THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

Charles McGee

2008 Kresge Eminent Artist
The Kresge Eminent Artist Award honors an exceptional artist in the visual, performing or literary arts for his or her professional achievements and contributions to Metropolitan Detroit’s cultural community. The award, which includes a $50,000 prize, is unrestricted and is given annually to an artist who has lived and worked in Wayne, Oakland or Macomb Counties for a significant number of years.

Charles McGee was named by The Kresge Foundation as their first Eminent Artist Award winner in 2008. This monograph has been created to commemorate this honor and is being published in 2010.

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Cover:
*Arm Race Arm, 1984*
Fiberglass reinforced plaster material on armature Collection of Janet and Jim Pallas

Left, detail from:
*Red, Yellow, Blue, c. 2006*
Collection of the artist.
“The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.” – Aristotle

The Kresge Foundation is proud to honor Charles McGee as the inaugural recipient of the Kresge Eminent Artist Award. He is an American artist of international renown who many years ago made the City of Detroit his home.

In establishing Kresge Arts in Detroit and its Kresge Eminent Artist Award, we celebrate local artists of the first order who have chosen to pursue their careers as residents of Metropolitan Detroit. The benefits of their presence are tremendous. Artists elevate our awareness; they unify, provoke, challenge and inspire us. And, by making their lives here, they validate continuously our decisions to do so as well.

As a community, we celebrate the creative brilliance of Charles McGee and cherish his unwavering artistic leadership in the region.

– Rip Rapson
President and CEO
The Kresge Foundation
“I am mandated by nature to do this, to make art.”

“I have no choice, you know. I breathe it. I sleep it. It’s one of the only things that I really worship.

If you look at nature, it is necessary that we have people. It’s necessary that we have frogs, snakes, water, all of these things and how they all work in concert with each other to carry out the mandates of nature — which is creating a kind of equilibrium in the universe.

The fact that you are born and exist in a particular geographic location is going to cause a chain of events that starts from birth or even before birth — what happens along the way is you take the purity of where we came from and it starts to metamorphosize as we grow and as we assess information, process the information.

I feel like the path that I have taken created my alphabet, it gives me a uniqueness that I employ readily because I feel convinced that I have been fed the truth and that nature has given me the opportunity to edit things as I have come through life.”

Composition: the Nature of McGee

Far left: Detail* from Noah's Ark: Friends, 1984–5
Mixed media on masonite board, 26.25” x 48.063”
Private collection
*Artwork altered with permission of the artist. Original artwork shown on pg. 24

Play Patterns, 2009
Enamel, fabric, mixed media collage on dibond, 5’ x 10’
Collection of the artist
Charles McGee spent much of his early childhood with his grandparents on their sharecropper’s farm near Clemson, South Carolina. When Charles moved to Detroit in 1934, he was ten years old, unschooled and unable to sign his name except with an “X.” His mother — then living in Detroit with her sister and brother-in-law and employed as a domestic worker — brought Charles and his sister to Detroit, hoping to offer them a more promising future than that available to poor blacks in the rural South of the 1930s.

Detroit, however, was in the depth of the Great Depression and people were struggling here too; life was not easy and circumstances not propitious. Add to this that Charles’ mother suffered from tuberculosis and was frequently hospitalized and that Charles found himself unprepared socially or academically to keep pace with his new school classmates.

Few could have predicted, at the time, that the young Charles McGee would grow strong and flourish in this environment and that he would become a forceful and widely beloved teacher with his own art school, an influential gallery director, a respected university professor, and an artist of such regional and national prominence that his art and his actions would significantly influence the Detroit arts community and contribute even more generally to the broadening inclusivity of American art in the late-20th century.

Charles McGee’s story is a fascinating story ... a story of triumph ... a story of supportive family members and good teachers ... a classic American story of a determined individual pulling himself up by the bootstraps ... and a story of artistic genius. McGee himself is not, I think, comfortable with the notion of “genius,” at least not in reference to himself nor perhaps in reference to the conventional idea that extraordinary achievement is linked to the lucky possession of a rare and natural gift called “genius.”

When he first entered school at the age of 10, McGee embraced art as an area in which he might excel. He enrolled in drawing classes at a branch library and later the Detroit Institute of Arts and drove himself to what was to become a tireless and lifelong effort to understand quality and to aim for the highest standards in his own work. Drawing — and later painting and sculpture — became for McGee his tools for searching for truth and for understanding the world. Today, still driven by an intense passion for understanding the world, Charles McGee remains an inveterate observer with a consistent desire to integrate his vision of the world into his art.

The view that talent relates more to persistent and disciplined effort than to a mysterious natural gift is corroborated by recent research of Swedish psychologist Anders Ericsson. From his studies of world-class achievers, Ericsson has concluded that outstanding achievement is a result, not of superior abilities but of persistent and deliberate practice over a period of many years. Ericsson posits that becoming world class in any field requires a minimum of 10,000 hours of deliberate practice — focused practice that pushes the practitioner beyond what is known and comfortable for hours a day and years on end.

The grueling demands of disciplined practice require passion and extraordinary drive but have extraordinary rewards as well. Continually pushing beyond what one can comfortably do makes an automatic response impossible, sparking the same energy and freshness of discovery that fuels the enthusiasm of children. It is this persistence of effort and this drive toward excellence that has marked the artistic career of Charles McGee, the child from South Carolina who has shared his creative life and energy so freely with the City of Detroit and with the world.

“The secret of genius is to carry the spirit of the child into old age, which means never losing your enthusiasm.” — Victor Hugo

Marion (Mame) Jackson is Distinguished Professor of Art History at Wayne State University. Her original essay was written expressly for this publication.
Press Charles McGee on the origins of his artistic obsessions, and he’s likely to take you back to that ax handle. McGee was nine, and still working with his grandfather on a sharecropper’s plot in South Carolina when the ax broke one day.

“I just felt I could fix it,” says the longtime Detroiter, now 85, “and my grandfather let me. From that moment on, I carved all the new ax handles.”

From such humble beginnings, McGee fashioned a life that would ultimately make him one of Michigan’s foremost artists, and one of the most beloved. A longtime teacher, his courtesy toward and support for younger artists are the stuff of legend.

So too are some pioneering steps in his past. Forty years ago, when African-American artists were routinely fenced out of galleries, McGee pulled together Detroit’s first group show of black artists, and then opened his own place, Gallery 7, to promote black and white artists alike.

Not bad for a guy who didn’t go to school until he was 10.

At an age when most careers are long over, McGee — with pieces at the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History — is still working at the top of his powers. In recognition of that, in 2008 the Troy-based Kresge Foundation named McGee its first-ever Eminent Artist, an annual award that comes with a $50,000 stipend. The award was created to honor a Michigan artist who, as foundation President Rip Rapson says of McGee, “has selflessly contributed to the artistic growth of others, and who creates art of the first order.”

McGee’s plans for “United We Stand,” a large installation at Wayne State University, are already in the works. Closer to home, McGee’s also wrestling with a layered collage slowly taking shape in his unheated studio across Six Mile Road from Detroit’s Marygrove College.

But back to that ax handle.

“That was the beginning of my understanding,” says McGee, speaking one snowy morning in his Rosedale Park kitchen, dressed in black wool cap and a heavy gray vest, “my first introduction to my abilities.”

A new life in Michigan

McGee’s mother had tuberculosis, and was hospitalized for much of his youth. So McGee came to Michigan to live with his aunt and uncle in 1934. “My aunt came and got me from my grandparents,” he says. “My mother was at Hermann Keifer Hospital in Detroit. She knew she was sort of dying, and wanted my sister and myself to come up.” McGee’s mother would die two years after her children’s arrival in Detroit. By that time, she’d been transferred to a sanitorium in North Carolina.

In Detroit, the budding artist’s focus emerged early, spurred by a very practical concern. He couldn’t help but notice that an artistically talented pal at Cleveland Middle School got special treatment from the teacher.

“He would skip a class and make art,” McGee says, “and get away with it. Because he was that good. And I decided I wanted some of those favors, too.”

So the young McGee buckled down, and soon found himself in the same privileged position. Eventually, his role at school evolved into something like resident artist.

“I got to be the art guru,” he recalls, “until my uncle died in 10th grade. Then I had to go to work to help my aunt.” Life accelerated from there. McGee joined the Marines, and served in the occupation of Japan at the end of World War II. Once back in Detroit, he used the GI Bill to enroll in the old Detroit Society of Arts & Crafts — now the College for Creative Studies.

“With a full-time job, it took him 10 years, until 1957, to finish his degree. “It was such a labor of love,” he says of his studies, “I didn’t even know it was work.”
In the early years, McGee was single-minded, deliberately seeking out no-account jobs that would leave him time and energy for his art. His first was as a welder with Briggs Manufacturing. “I would get a menial job — anything to free my art,” he says, “to make sure that whatever I did, I didn’t have to kiss buttss to do it. You know what I mean?” The remainder of the day was his alone, with no work-related stress to cloud his artistic focus. “I would draw,” he says, “just about every minute of my life.”

In those years, McGee was still an active churchgoer, and had to get special dispensation to duck out of choir practice to attend art classes. “I was religious at the time,” he says, “though life has weaned me of that.”

At the Society of Arts & Crafts, McGee fell under the influence of two great painting teachers — the realist Guy Palazzola and Sarkis Sarkisian, whose work was more abstract. McGee deeply admired both men, and some of his early pieces — like a still life of jade-colored pears — have a distinctly classical feel to them. But he quickly veered towards abstraction.

“Eventually my work separated from the realist tradition epitomized by Palazzola,” McGee says, “until it got flatter and flatter. Palazzola was sort of imprisoned by representationalism, although his work was great. I can’t deny that. But on the journey to learn what art is and what it’s about, I almost got asphyxiated by the elements, with the process itself. You put it out there and you organize it — that’s what makes the work important. It’s almost like me listening to Christina Aguilera — My gosh, can she sing! — or listening to Charlie Parker. You know what I mean?”

Boiled down to its essence, McGee says his journey of discovery has been one of “deconstructing what I think I know” until he arrives at new understanding. “I create art out of shapes that come naturally to me,” McGee adds. “I have no idea what’s going to come out.”

**Styles across the board** Stylistically, McGee’s adult work ranges from the primitive to the utterly abstract, from the color-suffused to canvases composed of tangled black lines bristling with energy. He is in many respects an artistic pragmatist, with an allergy to what he calls “isms.” It doesn’t matter whether work is representational — that is, if it’s a recognizable object — or abstract. “If it’s good,” McGee says, “it’s just good. If not, its energy is lethargic, and it doesn’t work.”

Valerie Mercer, the curator of The Detroit Institute of Art’s General Motors Center for African American Art, says McGee’s work over the past 20 years has developed what she calls “a very distinct, abstract, biomorphic vocabulary” — a blend of the natural and the abstract. Over and again in his work, she notes, his forms take shapes “that are mindful of snakes and insects and things like that.”

After all,” Mercer adds a bit puckishly, “he does come from the South.”

As for his huge signature piece at the DIA, “Noah’s Ark,” Mercer says that visitors ask for it all the time. “People come looking for it,” she says.

Cledie Collins Taylor, who owns Detroit’s Arts Extended Gallery, says she and McGee go back all the way to the 1960s, almost farther than she wants to contemplate. One of three Kresge jurors that chose McGee as Eminent Artist, Taylor calls McGee “the ultimate. He has evolved the way Picasso evolved.” As a young man, Taylor says McGee’s eye was sensitive and camera-like, but he veered toward greater and greater abstraction. “There are periods of Charles’ work that I really prefer — I call them the ‘active inanimate objects,’” she says. “Charles is able to put life into shape. He has a wonderful sense of design and a wonderful eye.”

Indeed, an eye for color. To arrive at precisely the hue he was seeking in an early painting acquired by Taylor and her husband, McGee torched it at a friend’s home. “Charles almost burned down some friend’s bathroom doing this,” Taylor says. “He set the painting afire. That’s how he got the color he wanted.”

All the same, Taylor warns you that McGee will bristle when asked to explain his work. “He doesn’t like to be questioned, particularly about his work,” she says. “Someone will say, ‘What do you mean here?’ And Charles will say, ‘It meant nothing — I just wanted to have that line touch that line there, and that value touch that value.’”

The current project consuming McGee is a 5-by-10-foot painted collage, slowly taking shape on the floor of his studio, surrounded by neat piles of exotic fabric that may, or may not, get integrated into the work. He’s also built the mock-up for an enormous
assemblage, “United We Stand,” that will go in front of Wayne State University’s Old Main Building whenever the funding comes through.

Pushing black artists Beyond the hundreds of exhibitions of his work over the years, McGee organized “Seven Black Artists,” the first all-black group show at the Detroit Artists Market in 1968. For a time, he ran his own business, Gallery 7, helping to promote dozens of artists, both black and white. His now-closed Charles McGee Art School gave free lessons to legions of Detroiters while, at a higher level, he taught at Eastern Michigan University for 18 years.

Jennifer Clark, an artist living in Half Moon Bay outside San Francisco, studied with McGee 20 years ago at EMU and calls him one of the “really significant” people in her life. “Charles is very much one of those people who lifts you up,” Clark says. “He’s very encouraging, in a way that inspires people to find their own voice. I not only learned a lot about art from Charles,” she says, “but a lot about life — the ‘honing of vision,’ as he would always call it.”

Now retired from college teaching, McGee still gives weekly art classes at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center. Teaching seems to be in his blood, almost as if it were a necessary complement to his work in the studio. “Not only is Charles very talented,” says the DIA’s Mercer, “but he’s influenced generations of artists through his example, his dedication and commitment to his craft.”

An easy pick Taylor says that as far as the Kresge jury was concerned, McGee’s mix of artistry and outreach to young artists easily put him over the top. The jurors, who included Taylor as well as former Cranbrook Academy of Art director Gerhardt Knodel and art historian Dennis Alan Nawrocki, voted unanimously for McGee. And then, says Taylor, “These three old people jumped up and high-fived one another.”

In discussing the Kresge prize, McGee characteristically turns the spotlight from himself toward the wider community, noting that the award’s real value is in the encouragement it can give to younger artists — a message that somebody out there is paying attention, and will reward excellence in Michigan. Still, for all his self-effacing politeness, anyone who’s dealt with McGee knows he’s no pushover. That sets Taylor to laughing. She admits that in negotiations to hang McGee’s work in her gallery, she’s found herself repeating, time and again, “Why sure, baby,” to any conditions he laid down. “One does not argue with Charles,” Taylor says. “He has a very clear notion of where he’s going. Charles was always the complete artist, from the bone out.”

Noah’s Ark: Genesis, 1984
Enamel and mixed media on masonite panels, 120" x 180"
Permanent collection of The Detroit Institute of Arts
Gift of Joan Lovell and James A. Tuck

Nagasaki, 2005
Mixed media and collage on plywood, 31" x 24"
Collection of the artist

Michael Hodges covers the visual arts for The Detroit News. This essay is expanded from his original story which appeared on February 7, 2009.
Consider the title again:
PATHS: STILL SEARCHING.
Reconsider “still”, the word in the middle. See it for what it is, the point of balance, the connection between paths & searching between what comes before & what follows. Equal in importance in conception & connotation to its companions.

Still
Is the assurance of an unspoken commitment to witnesses of the works of Charles McGee.
Read “still” not for its adjective or noun denotations of “inanimate or silent”. No.
To the converse – It is to be taken in its adverbial implication: “more than ever”; “and with greater reason”.

Was & is. Still. A continuing assurance

validated by our awareness & acknowledgement of the distance, the energy, vigor & fortitude of this traveled artist, who continues to be the point of balance on the quest he began decades ago.
Charles McGee is on a path through space-time along trodden tracks & least traveled trails to gain or retain or explore & explain the course of action or succession of events of his ever evolving philosophy & identity.

& in the process, this master of materials, manufactured & natural, mixed & matched, leaves visual journals of the journey, a marvel of maturity & craftsmanship & the magic of the conscious & unconscious whose surfaces, in two and three dimensions are, an ever intriguing interplay of form, rhythm, & harmony.

In McGee’s work everything leads to everything else. Every possibility leads to a question, every question to a choice, every choice to a possibility.

Even the supremely chaotic example of NAGASAKI, the ultimate anti-art anti-human occurrence of nature in disservice to itself & man to man is not an end or a beginning but a witnessed site stored, like all of the other instances gathered over a lifetime, & presented as a point of information synthesized & displayed for our edification. LINEAGE becomes a squiggled & scrawled pencil line given dimension, TIME MODULES I & II offers a glimpse of a given moments density... The ruthless rhythm of the certainty & the chance of time’s push & pull, encourage this pathfinder through the unexplored regions of person & universal existence.

& knight-errant like, he stays or tames the dragons he encounters, he records his deeds, and continues, still searching, with no end in sight.

Bill Harris is a writer and professor of English at Wayne State University. “Paths of the Traveled Artist” is his revision of “PATHS; STILL SEARCHING Charles McGee at The Scarab Club” September 14–October 15, 2005.

Detail from Urban Extract, 1979, Mixed media, wood and plaster, 48” x 32” Collection of Susan Tait.
Evolution: Signature McGee

Left:
Detail from Noah’s Ark: Time Modules, 1987
Oil marker on masonite board, 24” x 35”
Collection of Jennifer Yanover
*Artwork altered with permission of the artist.

This page:
1 Untitled, 1997
Enamel on 400 lb. watercolor paper, masonite board, 28” x 41”
Collection of Lorenzo J. Taylor
2 Ritual 1, 1993
Panted hydrostone, 67” x 35” x 22.5”
Collection of Elke and Eileen Aboulafia
3 Spectral Rhythms, c. 2004
Enamel on masonite board, 23.5” x 23.5”
Collection of Victor and Maxine Moore
4 Spring, 1951
Oil on masonite board, 9” x 11.75”
Private collection
5 Trilogy: Yellow, c. 2002
Acrylic, mixed media on masonite
Collection of Daniel S. Hoops Revocable Trust
6 Patterns of April, c. 1968
Charcoal pencils and kneaded eraser on illustration board, 60” x 40”
Private collection
The context is critical to understanding Charles McGee’s art. Always ahead of his time, his work reflects his relationship, as an African-American, to social, anthropological and ethical circumstances. He is passionate, committed to what he believes in, and is unafraid of being out there in art, on his own. You can trust that the ideas his art abstractly relays, are felt deeply by McGee and the messages come from wisdom, perceptive observations, and foremost, his heart.

Those early pencil drawings of African-Americans, particularly women and children, were gorgeous; statements of adoration of the female during a period when the black woman was struggling to assert her identity and there was little recognition of the African-Americans as a people of strength and character. Though other artists were working in similar territory, McGee distinguished himself both by his superb technical skills and the sense he conveyed of the person, the individual he was drawing. While he was giving artistic form to the “Black is Beautiful,” message of those decades of the 1960s and ’70s, McGee was also seeing and thinking abstractly — in the compositions’ sense of space and scale.

During the next period of his work, he was preoccupied with the exploration of abstract structure. Always a master of the drawn line, in these drawings and paintings line was used as a notation, a marker of time elapsing, of the person’s hand making the mark and the order of linear, geometric forms. McGee was absorbing the lessons of the art being made in the art world in general by important artists of the 1970s. Looking back it is clear that this was a transitional phase for him, where he was learning how he could make figurative works that were also abstract. And he understood how to build large-scale sculptures using the basics of geometric construction. It seems like he was shifting his art, seeking a language of his own. And this he found, very successfully, in his mature work: sculpture and paintings that still carry his voice today. This art is rich with invented imagery grown from traditional African and indigenous peoples’ beliefs and fables, images abstracted from any sense of modulated, realistic form, instead painted in flattened color and built up layer by layer. The images are full of patterns and colors that make the paintings and sculptures active, engaging and playful. During his years as an art dealer, McGee sold classic African sculpture with its superb patterning. He spent time with the African traders and learned much about the rituals and history on his own. This strand of history, along with his early figurative work, informs the current art. But his imagery is more universal now, always a celebration of the creative nature of humankind. The relationship of people to animals to vegetation, the sense of wonder that knits all of us who inhabit this planet together, animates the work. McGee is preoccupied with the global universe of today that begins from our shared early roots.

Marsha Miro is a founder of MOCAD: Museum of Contemporary Art of Detroit and former fine arts critic for The Detroit Free Press. Her original essay was written expressly for this publication in April, 2010.
Charting the Course of Time: The Work of Charles Mcgee

by MaryAnn Wilkinson

Charles McGee at 85 continues to change, reinvent, and experiment with every aspect of creative expression. At a time when many artists would be content to simply get around the golf course, his studio practice is as vibrant and intense as at any time during his long career. Since his early days as an artist in the 1950s, the scope of his work has encompassed intimate figurative charcoal drawings, abstract mural paintings, and large-scale public sculpture. His protean approach to making art eludes traditional formalist labels and owes little allegiance to the styles of others. McGee’s journey from genre painting to works that challenge the accepted definition of words such as “figurative,” “abstract,” “painting,” and “sculpture” has been the steady, cumulative progression of a personal aesthetic vocabulary. His works never seem to follow a neat linear evolution. Rather, they develop with an uneven cadence, sometimes through the methodical honing of skills, sometimes with abrupt shifts in approach. A complex set of motivations, social as well as aesthetic, resonates in this work and guides the artist’s formal approach. To understand the evolution of his body of work, one must consider McGee’s art as both a continuum and a totality, a synthesis of observations and understandings accumulated over a long life.

McGee began to get attention as an artist through charcoal drawings and paintings in the 1950s. These works demonstrate the increasing assurance of his use of supple outline coupled with a strong interest in the range of tones from light to dark. His subjects were most often portrait studies or urban scenes taken from life as in which scrupulously rendered and Titian, helped him free his brushwork and constructions and explored the possibilities of two-dimensional representation of form defined by light characteristic of his charcoal drawings. From abandoned, partially destroyed buildings around the city, McGee recomposed these elements into freestanding or relief sculptures, rufueal allusions to the cycle of decay and regeneration that characterize the urban landscape and the effects of the passing of time. This new sculptural vocabulary assertively moved away from the wall for the first time in the artist’s career, although many of the pieces retain the flatness of painting. The openings in the porous wall sections and unglazed window frames allowed new considerations of the effects of light and shadow which differed from the two-dimensional representation of form defined by light characteristic of his charcoal drawings.

By the early 1980s, McGee’s ideas had begun to coalesce and his work turned in a vigorous new direction. McGee credits an important shift in his personal life to the change in his art from the raw and austere “Urban Extract” works to the sensuous whimsy of the “Noah’s Ark” series. Happy and with a renewed faith in the future, he approached his work with an upbeat mood. He began to paint again, combining painted surfaces with collage. He continued to experiment with light, color, and pattern. Most importantly, he reintroduced realistic imagery into his works. The most ambitious and dramatic examples of his return to figuration are the large-scale works created after 1980. In both painting and sculpture, McGee had long felt comfortable working on a large scale; in the early 1970s he completed his first outdoor mural at the corner of Wyoming and Curtis Streets in Detroit (now lost). His four-year appointment to the Michigan Art in Public Places Commission led him to reexamine the implications of working in three dimensions in the public arena.

Even in these early works McGee was moving away from the realist style that was prevalent in local painting at the time. His investigation of art-historical masters such as Artemisia Gentileschi, Rembrandt, and Titian, helped him free his brushwork and develop a brighter palette. Fascinated by process, McGee to crystallize his ideas about the relationship between color and tempo that would inform his later work. Travel, especially to vibrant, colorful locales, such as Morocco and his beloved Spain, has remained an inspiration for McGee. While photographs of the Michigan landscape were the basis for much of his realistic painting of the 1950s, by the end of the 1960s this information served a different function. These later photographs read less like a sightseeing chronicle than as a sketchbook, capturing color combinations, repetitive patterns, and the effect of light. The combinations and shifts in medium that characterize McGee’s current work make an appearance in the 1970s, when his first created collages and constructions and explored the possibilities of physically opening up the picture plane. In a series entitled “All Ablaze,” McGee used an awl to puncture the surface of sheets of white watercolor paper with tiny holes in ordered patterns. Inspired by the keypunch patterns of computer tape, the works imply a symbolic, enigmatic language.

The “Urban Extract” series of the late 1970s ordered the world more directly and with a powerful emotional charge. Segments of walls with hanging, broken wiring and empty window frames were salvaged from the realist style that was prevalent in local painting at the time. His investigation of art-historical masters such as Artemisia Gentileschi, Rembrandt, and Titian, helped him free his brushwork and develop a brighter palette. Fascinated by process, McGee to crystallize his ideas about the relationship between color and tempo that would inform his later work. Travel, especially to vibrant, colorful locales, such as Morocco and his beloved Spain, has remained an inspiration for McGee. While photographs of the Michigan landscape were the basis for much of his realistic painting of the 1950s, by the end of the 1960s this information served a different function. These later photographs read less like a sightseeing chronicle than as a sketchbook, capturing color combinations, repetitive patterns, and the effect of light. The combinations and shifts in medium that characterize McGee’s current work make an appearance in the 1970s, when his first created collages and constructions and explored the possibilities of physically opening up the picture plane. In a series entitled “All Ablaze,” McGee used an awl to puncture the surface of sheets of white watercolor paper with tiny holes in ordered patterns. Inspired by the keypunch patterns of computer tape, the works imply a symbolic, enigmatic language.

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McGee speaks fondly of his early years on the farm as “living in Nature’s Corner,” vividly remembering the variations of terrain, the colors of soil and sky, and the animal life — snakes, rats, insects — common to a rural landscape. The early memories of living on the land have found particular resonance in the “Noah’s Ark” works. The presence of both wild and tame animals in an environment shared with humans underscores McGee’s belief in the equality of all living creatures. Insects are both literally and figuratively included in his painted collages, held in a formal balance by sinuous, boldly patterned snakes and plump, crawling rodents. In many of the works, wilding galloping horses, spotted felines, and various birds are readily identifiable, but other animal-like, biomorphic forms are not so clearly defined. Each shape, however, retains a sense of individualism, clearly on a par with the human forms in the composition, and has equal visual weight. For McGee, these works present nature as a continuum from “the highest in the sky (birds)” to “the lowest on the ground (snakes),” indicating his rejection of the notion that man is a superior being. An abiding interest in and a keen understanding of the unique nature of each animal and shape underscores his formal inventions. His creatures and organic forms are energized to such a degree that they seem able to exist outside the composition and indeed, many run right off of the edge of the canvas.

Although not personally devout, McGee was well aware of the importance and tremendous influence of religion and its traditions. The Old Testament story of Noah’s Ark — simple, unenigmatic, and widely known — appealed to him as a theme that need not be treated as a narrative to be understood. The story, rich with possibilities for developing imagery, embodied many important personal issues for McGee. His love of community, his concern about racial strife, and his ebullent sense of optimism could all be expressed in explorations of the biblical tale. Like the story, McGee’s works are easily understood, yet the underlying ideas are profound and all encompassing. He has infused each piece with love and hope for humanity. The theme of “Noah’s Ark” has become a forum for the resolution of problems that have preoccupied McGee for a lifetime: his evolving ideas on formal methods, a willingness to embrace nontraditional media, and an unwavering belief in the fundamental importance of art to life. These works are the confident expression of a man who has found his place in the world.

Charles McGee’s enormous body of work, done over more than 60 years in the studio, has been a continuous synthesis of lessons learned and ideas pursued. In 1994 he wrote, “art charts the course of time,” feeling himself always moving forward. In the process of reordering, juxtaposing, and layering to find a new way to express his inner peace and desire to connect with the rest of humanity, he has created works that are moving, fresh and vibrant, reflecting his attitude of never resting, never looking back.
The McGee dynamic

From the start of his long, ongoing career Charles McGee has known — unerringly — how to engage viewers in both figurative and abstract compositions. His spirited murals and sculptures, abounding with animated figures and shapes, populate indoor and outdoor Detroit locales. Nearly a dozen enlivens sites ranging from the Detroit Institute of Arts (“Genesis,” 1984) to a Detroit People Mover station (“The Blue Nile” at the Broadway stop, 1985) to three recent reliefs (“Freedom Bound,” 1994) to a Detroit People Mover station (“Genesis,” 1984) to a Detroit People Mover station (“The Blue Nile” at the Broadway stop, 1985) to “The Blue Nile” at the Broadway stop, 1985) to the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History (“Play/Ground,” 1994) to three recent reliefs (“Regeneration,” 2007, in which he has used either a representational or abstract style. The Old Testament account of Noah’s Ark and its deliverance from the Flood is, for McGee, an allegory of society’s escape from imminent destruction so that human progress might continue. The artist has also likened the cataclysm of the Deluge to the Detroit riots of 1967, which also necessitated a fresh start in its aftermath.

McGee’s multilayered installation at William Beaumont Hospital “speaks,” the artist explains, “to the spirit of healing and renewal made possible through medical science.” Twelve organic forms suggestive of microorganisms, chromosomes, and microbes interact and overlap with fourteen amorphous human figures. Nine underlying black rhomboid panels denote the laboratories and research institutions that produce medicine. McGee has identified the syncopated rhythms of jazz as an influence on his sprightly, seemingly extemporaneous compositions. “Progression”’s propulsive dynamic, anchored by the familiar tale of Noah and the Ark, reveals how the artist has married ancient and modern to fruitful effect. Other examples of public art by McGee — eight in all — grace such Michigan sites as Traverse City, Ypsilanti, and Wilberforce, Ohio. 

Charles McGee’s works are available for viewing at many public locations throughout the Detroit metropolitan area. Five of his best-loved artworks may be seen at the venues listed below:

1. Noah’s Ark: Genesis
   The Detroit Institute of Arts
   5200 Woodward Avenue, Detroit, Michigan

2. Freedom Bound
   Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History
   315 E. Warren Avenue at Brush Street
   Detroit, Michigan

3. Blue Nile
   People Mover Mural
   Broadway Station (Corner of Broadway and John R)
   Detroit, Michigan

4. Regeneration
   Henry Ford Hospital
   2799 W. Grand Boulevard
   Detroit, Michigan

5. Progression
   William Beaumont Hospital
   3001 W. Thirteen Mile Road
   Royal Oak, Michigan
Historical Perspectives

For me the most exciting event occurred on the Saturday morning after the opening. Art teachers in the Detroit public high schools had each been asked to select three or four students who they felt would be interested in attending a reception at the Market. They would see the show and meet and talk with the artists about opportunities for education and careers in the field of art in Detroit. Laura Hager was in charge of the reception. Eighty students and a number of their teachers attended. I would like to believe that the black students who were there were stimulated and encouraged by what they heard and saw, and that there are now artists working in Detroit who recall that morning.

There was another renovation from the show, one that unquestionably added to the richness of Detroit's own community – Gallery 7. The summer following the Market show, Gallery 7 opened under the aegis of Charles McGee at 8232 McNichols, with most of the artists from the Market show represented. The gallery, both at the McNichols location and later in the Fisher building, was to be a focal point for Detroit's black artists for many years.

Looking back on the exhibition, Charles McGee says, "The show had that energy that appears wherever one finds excellence in the arts. It brought together Detroit's black artists and engendered among them a comradeship that made it easier for them to continue in their work."

There are those who might believe an exhibition of black artists patronizing, or divisive or even irrelevant. In retrospect, given that particular time and our particular city, "Seven Black Artists," even in some of its angry statements, was unifying, for if art is good art, it is universal art; it underlines the commonality of our humanity. It tells us there are no "others," there is only "us."

"I think the reason for making art, or at least for my trying to make art has to do with trying to create a better world. Making it so that one does not have to discriminate between the haves and the have nots."

— McGee in conversation with biographer Nick Sousanis.
Making art available to everyone has long been the cornerstone of Charles McGee’s personal philosophy. “The community aspect of it (art) drives my work,” says McGee. “If you look at my imagery, it talks about connectivity, how all of these elements come together.” It’s the reason McGee, still vibrant at the age of 85, persists in the creation of new artwork and continues to “connect” in his role as educator and community leader.

The work of this 20th-century master artist is part of prestigious collections nationally and internationally, and on permanent display in The Detroit Institute of Arts, Troy Beaumont, Henry Ford and Detroit Receiving Hospitals, The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Michigan State University, Central Michigan University, The Detroit People Mover and countless other public venues.

Indeed, McGee seems ubiquitous of late. His recent retrospectives at Eastern Michigan University and Detroit’s College for Creative Studies enjoyed glowing critical reviews and wide attendance. He’s acting as curator for an upcoming show in Saginaw, judging numerous exhibitions, and still teaching a popular mixed media class once a week at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center.

“Art should come to the point to where it’s integral to the vocabulary of daily life. We should not make it precious beyond its capacity. The average person looking at these things should be able to enjoy it, and that’s the joy of making it as far as I’m concerned. It’s that communication with the public.” — Charles McGee in the film “Art in The Stations, Detroit People Mover.”

McGee’s instinctual ability to communicate with young artists was duly noted by the head of Eastern Michigan University’s art department, Kingsley Calkins, who convinced McGee, with his 10th grade education, to join the faculty at EMU in 1969, where he went on to teach for the next 18 years. McGee soon became Director of the university’s Sill Gallery as well, a position that allowed him to showcase the work of the school’s emerging artists.

The choice also afforded McGee the opportunity to resume a critical role in the Detroit arts community — that of public arts promoter. “The Michigan Council for the Arts was very active right about that time, late 80s, very early 90s — before many of the public arts programs in Michigan were cut. I was asked to conduct a free class for interested students at Detroit’s Northern High School. I wound up asking (artist) Allie McGhee to help me because there were too many students to handle myself. One was Tyree Guyton.” Guyton would later become famous as the creator of the Heidelberg Project in Detroit.

Service to the cultural and educational arts has been a constant in the course of McGee’s distinguished career, beginning with his turn as curator for “Seven...
Today, the paintings, sculptures and assemblages created by Charles McGee enrich and beautify the day-to-day lives of ordinary people who pass through Michigan’s public spaces.

Making artwork which will meet the rigors of public exhibit, however challenging, is a task that does not daunt the ever intrepid McGee.

“I've always been very involved in creating art in public places, very involved,” says McGee.

He tackled any number of problems in developing the techniques that would serve “Blue Nile,” his piece in the Broadway Station of Detroit's People Mover, and ensure its durability in Michigan’s severe climate. After much trial and error he chose to work with “alucobond, guaranteed for over 100 years without any problems. The paint that I chose to use was industrial enamel,” he explains in a documentary on the making of the People Mover Art.

Experimenting with cutting edge technology to provide a new medium for interpreting his art is an enduring McGee characteristic. “My brain is not lame,” laughs McGee. “I’m not afraid to try something new.”

“I admire that about him,” says fellow artist and long-time McGee friend, Al Hinton. “He always wants to push for the new. Not that he’s eclectic and jumps around in terms of his images. He’s just always looking for new tools that he can make useful.”

“He’s fearless,” agrees Jack Butler of Butler Graphics, who has worked with McGee to visualize his two-dimensional drawings as finished 3-D sculpture via computer generated vector graphics. McGee's collaborative efforts with Butler are manifested in “Regeneration,” his relief sculpture at Detroit's Henry Ford Hospital.

“I’m always racing ahead,” says McGee.

“I can’t be satisfied with where I am or where I have been because that’s already discovered. The felicity for me is what is there beyond now.”

What lies ahead for McGee and his public is the promise of even more art — a splendid abstract sculpture cum outdoor seating to be installed amidst swaths of green near the DIA — if funding becomes available.

“What I'm doing is trying to create a sense of place,” says McGee in explanation of the conceptual piece "and by that I mean, a place that you can go and not think about anything but how beautiful this environment is, how logical the construction is and how engaging the aesthetics are ... so you can take your mind off of your problems and be serene.”
What’s Next, Charles?

by Nick Sousanis

At the heart of McGee’s lifelong quest for greater understanding is that single question “What’s next?” It keeps him hard at work seeking answers in his studio and restless to get back when he’s away. Having reached an age when others often slow down, McGee is, if anything, picking up speed, accelerating in his relentless pursuit of new possibilities. With the vast changes he’s seen over the course of his lifetime, he feels, “You gotta keep moving or you get run over.” McGee is adamant that “As long as I’m on the face of the earth, I plan to keep step as best I can.”

In 1987, at the age of 63, McGee retired from teaching at Eastern Michigan University. What came next was not a stop. Instead it signaled the launch of a reinvigorated career. Stuart Shedletsky, the curator of the national traveling exhibition “Still Working: Underknown Artists of Age in America” that would feature McGee in 1994, wrote of this next phase for McGee in the show’s catalog: “Since his retirement his art has erupted into a volcano of renewed energy. His work has taken on physical dimension as his personal exuberance has broken the limits of the painted spaces that characterize his past.” After decades of constantly extending outward into the community, McGee deliberately withdrew somewhat in order to devote more attention to creating his own work. He felt that was necessary in order to focus “the remaining time that I have on the planet to try to do the very best that I can to deliver the very most that I can in good health.” While this didn’t mean that he stopped giving of himself, it did mean traveling a narrower path and being more selective in what he put his energy into. “All I want is to try to live in peace for the rest of my days. Because I feel that this way I’ll be able to produce without a lot of consternation.”

Part of this intensified involvement in his work included a need “to be alone to do what I do.” McGee found that having the space to think about his work and become entirely engrossed in it “purifies my life and keeps it very simple.” Ultimately, he says: “I think that my mission is very clearly defined by virtue of my talent. So I don’t question that, I just obey. There are a lot of people who would be bored to death to do what I do … But I find in making art or making anything, there’s a necessary amount of time and devotion and commitment that takes you outside of other people, where you need that single time to think clear thoughts without any immediate influence. I find that so-called “vacant time” or time out from what I do, is just as tomid and just as demanding, if not more so, than the time that I spend after applying.”

For the first time in his life, McGee was able to devote all of his time to his art. That explosion of energy and ideas in his studio soon translated into a steady stream of exhibitions. He was being featured in solo exhibitions, retrospectives, and group shows around the state and beyond. Joy Hakanson Colby said that his participation in the exhibition “Still Working: Underknown Artists of Age in America” returned him to national visibility. Organized by the Parsons School of Design in New York, the exhibition featured 32 artists over the age of 60 from around the country. It opened at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and traveled to multiple venues across the country. The show’s curator Shedletsky, called McGee, “a light and a real force,” relates Colby in her article of June 1994 for The Detroit News.

1994 was a big year for McGee. In celebration of his 70th year, he was the subject of a massive two-venue solo show. “Charles McGee: Seeing Seventy” debuted at the Dennos Museum in Traverse City in the fall, before opening at the Detroit Institute of Arts on his birthday.

In addition to exhibitions at galleries and museums, McGee had the opportunity to bring his vision to broader audiences through a slew of public projects, including the People Mover mural, his ongoing series in hospitals, and “Noah’s Ark: Gateway” on the campus of Central Michigan University. Other prominent works include “Life Source” for the Water Management Facility at Central State University in Ohio, which he was commissioned to do after winning a national contest search in 1984. The words he wrote for the accompanying plaque reflect his passion for education: “Big is the head that thinks and drinks deep from the full fountain of eternal knowledge and quenches its thirst with overflowing fresh water.” “Unity III” installed in 2007 at Michigan State University also bears his philosophy: “Universal order connects us all. Therefore to create a world where all things operate in the service of nature equally is a challenge.” With these works, he continues to reach new audiences, and plans for further public installations are on the horizon. As I write this, multiple exhibitions are lined up in celebration of his 85th birthday. And again, he’s not thinking about these as retrospectives, but as opportunities to exhibit new bodies of work. He’s even starting to think about possibilities for a 90th birthday show! “What’s next?” is ever a dizzying prospect.

A Letter in Tribute

The Detroit Institute of Arts was thrilled to learn The Kresge Foundation named Charles McGee its first Eminent Artist in 2008. We congratulate the Kresge Foundation for creating its Eminent Artist Award, recognizing the importance of visual arts to our city and region, and making its initial grant to McGee. As a long-recognized artist of national and international stature, McGee has steadfastly maintained his Detroit presence and devoted much of his life to teaching and mentoring. The DIA is proud to have nine of Charles McGee’s works – including Noah’s Ark: Genesis, one of the most popular works of art in the museum. We received our earliest McGee works – Window Watchers and Seated Woman, 20th Century – forty years ago.

African American artists have been part of the DIA’s collection since the early part of the 20th Century. Our General Motors Center for African American art was established in 2006 to be a center of excellence for the enhancement of public knowledge of African Americans’ contributions to the visual arts and to American history. It continues to showcase the rich artistic legacy of African American art and to provide programs to engage and inspire visitors from all walks of life.

We are indeed fortunate to have the benefit of Charles McGee’s long and distinguished career as an artist, arts advocate and – even more importantly – an art teacher. I am pleased to join the Kresge Foundation and many others in recognizing the important contributions of the most respected member of our community.

Graham W. J. Beal
Director
The Detroit Institute of Arts
disciplines, introspection and ability to grow by the quality and quantity of his body of work, always. Over the years I have always been impressed with a National Treasure as an artist and educator. By all measure and criteria Charles McGee is extensively in many private and public collections invitational and juried exhibitions. He is included work has been exhibited nationally, in one person, and distinguished himself in innumerable ways. His education. He has won awards, garnered honors had an active commitment to the visual arts and art education. He has formed a high regard for his inventive energetic methods in mixed media. Charles McGee sets high artistic standards. What makes his work extraordinary comes in contact with. He always finds a suitable scale to serve his expressive ideas and needs. In the 40 years I have known Charles McGee he has had an active commitment to the visual arts and art education. He has won awards, garnered honors and distinguished himself in innumerable ways. His work has been exhibited nationally, in one person, invitational and juried exhibitions. He is included extensively in many private and public collections and has done the visiting artist invitations. By all measure and criteria Charles McGee is a National Treasure as an artist and educator. Over the years I have always been impressed with the quality and quantity of his body of work. Always. However I am most impressed by his spirit and commitment to excellence. His dedication, personal disciplines, introspection and ability to grow by developing new methods of working have established his place as an exceptional artist.

He is a thorough professional. In the time that I have known him I have admired his ability to confront, accept and incorporate new ways and ideas which challenge our personal patterns, traditions and preferences.

He is an outstanding artist and art educator; he exerts a lasting impact on all those he comes in contact with.

Charles McGee at his home in the Rosedale Park section of Detroit, April 2010.

“Every piece of every artist’s work is a marker along the path of his maturation.” — C.M.

“My experience of Charles McGee is based upon observation and perception gained over a friendship of many years.

It was always apparent that Charles was a uniquely gifted artist and possessed a wide ranging curiosity coupled with a keen inquiring mind. As I got to know him I found that he is a thorough individual in crafting any art project, public or private, he is involved with. He always finds a suitable scale to serve his expressive ideas and needs.

In the 40 years I have known Charles McGee he has had an active commitment to the visual arts and art education. He has won awards, garnered honors and distinguished himself in innumerable ways. His work has been exhibited nationally, in one person, invitational and juried exhibitions. He is included extensively in many private and public collections and has done the visiting artist invitations.

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I formed a high regard for his inventive energetic methods in mixed media. Charles McGee sets high artistic standards. What makes his work extraordinary is his integrated view of art and life. His work has uncommon intensity and as narrative, speaks with clarity and durability over time.

It is hard to convey the full richness and the impact Charles McGee has made on the arts. We are fortunate that he has spent the majority of his artistic and teaching career working, promoting and enriching the arts in Michigan.

Recently I have been living and working out side of the country and from that vantage point I make this assessment: Charles McGee is a technical pioneer, a superior artist. His professional quality and aesthetic sensibility seen in context makes him an essential part of the continued development of the arts in America.”

Al Hinton artist, Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan

“Charles has influenced us by not standing still with one idea. When you look at Charles’ early work, people loved his charcoal drawings so much that they were willing to pay him anything for a drawing, basically offering him a blank check. But his ideas have taken him in different directions and he’s had the courage to go to those directions.

There are very few artists that have been able to sustain the quality of work that Charles has over such an extended period of time. He’s of major importance to this community, and I guess as we all know, there’s nobody like him, that’s seen that kind of vision, of what he actually represents in his work.”

Lester Johnson artist, Professor of Fine Arts, College for Creative Studies, Detroit, Michigan

“I was just thrilled when Charles McGee was named as the Kresge Eminent Artist for 2008. For many years, African American artists were not given the prominence or the support that has been true of recent years. I had been aware of his work for a long time and it was my personal goal — I have collected African American art for about 25 years — to have a Charles McGee in my collection which included Benny Andrews, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Hughie Lee-Smith, Richard Mayhew, Allie McGhee, James Porter, Shirley Reed, Gilda Snowden, Alma Thomas and William T. Williams. I now own Triad 2000, and Patches of Time V8. Collecting McGee is addictive, it really is.”

Nettie Seabrooks, executive advisor to Detroit Institute of Arts director Graham Beal, former chief operating officer of the museum.

“Charles has long been an artist whose work has often been seen as provocative, a leader in the field and a guiding influence.”

“I admire his spirit and drive to focus on his mission of creating and sharing his knowledge and perspective in a direct but gentle way with his students. His use of materials is admirable, and his forward-thinking nature allows him to use technology to his benefit when creating.

Charles McGee is one of the most passionate, caring and thoughtful individuals I have ever worked with. He is selfless in his interest in creating, teaching and exhibiting his art to connect cultures, history and humanity as a way to bring people together.”

Jane Linn former president and CEO, Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center, Birmingham, Michigan

“Charles McGee’s work always has been like music — most specifically the rhythmic and improvisational beat of jazz, and it has given him masterful insight into a broad range of art. McGee’s energy is the essence of life in art, and it also defines his own artful life that has moved him through a long and important career.”

Marvin Anderson Professor Emeritus, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan, writing in thedetroiter.com

“Charles McGee joined the teaching faculty at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center in 1999, sharing lessons he himself states were ‘...learned...to a certain extent out of observations and deductions.’

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“Charles has long been an artist whose work has often been seen as provocative, a leader in the field and a guiding influence.”

“I admire his spirit and drive to focus on his mission of creating and sharing his knowledge and perspective in a direct but gentle way with his students. His use of materials is admirable, and his forward-thinking nature allows him to use technology to his benefit when creating.

Charles McGee is one of the most passionate, caring and thoughtful individuals I have ever worked with. He is selfless in his interest in creating, teaching and exhibiting his art to connect cultures, history and humanity as a way to bring people together.”

Jane Linn former president and CEO, Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center, Birmingham, Michigan

“Charles McGee’s work always has been like music — most specifically the rhythmic and improvisational beat of jazz, and it has given him masterful insight into a broad range of art. McGee’s energy is the essence of life in art, and it also defines his own artful life that has moved him through a long and important career.”

Marvin Anderson Professor Emeritus, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan, writing in thedetroiter.com
McGee guides a student to a solution for her mixed media piece at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center in Birmingham.

“Charles McGee never doubted his own power, his own genius. He felt it and pushed it…but it still surprises him.

Charles was always very clear on what he wanted his art to do and how his art fit into the world at large. He was very clear on what his art was to him and what his art should be.

Since I have been involved in art in Detroit forever, I remember the early days of Charles’ involvement with the community, and his work and the respect that people always had for him.

Charles has always been a leader; he’s always had a following, and he’s always organizing artists. It was sometimes a survival thing, very often a way to expose this group of African American artists in a very dignified way to the community.

Charles has nurtured a lot of artists in my opinion. He starts out as an artist but he allows his vision and his hopes and his standards to test the people around him. He doesn’t keep them to himself.

He has grown, and grown, and changed. Charles almost completely forgets what he has done and comes back to it fresh. He’s good at every stage, even when he goes to the geometric, shifting planes, the brilliant, almost psychedelic color, it still has the restraint and the excitement and the superb technical skill — it’s all part of Charles McGee’s caring about his work, and taking whatever time it takes to do it.

Almost setting the house on fire because he put flame to his canvas to achieve a particular hue. ‘How did he get this color?’ you ask yourself. There’s no color you can buy to get that intensity — that’s Charles adding some extra spin.

He just has such joy from his art. He allows that joy in his own creations to show and it’s like overlooking your child. He allows the art to touch him and hurt him.”

Dr. Cledie Collins Taylor founder and director, Extended Arts Gallery, Detroit, Michigan

“McGee: he is his work and his work is him. Charles’ impact in the community manifested itself in the galleries that he showed with and that he ran. People didn’t talk about black artists at that time — 1969, when he curated “Seven Black Artists,” his pioneering exhibition for the Detroit Artist’s Market. Black artists were like women artists, people didn’t pay attention to them and there wasn’t any black history in those days about the artists’ and the exciting things that had been happening. Charles led this community and made an extremely important contribution.

When he had Gallery 7 in the Fisher Building, he insisted there be no emphasis on the race of the artists whose work he was showing. He was only and ever about the quality of the art. When I would call him during Black History Month, he would say ‘I suppose you want a quote for your newspaper about Black History Month. Well, people should be regarding the art not the blackness of it. I’m not giving you any quotes.’”

Joy Hakanson Colby served as the art critic for the Detroit News for 60 years before retiring in 2006.

“My most vivid recollection of Charles goes back a long time, to the early 1970s, and an arts advocacy group we were both involved with — New Detroit, Incorporated. The group’s advisors were Josephine Love (Your Heritage Youth Museum Director) and Gertrude Kasle (noted Detroit gallery)

I was on the committee along with Charles and a number of other artists including Al Hinton and Allie McGhee. The mission was to place works of art around the Detroit community in neighborhoods as opposed to in the preeminent and obvious sites downtown.

It was the right time for art in the neighborhoods, for a community based push that would counter the charge that art is elitist, that it was always about big money, and controlled by big museums.

The group had a small working budget to authorize murals and small works of sculpture. Charles McGee was one of the obvious and outstanding committee members. He was just very thoughtful on who should receive these awards. He researched these artists, and he was extremely eloquent on why they should be chosen. For me as a new kid on the block, to see an established artist here lift the whole dialogue was just fantastic.”

Michael Hall sculptor, Hamtramck, Michigan

“Life is a continuum, it never has that period to it. It’s always a comma.” — C.M.

“What is unique about Charles? It’s not terribly unique that McGee is so brilliant, but the depth of his brilliance is what is so unique about Charles. He really goes deep down into his soul and his heart to find answers and solutions to things — then it all comes out very naturally. That’s his real gift.

Charles has never been just about Charles the artist. From my perspective, I believe Charles has been strategically and historically important in getting other black artists to reach their rightful place in history. If you look at his career, he has provided so many opportunities for others, whether through Gallery 7 or all that he did at Eastern Michigan University, or in the City of Detroit. He has done so much for youth, provided so many opportunities. He has gone out of his way to establish places, stage events, and offer objectives all to encourage young artists to become great artists.”

Marilo Wheaton is the director of the Robert M. Fredericks Sculpture Museum at Saginaw Valley State University and former director of the Cultural Affairs Department of the City of Detroit.
PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Curator
Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit
Detroit, Michigan

1975
Mercy College
Detroit, Michigan

1984–86
Northern High School
Detroit, Michigan

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1962
Detroit Artists Market
Detroit, Michigan

1962
Howard University
Washington, D.C.

1964
Grinnell Gallery
Grinnell, Iowa

1965
Armin Galleries
Detroit, Michigan

1968–78
Charles McGee School of Art
Director and Founder
Detroit, Michigan

1969–1987
Eastern Michigan University
Professor Emeritus of Art
Ypsilanti, Michigan

Ann Arbor Art Association
Ann Arbor, Michigan

1969–1978
Gallery 7
Director and Founder
Detroit, Michigan

1969–1978
Children’s Museum
Detroit, Michigan

1974
New Works
Detroit, Michigan

1977
Pontiac Creative Arts Center
Pontiac, Michigan

1980
Life, Death and the Middle Ground
Midland Center for the Arts
Midland, Michigan

1989
A Sustained Vision
Detroit Focus Gallery
Detroit, Michigan

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1959
Pennsylvania Academy Biennial
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

1967
The Butler Annual
Butler Museum of American Art
Youngstown, Ohio

1981
New Vistas in American Negro Art
Howard University
Washington, D.C.

1965
The Toledo Regional
Toledo Museum of Art
Toledo, Ohio

1967
Art in U.S. Embassies
Bangkok, Thailand

1968
The Joan Miró Drawing Exhibition
Palacio de la Virreina
Barcelona, Spain

1969
The Witherspoon International
Art on Paper
Witherspoon Art Gallery
Greensboro, North Carolina

1969
12 Afro-American Artists
Lee Nordness Gallery
New York, New York

1969
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.

1969
Seven Black Artists
Detroit Artists Market
Detroit, Michigan

1969/1971
New Black Artists
Brooklyn Museum
Columbia University
New York, New York

1969
Contemporary Black
American Artists
Smithsonian Institution Traveling
Exhibition Service (SITES) tour

1971
Contemporary Black Artists
in America
Whitney Museum of American Art
New York, New York

1975
Michigan Survey
San Jose Museum
San Jose, California

1975
Toledo Regional
Toledo Museum of Art
Toledo, Ohio

1967
Art in U.S. Embassies
Bangkok, Thailand

1968
The Joan Miró Drawing Exhibition
Palacio de la Virreina
Barcelona, Spain

1969
The Witherspoon International
Art on Paper
Witherspoon Art Gallery
Greensboro, North Carolina

1969
12 Afro-American Artists
Lee Nordness Gallery
New York, New York

1969
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.

1969
Seven Black Artists
Detroit Artists Market
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Brooklyn Museum
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New York, New York

1969
Contemporary Black
American Artists
Smithsonian Institution Traveling
Exhibition Service (SITES) tour

1971
Contemporary Black Artists
in America
Whitney Museum of American Art
New York, New York

1975
Michigan Survey
San Jose Museum
San Jose, California
McGee installing his sculpture “Regeneration” at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit.

**Rhapsody in Black and White, 2008**
Ultraviolet inkjet spray system on Dibond

1978 Michigan Foundation for the Arts
Midland, Michigan
1982 Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan
1982 Martin Luther King Community Center
Detroit, Michigan
1984 Detroit Institute of Arts
Detroit, Michigan
1985–86 Northern High School
Detroit, Michigan
1987 People Mover Mural
Broadway Station
Detroit, Michigan
1989 East Lansing City Hall
East Lansing, Michigan
1990 Central Michigan University
Mount Pleasant, Michigan
1990s Karmanos Cancer Center
Detroit, Michigan
1994 Central State University
Wilmington, Ohio
1983 Bishop Airport Authority
Flint, Michigan
2004 Beaumont Hospital
Royal Oak, Michigan
2007 Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan
2007 Henry Ford Hospital
Detroit, Michigan
2008 Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan

**SELECTED COLLECTIONS**

Atlanta University
Atlanta, Georgia
Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History
Detroit, Michigan
Crónk Recreation Center
Detroit, Michigan
Dennos Museum
Traverse City, Michigan
Detroit Board of Education
Detroit, Michigan
Detroit Children’s Museum
Detroit, Michigan
Detroit General Hospital
Detroit, Michigan
Detroit Institute of Arts
Detroit, Michigan
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan
The Engineering Society of Detroit
Traveling exhibition
Holtzman & Silverman
Detroit, Michigan
Howard University
Washington, D.C.
Links, Inc.
Detroit, Michigan
Maccabees Corporation
Southfield, Michigan
Michigan Bell Telephone
Detroit, Michigan
Miller, Canfield, Paddock & Stone, P.L.C.
Detroit, Michigan
School of Graphics
Barcelona, Spain
Shaw-Walker Company
Muskegon, Michigan
Smith, Hinchman & Grylls
Detroit, Michigan
University of Michigan
Dearborn, Michigan
U.S. Embassy
Lima, Peru
The Willistead Art Gallery
Windsor, Canada
Ypsilanti State Hospital
Ypsilanti, Michigan

**PUBLIC COMMISSIONS**

1974 Urban Wall Mural Program
New Detroit, Inc.
Detroit, Michigan
1978 Michigan Arthritis Foundation
Detroit, Michigan
1989 East Lansing City Hall
East Lansing, Michigan
1990 Central Michigan University
Mount Pleasant, Michigan
1990s Karmanos Cancer Center
Detroit, Michigan
1994 Central State University
Wilmington, Ohio
1983 Bishop Airport Authority
Flint, Michigan
2004 Beaumont Hospital
Royal Oak, Michigan
2007 Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan
2007 Henry Ford Hospital
Detroit, Michigan
2008 Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan

1958 Donald Morgan Prize
Outstanding Painting
Annual Michigan Artists Exhibition
Detroit, Michigan
1959 At Cranbrook: Detroit Artists
Cranbrook Art Museum
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
1976 Works in Progress II
Detroit Institute of Arts
Detroit, Michigan
1979 Still Working
Cocoran Gallery of Art
Washington D.C.
Traveling exhibition
1978 Michigan Foundation for the Arts
Midland, Michigan
1982 Martin Luther King Community Center
Detroit, Michigan
1984 Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan
1985–86 Northern High School
Detroit, Michigan
1987 People Mover Mural
Broadway Station
Detroit, Michigan
2008 Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan

**SELECTED HONORS**

1958 Donald Morgan Prize
Outstanding Painting
Annual Michigan Artists Exhibition
Detroit, Michigan
2008 Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan
1958 Honorary Humanities
Doctorate Degree
Marygrove College
Detroit, Michigan
1968 Second Prize
Afro-American Exhibit
Detroit Institute of Arts
Detroit, Michigan
1978 Artist of the Year Award
Arts Foundation of Michigan
Detroit, Michigan
1985 Individual Artist Grant
Michigan Council for the Arts
Detroit, Michigan
1988 Distinguished Service Award
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan
1988 Spirit of Detroit Award
Detroit City Council
Detroit, Michigan
1988 Studio Club Award
Center for Creative Studies
Detroit, Michigan
1988 Individual Artist Grant
Michigan Council for the Arts
Detroit, Michigan
1989 Governor’s Michigan
Artist Award
Concerned Citizens
for the Arts in Michigan
Detroit, Michigan
2003 Honorary Fine Arts
Doctorate Degree
College for Creative Studies
Detroit, Michigan
2006 Honorary Humanities
Doctorate Degree
Marygrove College
Detroit, Michigan
2008 Kresge Eminent Artist Award
The Kresge Foundation
Troy, Michigan

**SELECTED COLLECTIONS**

Atlanta University
Atlanta, Georgia
Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History
Detroit, Michigan
Crónk Recreation Center
Detroit, Michigan
Dennos Museum
Traverse City, Michigan
Detroit Board of Education
Detroit, Michigan
Detroit Children’s Museum
Detroit, Michigan
Detroit General Hospital
Detroit, Michigan
Detroit Institute of Arts
Detroit, Michigan
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan
The Engineering Society of Detroit
Traveling exhibition
Holtzman & Silverman
Detroit, Michigan
Howard University
Washington, D.C.
Links, Inc.
Detroit, Michigan
Maccabees Corporation
Southfield, Michigan
Michigan Bell Telephone
Detroit, Michigan
Miller, Canfield, Paddock & Stone, P.L.C.
Detroit, Michigan
School of Graphics
Barcelona, Spain
Shaw-Walker Company
Muskegon, Michigan
Smith, Hinchman & Grylls
Detroit, Michigan
University of Michigan
Dearborn, Michigan
U.S. Embassy
Lima, Peru
The Willistead Art Gallery
Windsor, Canada
Ypsilanti State Hospital
Ypsilanti, Michigan

**SELECTED HONORS**

1958 Donald Morgan Prize
Outstanding Painting
Annual Michigan Artists Exhibition
Detroit, Michigan
Beginning in 2008, The Kresge Foundation honors each year an exceptional artist living and working in Metropolitan Detroit whose body of work, contributions to his or her art form and demonstrated commitment to the Detroit cultural community are widely recognized. The Kresge Eminent Artist Award, which includes a $50,000 prize, acknowledges artistic innovation and rewards integrity, depth of vision, and singularity of purpose as judged by the Kresge Eminent Artist Panel.

The Eminent Artist Award together with the Kresge Artist Fellowships and Kresge Arts Support constitute Kresge Arts in Detroit, a coordinated effort to showcase and support Metropolitan Detroit’s tri-county arts and cultural community — Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties.

Kresge Arts in Detroit is one facet of the foundation’s Detroit Program, a comprehensive community development framework that identifies key building blocks of the city’s long-term health and vitality and aligns the public, private and philanthropic sectors at the local, state and national levels to rebuild the region for prosperity in the 21st century.

The College for Creative Studies administers the Kresge Eminent Artist Award and Kresge Artist Fellowships on behalf of the Kresge Foundation.
The College for Creative Studies is very proud to partner with The Kresge Foundation to administer the Kresge Eminent Artist Award. It is truly inspiring that The Kresge Foundation acknowledges the individual artist as a potent force in bringing about the change Detroit needs and deserves. At the College for Creative Studies, we believe that engaging the creative community is key to revitalizing the region. Kresge Arts in Detroit allows CCS to reaffirm its mission to nurture creativity and support the ambitions of artists whose innovative work makes a difference in how we envision ourselves and our community. Charles McGee’s work sets a standard for all aspiring artists. CCS congratulates him.

– Richard L. Rogers
President
College for Creative Studies

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s words are especially stirring when considering the life and work of Charles McGee, the inaugural recipient of the Kresge Eminent Artist Award. McGee blazed a trail for art and artists in our community early on and, at the age of 84, he shows no sign of slowing.

Considered by his fellow artists, curators, collectors, teachers and students as the benchmark for artistic excellence, McGee’s distinguished career spans six decades and encompasses the kind of doing that astounds in its quality and volume: his work has been celebrated in hundreds of exhibitions from Detroit to New York to Bangkok; he has been a teacher and mentor to thousands of young artists; he has founded galleries and arts organizations, creating opportunities for others to share their work and ideas; his work has been commissioned and collected by institutions and individuals around the world; he has advised the State of Michigan, the City of Detroit and our arts institutions on countless cultural initiatives; and he has done it all with humility, reverence and a sense of wonder at the power and triumph of art.

Charles McGee is, indeed, an eminent artist and it is with great honor that Kresge Arts in Detroit announces him as the recipient of this prestigious award, the first of its kind in Michigan. The 2008 Kresge Eminent Artist Award was selected by a panel of three influential members of Detroit’s art community: Gerhardt Knodel, artist and former director of Cranbrook Academy of Art, Dennis Alan Nawrocki, art historian and author of the recently published third edition of “Art in Detroit Public Places” (Wayne State University Press) and Dr. Cledie Taylor, founder and director of Arts Extended Gallery. Kresge Arts in Detroit is grateful to the panel for shepherding this important task and for setting the standard for this award in future years.

“The creative mind,” McGee has written, “continues always to test the parameters of conventional knowledge, forever in pursuit of new vistas.” His extraordinary life in art is a model of continuity and change; his unerring dedication to his practice and community serves as an example for all of us to mark our own trail, one that will awaken us to new vistas and the freedom that art bestows.

– Michelle Perron
Director
Kresge Arts in Detroit
Kresge Arts in Detroit – Advisory Council

Kresge Arts in Detroit is guided by the expertise of a volunteer advisory council, made up of members of the Metropolitan Detroit cultural community. The council selects review panels, nominates candidates for the Kresge Eminent Artist Award, and provides external oversight to Kresge Arts in Detroit. The following is a list of the 2008–09 members under whose leadership Charles McGee was chosen.

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About The Kresge Foundation

The Kresge Foundation is a $3.1 billion private, national foundation that seeks to influence the quality of life for future generations by creating access and opportunity in underserved communities, improving the health of low-income people, supporting artistic expression, assisting in the revitalization of Detroit, and advancing methods for dealing with global climate change. The foundation works in six program areas: arts and culture, community development, education, the environment, health, and human services.

In 2009, the Board of Trustees approved 404 awards totaling $197 million; $167 million was paid out to grantees over the course of the year. For more information, visit www.kresge.org.

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With very special thanks to Marion Jackson and Marshia Miro for their original essays; to Michael Hodges, Bill Harris, MaryAnn Wilkinson and Dennis Alan Nawrocki for revisiting their previous work on McGee; to Nick Sousanis for his many contributions to this project; to Al Hinton for reaching across numerous time zones to write of an admired friend and colleague; with additional thanks to Marvin Anderson, the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center (BBAC); Jack Butler, Dr. Marlene Chavis; Joy Hakanson Colby; College for Creative Studies; Dr. Cledie Collins Taylor; Gloria Whelan and The Detroit Artists Market; Graham W. J. Beal and The Detroit Institute of Arts; The Detroit News; Treena Ericson; Michael Hall; Lester Johnson; Danielle Kaltz; Gerhardt Knodel; Joyce LaBan; Sue Marx; Julia Myers; Tim Nagae; Nettie Seabrooks; Irene Walt and Marilyn Wheaton for their kind contributions.

"The greatest thing that’s happening to me now is that I’m looking to the future." — McGee at 85