more directly on the visions which took shape before him.

Elijah Pierce, the barber and the preacher, knew the truth of Ecclesiastes 3:1,2: To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted."
Elijah Pierce, Woodcarver (Paperback)

by Norma J. Roberts (Editor)

- **Paperback**
- **Publisher:** Columbus Museum of Art (November 1992)
- **ISBN-10:** 0918881307
- **ISBN-13:** 978-0918881304

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⭐⭐⭐⭐⭐ African American Folk Artist, March 18, 2003

By Enrique Torres "Rico" (San Diegotitlan, Califas) - [See all my reviews](#)

This review is from: Elijah Pierce: Woodcarver (Paperback)

If you are into folk art, African-American cultural contributions, religious themed art, a woodcarver or just someone who appreciates intricate woodcarving details than you will enjoy and should seek this book. Elijah Pierce's sculptures are broken down into various categories including free standing carvings, religious reliefs, secular reliefs and autobiographical works. This catalogue is from an exhibition from the Columbus Museum of Art that displayed Elijah Pierce's works in 1973, eleven years before his death. They have the largest collection of his works, it features over 200 pieces. His style was unbelievable, his panels filled with incredible detail, full of emotion, religious fervor and cultural pride. In the book you will see his tribute in wood to sports hero's too like football player Archie Griffin or boxing legend Joe Lewis. Many of the works are patriotic themed, including tributes to Abraham Lincoln. Martin Luther King, The Kennedy's and Paul Revere. One of the things that sets Elijah Pierce apart, besides his technical carving skills, was his colorful painting of the wooden figures or reliefs. He used many different colors including bright solid tones that brought more life into the wood. There are several essays included and the mystical qualities of wood are discusses by him and several other woodcarvers. His life is discussed in the essays, including his hardships as well as his successes, with the end result being an intimate portrait of the artist. Being a man of tremendous religious conviction, coming from a strong religious family, a preacher himself, his carvings became his pulpit. The religious fervor in his carvings are amazing and the biblical stories in wood come to life and jump out at you. His "Book of Wood" is an astounding series of panels bound together and was used on occasion for his sermons but eventually housed in his barbershop where it was the centerpiece of Pierce's art display's. You must find this book to see all the exquisite works of art this master woodcarver created, it will astound you in it's simplicity, varied subject matter and asthetic qualities. Elijah Pierce has left a legacy that should not be missed as it reflects the everyman qualities of the American spirit. Highly recommended for art enthusiasts, folk art collectors, teachers and especially woodcarvers, as it is very inspirational.
Your life is a book: the artistic legacy of Elijah Pierce - African American folk artist

American Visions, Feb-March, 1993 by John F. Moe

Folk artist Elijah Pierce understood his mission in life: God had given him a talent to carve the messages of the Bible, and it was his responsibility to carry out this mission. Many times he said, in rhythmic tones and with complete conviction, God speaks to me. I know his voice. Elijah, your life is a book, and every day you write a page, and when you are done you won't be able to deny it because you wrote it yourself."

Pierce carved with the conviction of someone who understood his mission. A particularly personal work, "Obey God and Live," tells the story of Pierce's conversion to faith in God and Jesus Christ. The carving depicts the time when the artist was a young man, perhaps in his early 20s. His mother had instructed him to read the Bible, but the young Pierce was tempted instead to look at a new Sears, Roebuck catalog that had arrived in the mail. In the images on the right of the carving, Pierce is being punished by God for running away from His teachings. He remembered that God touched him on his head, and something happened that made him appear to be dead. When he confessed his faith in Christ, he was restored to good health.
During his lifetime, Pierce played a central role in his community; he was an articulate and thoughtful interpreter of his surroundings, and his art reflected and told the story of his times. As an artist, a barber, and a lay minister, he lived at the very heart of black community life. He was surrounded by signs and symbols that spoke not only of the hereafter but also of life as an African American in an inhospitable Country. He was constantly dealing with apprehensions about the hereafter and religious salvation and with the anxieties of living in a society in which people like himself were not always welcome. Pierce's oeuvre is replete with works that negotiate these two worlds, the world of the now and the world of the hereafter.

When he died in 1984 at age 92, Pierce had carved his impressions of the major events of African-American history as well as - and distinct from -American history. He carved images of slavery, work gangs in the South, U.S. presidents, black community leaders, and important events, such as the integration of the U.S. armed forces. He also carved the personal stories of his youth in the South and his adulthood in Ohio. He carved important universal messages for the community that concerned sacred and secular themes, such as the importance of neighborliness in community behavior.

Pierce's story began in Mississippi, where he was born on March 5, 1892. He grew up not far from Tupelo, on a cotton plantation outside of Baldwyn, in a part of Mississippi that was known for its logging industry. Early on, Pierce was surrounded by woods and acquainted with the business of timber cutting, and he became well accustomed to both.

He often carved images from his boyhood depicting scenes of his family, especially his mother. He tended not to sell family pieces, because when he did, he generally regretted the sale. Once he sold a carving in which the subject was his mother, and he tried to buy it back. He was genuinely surprised and disturbed that the purchaser would not sell it back to him. It was, after all, his own depiction of his own mother.

The painted wood relief "The Place of My Birth," which depicts Pierce's home in Baldwyn, is perhaps the most significant of the family pieces and is certainly one of the most striking. It shows a typical plantation house of the area, a dogtrot or turkey-trot house. There are nine people in the carving, of which probably seven or eight are Pierce's brothers and sisters.

Pierce recognized early that he wanted independence and a trade that would allow him to work anywhere. "I needed a trade where I could be independent," he said. "I didn't need to work for nobody. And I liked barbering. I knew a barber in town, and I was just fascinated by cutting hair. That man would allow me to learn barbering from him, and so I did."
He decided that barbering would be the most practical profession for an aspiring young black man in the early part of the century. It was also an important occupation in the African-American community, because whites would not barber for blacks.

After the death of his first wife, Zetta, Pierce decided to follow the migration of thousands north to the cities. He traveled first to Illinois. "I never had any problem getting a job 'cause every town needed a barber. So I worked wherever I stopped," he recalled. It was in Illinois that he met his second wife, Cornelia Houeston. She was from Columbus, Ohio, and he followed her there; they were married September 8, 1923.

Pierce established his barbershop on Long Street, one of Columbus' major thoroughfares from the 1920s to the 60s and one of the black community's business, social and religious hubs. He thrived in this environment. Before urban renewal eliminated much of the walk-in barber trade, his barbershop was one of the places for people to stop by and catch up on the news of the neighborhood.

In 1948, after his second wife died, Pierce came into his own as a mature artist, and he became known as a folk hero. His fame spread nationally and, to some degree, internationally. And in 1952, at age 60, Pierce married his third wife, Estelle Greene, and began his life anew.

During the 1960s and early '70s, he was carving his best work, both technically and philosophically. Like many artists, Pierce reached this peak late in life, when he was in his 70s and early 80s. In his late 80s and 90s, his carving became less and less proficient, but the strength of his vision remained intact and his images continued to reflect the power of his convictions.

More Articles of Interest

- Discussing the work of Elijah Pierce
- Conclusion of 'Rings' saga is one film that rules them all. (News)
- National Headliners - political activity of African Americans - Brief Article
- Banks, Bridges, Brosnan, Murphy, Ruffalo, Sims, Set as Presenters at Golden...

Although his messages encompass the sacred and the secular, in the end only one message was paramount for Elijah Pierce, and that was the experience of salvation. For Pierce, all of the daily life
and the trials that people were forced to endure amounted to preparation for everlasting life. In this battle, Pierce believed that he had done his best to endure and prepare himself. Through his art and actions, he attempted to demonstrate the intensity and wisdom required to survive all earthly trials. He believed in his community, and he believed in his God.

By the end of his life, Pierce felt he had completed his God-given task and had created a collection of art work that conveyed the importance of religious faith and salvation. He had his own art gallery in which he could illustrate to visitors the messages he had received that related to life's religious, social and political dilemmas. He was satisfied with his work and felt that he had made, to the best of his ability, an answer to God's challenge: "Your life is a book, and every day you write a page." In Pierce's book there is certainly a profound personal witness to his faith through his combination of preaching and art.

Elijah Pierce, Woodcarver

In 1993, the 101st anniversary of Elijah Pierce's birth, the Columbus Museum of Art presents a major retrospective on the eminent African-American folk artist. The exhibition, "Elijah Pierce, Woodcarver," reconsiders the art world's notion of the folk artist as a simple, isolated visionary. Pierce is instead recognized as a complex and sophisticated artist who lived and worked at the very heart of his community.

From 1970 until Pierce's death in 1984, hundreds of people from across the country visited his Columbus, Ohio, barbershop. Here they saw his vibrantly carved and painted wood reliefs, tableaus, message signs, and animals and figures that reflected a remarkable personal history: Pierce's childhood on a Mississippi cotton plantation and a deeply religious upbringing; his migration north; and his establishment as a barber, carver and lay minister in Columbus.

This article is taken from the essay "Your Life Is a Book," by John F. Moe, in Elijah Pierce, Woodcarver (Columbus Museum of Art, 1992) and adapted with the permission of the Columbus Museum of Art. John F. Moe is a Fulbright professor of American studies at the University of Bergen in Norway and an adjunct associate professor of ethnology and art education at The Ohio State University in Columbus.

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Elijah Pierce

About the artist

1892–1984, lived and worked in Columbus, Ohio

A Baptist preacher, a barber, and one of the most important American wood carvers of the twentieth century, Elijah Pierce tends to be identified with Columbus, Ohio, where he lived much of his life and where most of his work resides. However, he was born on a cotton plantation in Baldwyn, Mississippi, the son of a former slave. His uncle Lewis Wallace taught him how to whittle, but barbering attracted his attention as a trade. After the death of his first wife in 1915, Pierce joined the Great Migration north, working as an itinerant laborer and preacher—he earned his license in 1920 in his home town—and eventually following his soon-to-be second wife Cornelia to Columbus, Ohio, in 1923. In Columbus he was employed steadily as a barber and began to carve more seriously after presenting Cornelia with a small elephant as a birthday present. He promised her a whole zoo, and Pierce’s art practice began with that menagerie.

By the 1930s, Pierce was making colorful painted-and-polished sculptural reliefs as well as freestanding figures, which illustrated Biblical scenes, depicted popular cultural events and personages—particularly from sports and cinema—and recounted autobiographical details. He opened his own barbershop in 1951, installing a woodworking studio. Pierce’s sculptures, already well-known in his community, garnered broader artworld attention in the 1970s, and he exhibited nationally and internationally, retiring from his business and concentrating exclusively on his art. He began to tackle more topical subjects like the Civil Rights Movement and Watergate. In 1982 he won a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, in recognition of his cultural achievements. Pierce’s work, although concerned specifically with the African-American experience, maintains a wide appeal for its formal refinement and its direct, plainspoken communication of universal themes both religious and secular. Pierce’s sermon sculptures are among the most sought-after in the pantheon of self-taught American artists, and his work can be found in institutions worldwide, including the National Museum of American Art; the Columbus Museum of Art; the American Folk Art Museum; and the Wexner Center for the Arts.

—Brendan Greaves

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Artwork

![Artwork Image 1](image1)
![Artwork Image 2](image2)
![Artwork Image 3](image3)
![Artwork Image 4](image4)
![Artwork Image 5](image5)
Elijah Pierce

*Hear No, See No, Speak No Evil*, c. 1942
free-standing woodcarving on stained base
3 1/2 x 7 3/4 x 2 1/2 inches
Signed and annotated underneath base: Elijah Pierce 534 E. Long
Private Collection courtesy of Keny Galleries, Columbus, Ohio

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