Horace Pippin (American
West Chester, Pennsylvania 1888 - 1946 West Chester, Pennsylvania)

*Harmonizing*, 1944

Signed and dated lower right: H. Pippin 1944
Oil on canvas
24 1/2 x 30 3/8 in. (62.2 x 77.2 cm)
Gift of Joseph and Enid Bissett, 1964
AMAM 1964.26

Pippin, a self-taught artist, possessed an instinctive sense for color, composition, and form. In *Harmonizing*, a street corner serves as an impromptu stage for an a cappella quartet gathered before a weathered board fence. With bold simplicity, Pippin astutely evokes the visual and audible pleasures of an everyday encounter, at once both unremarkable and unexpected.

There is a strong regional focus to the street corner vignette depicted in *Harmonizing*, as there is in many of the artist's works. According to one of Pippin's neighbors during the early 1940s, the painting is set on the corner of West Gay and Hannum Streets in West Chester, Pennsylvania; Pippin and his family lived nearby in a house at 327 West Gay Street and, according to local legend, the artist enjoyed painting on street corners in the neighborhood. Other paintings from these years depict similar local scenes: a row of brick houses, shaded by a spreading tree, is the unpretentious subject of *West Chester, Pennsylvania* (1942; Wichita Art Museum, inv. M51.44); *My Backyard* (1941; private collection) depicts the artist's garden, bounded by fences and the backs of houses.

Located about twenty miles north of the Maryland border, the town of West Chester had a relatively large black population in the early twentieth century, although individual neighborhoods were mostly segregated. Throughout Pippin's images of the everyday activities and concerns of African-American residents, there is a strong undercurrent expressing a personal desire for an environment both racially integrated and free of racial tension; *After Supper: West Chester* (1936; collection Leon Hecht and Robert Pincus-Witten), for example, depicts blacks and whites companionably sharing an evening outdoors.

*Harmonizing* belongs to a varied group of outdoor genre scenes executed by the artist throughout the 1930s and '40s, counterparts to the his better-known domestic interiors. Many of Pippin's genre scenes are based on recollections of his childhood during the 1890s, offering "rare glimpses of a little-known group, African-American residents of small northeastern cities prior to the great migrations of the early twentieth century." The subject of *Harmonizing*, on the other hand, is distinctly contemporary. But, like all of the artist's works, it is an affirmation of the quotidian lives of everyday people, "events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens."

M. E. Wieseman

**Biography**

Horace Pippin was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, on 22 February 1888. Three years later his family moved to the resort town of Goshen, New York. Pippin left school at age fourteen (in 1902) to help support his family, and by 1912 had moved to Paterson, New Jersey, where, over the next five years, he held various jobs as a laborer. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Pippin enlisted in the U.S.

http://www.oberlin.edu/amam/Pippin_Harmonizing.htm
Army's 369th Colored Infantry Regiment. He fought along the front lines under French command, and was wounded in October 1918. After his discharge from the Army, he received the French Croix de Guerre in 1919; a Purple Heart was awarded him retroactively in 1945.

In 1920, Pippin married and settled in West Chester. As therapy for his injured right arm, he began drawing and, in 1925, burning images onto wood panels with a hot poker. He expanded to oil paints in 1928 and completed his first painting in 1930. His paintings were first exhibited locally in 1937; a solo exhibition immediately followed, and in 1938, four of his paintings were shown at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. Over the next few years, Pippin's national reputation grew, riding the crest of enthusiasm for self-taught folk artists. His works were sought after by such renowned collectors as Albert C. Barnes (of the Barnes Foundation), and he became a significant figure in the mainstream New York art world. Pippin died of a stroke on 6 July 1946.

Hailed as exemplar and chronicler of African-American life, Pippin possessed an instinctive genius for color, composition, and form. His bold and forthright paintings—genre scenes, biblical and religious scenes, interpretations of historical events, landscapes, portraits, and still lifes—are both emotionally complex and thematically sophisticated.

**General References**

**Provenance**
With Downtown Gallery, New York; sold to Enid Bissett, New York, 16 June 1944

Collection Joseph and Enid Bissett, New York, by whom given in 1964

**Exhibitions**


Munich, Haus der Kunst, 1974-75. *Art of the Naives: Themes and Affinities*. 1 November - 12 January (also shown at Zurich, Kunsthaus). Cat. no. 323.


Bellevue, Wash., Bellevue Art Museum, and Art Museum Association of America, 1985-88. *Hidden Heritage:


Literature
Wilson, Sarah J. In Horace Pippin: A Chester County Artist. Exh. cat., Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Penn., 1988, n.p., cat. no. 5.

Technical Data
The original canvas, a moderately heavy linen of relatively poor quality, was lined onto linen fabric and mounted on an ICA-type spring stretcher in 1969. The canvas is covered with a thin white ground. There is a 0.6 cm (1/4 in.) unpainted border on all sides of the canvas; this is common among the artist's paintings of the 1940s. The rich, creamy paint is applied in layers, sometimes involving different colors; for example, the light blue of the sky now visible has been applied over a darker blue paint. Other parts of the composition, such as the fence, are painted quite thinly, exposing the ground. The layered application--possibly involving different media--has produced traction crackle in the trees, the black of the street lamp, the yellow-green shirt of one of the figures, and the red roof at far right. A pentimento reveals that the arm of the street lamp was originally lower.

Footnotes


