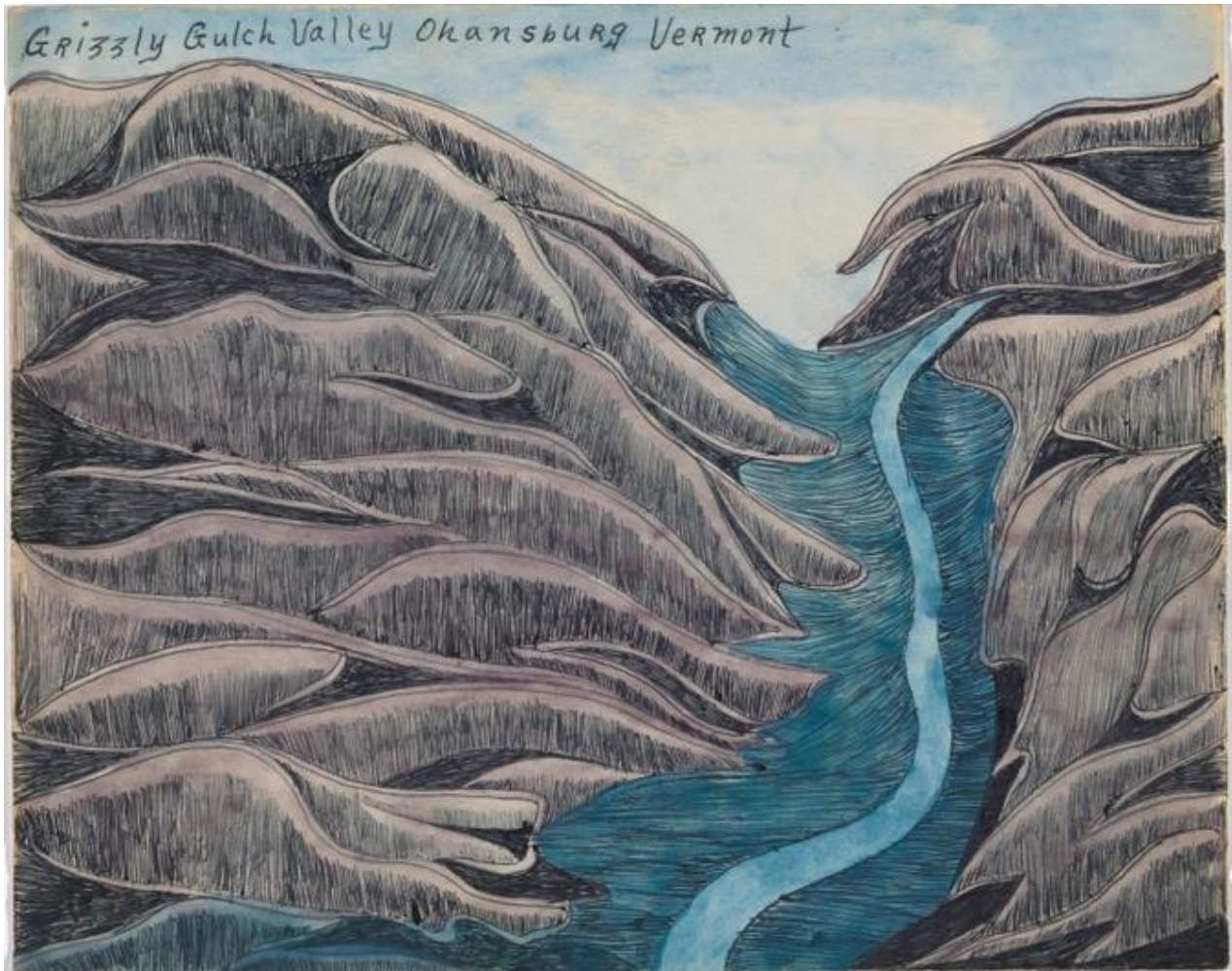


The Menil Collection presents **Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw**
at the Menil Drawing Institute

First major museum retrospective of the self-taught, visionary American artist in more than twenty-five years on view in Houston April 22–August 7, 2022



HOUSTON—February 16, 2022—The Menil Collection is pleased to present **Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw** at the Menil Drawing Institute, the first major museum retrospective in more than twenty-five years to focus on the dream-like landscape drawings of Joseph Elmer Yoakum (1891-1972), a self-taught, visionary American artist. On view in Houston from **April 22 through August 7, 2022**, the exhibition illuminates Yoakum’s vivid creativity, imaginative vision of the land, and deep spirituality and also explores his rich, complex biography as an African American man who claimed Native American heritage. Coorganized by the Menil Collection, Houston, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the exhibition offers the most comprehensive study to date of the artist, who made a significant and highly original contribution to American art.

The Menil Drawing Institute presentation will feature more than 80 drawings by Yoakum, most from the collections of Chicago-based artists affiliated with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, who deeply admired the singularity of Yoakum’s creativity. His collectors, supporters,

and friends include Roger Brown, Cynthia Carlson, Whitney Halstead, Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt, Christina Ramberg and Philip Hanson, Karl Wirsum and Lorri Gunn, and Ray Yoshida, all of whom helped promote the artist's work during and after his lifetime. Highlights of the exhibition's themes include:

- **Memory:** Yoakum claimed to have visited six continents in his youth, and when he began drawing at age 71, he continued his travels on paper, pulling from his memories in an intuitive process.
- **Landscape:** The grandeur of Yoakum's deserts, mountains, and oceans illuminate his skill as both a dramatic storyteller as well as his reverence for the natural world, both of which were influenced by his spiritual beliefs. Untrained in the conventions of linear perspective, he drew overlapping planes to define space and depicted plants, rivers, and other landforms that are disproportionate in relation to their settings.
- **Portraits:** A much smaller subset of Yoakum's work, his portraits typically depict celebrated figures in the African American community, such as actors, athletes, and performers, as well as Native Americans.
- **Technique:** The exhibition explores Yoakum's approach to composition and how he developed his own system of graphic vocabulary using inexpensive paper and tools and primarily drawing freehand.

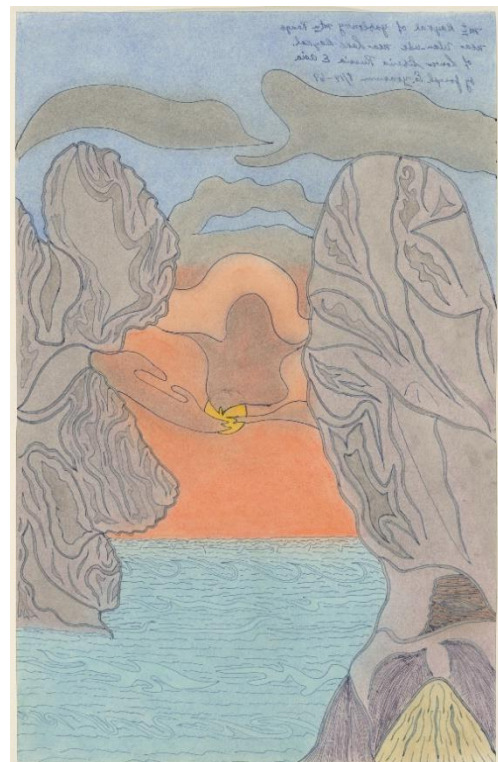
Rebecca Rabinow, Director of the Menil Collection, said, "Joseph Yoakum holds the rare and coveted designation of an 'artist's artist,' reflecting his foundational importance to art historians, critics, members of the creative community, and other artists, all of whom continue to be inspired by his work. Recognizing Yoakum's agency in transforming his visual memories into extraordinary works of art has been a main goal of this exhibition and accompanying catalogue, which the Menil is delighted to bring to audiences in Houston."

Edouard Kopp, John R. Eckel Jr. Chief Curator of the Menil Drawing Institute, said, "The Menil is proud to bring Joseph Yoakum's unique and meaningful artistic contributions to a broader public, celebrating more widely what has become an essential chapter in the history of American art and the American landscape. Outside of the artistic mainstream and unrestrained by the bounds of convention, Yoakum has given us a deeply personal, idiosyncratic, and poetic vision of the land."

About Joseph Yoakum

Much of what we know of Yoakum's extraordinary life story comes from the artist himself. Born in Missouri just twenty-five years after the end of the Civil War, Yoakum had little schooling before he left home to work for several circuses, traveling across the United States as well as abroad. He later served in a segregated noncombat regiment during World War I before settling in Chicago's South Side. Inspired by a dream, he began his artistic career at age seventy-one, ultimately producing some two thousand drawings before his death in 1972.

As the exhibition title intimates, Yoakum's drawings reflect his travels to every continent except Antarctica. As he put it, "I had it in my mind that I wanted to go to different places at different times. Wherever my mind led me, I would go. I've been all over this world four times."



Awareness of his biography is critical to a contemporary examination of Yoakum's body of work—marked by a distinctive, linear style of draftsmanship—but so, too, is recognizing his agency in transforming his visual memories into works of art. His idiosyncratic drawings, predominantly landscapes in ballpoint pen, colored pencil, pastel, and watercolor, convey his poetic view of nature. Simultaneously, Yoakum also made portraits of African American icons.

Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw is coorganized by Edouard Kopp, John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation Chief Curator, Menil Drawing Institute; Mark Pascale, Janet and Craig Duchossois Curator of Prints and Drawings, The Art Institute of Chicago; and Esther Adler, Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints, MoMA.

The exhibition debuted at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2021 and is currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, through March 19, 2022.

Exhibition Catalogue

An extensive, richly illustrated exhibition catalogue provides new scholarship on the artist and expands upon key themes of the show. It highlights friendships that Yoakum forged with the Chicago-based artists who cemented his place in art history; it explores how religion may have helped him cope with a racially fractured city; and it examines his complicated relationship to African American and Native American identities, while also situating Yoakum's contribution in the wider context of American art.

The catalogue is available for purchase at the Menil Collection Bookstore. The book is edited by Mark Pascale, Esther Adler, and Edouard Kopp, with contributions by Esther Adler, Kathleen Ash-Milby, Mary Broadway, Clara Granzotto, Whitney Halstead, Edouard Kopp, Faheem Majeed, Laura K. Minton, Emily Olek, Mark Pascale, and Ken Sutherland.

About the Menil Collection

Philanthropists and art patrons John and Dominique de Menil established the Menil Foundation in 1954 to foster greater public understanding and appreciation of art, architecture, culture, religion, and philosophy. In 1987, the Menil Collection's main museum building opened to the public. Today, the Menil Collection consists of a group of five art buildings and green spaces located within a residential neighborhood in central Houston. The Menil remains committed to its founders' belief that art is essential to human experience and fosters direct personal encounters with works of art. The museum welcomes all visitors free of charge to its buildings and surrounding green spaces. menil.org

About the Menil Drawing Institute

The Menil Drawing Institute was established in 2008 in recognition of drawing's centrality in the lives of artists and its crucial role in modern and contemporary artistic culture. The Drawing Institute has since developed an international profile for exhibitions, scholarship, and collaboration. In 2018, a dedicated building for the Menil Drawing Institute, designed by Johnston Marklee, was inaugurated. It is now the site of regular drawings exhibitions, an annual monumental wall drawing commission, public programs, and study. menil.org/drawing-institute

Funding

This exhibition is generously supported by Leah Bennett; Diane and Michael Cannon; Hilda Curran; Cindy and David Fitch; Barbara and Michael Gamson; Janet and Paul Hobby; Caroline Huber; Mary Hale Lovett McLean; John and Stephanie Smither Visionary Art Fund; James William Stewart, Jr.; Nina and Michael Zilkha; Alice Kleberg Reynolds Foundation; and the City of Houston through Houston Art Alliance.

Image Captions

1. Joseph E. Yoakum, *Grizzly Gulch Valley Ohansburg Vermont*, n.d. Black ballpoint pen and watercolor on paper, 7 7/8 x 9 7/8 in. (20 x 25.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Raymond K. Yoshida Living Trust and Kohler Foundation, Inc., 2013
2. Joseph E. Yoakum, *Mt Baykal of Yablonvy Mtn Range near Ulan-Ude near Lake Baykal of Lower Siberia Russia E Asia*, 1969. Blue felt-tip pen, blue fountain pen, purple ballpoint pen, and pastel on paper, 18 7/8 x 12 1/8 in. (48 x 30.9 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago, Anonymous gift

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