

# Mose "T."

1919–2006

MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

Mose Tolliver, known as “Mose T.” as he signed his paintings, is one of the most highly regarded American self-taught artists who began life as the son of a sharecropper and farm overseer on the Rittenour farm. In the late 1960s, Mose was forced to retire from his job in a Montgomery furniture factory after a thousand-pound crate of marble fell from a forklift and crushed his legs. A few years following the accident, Mose was encouraged to try oil painting by Raymond McLendon, one of his former employers. McLendon tried to persuade Mose to take lessons at his expense, but he elected to teach himself and painting became a routine activity for him. It was a rehabilitative experience. At first, he painted birds, flowers, and tree forms, later adding people and other animals. “I probably would never have painted if I hadn’t gotten hurt. I would still be working with plants and yards.”

Tolliver began to obey an inner compulsion to create art in his own unique way at an amazing rate. Mose began to paint on any surface—furniture, scraps, plywood packing crate sides, Masonite, metal trays, board remnants, old bureaus, tabletops, throw away chairs, or other abandoned surfaces given to him. Mose used what he calls “pure paint,” house paint—oil-based at first, and then water-based latex. Although his palette almost always was limited to two or three hues from the cans available at hand, Mose’s color schemes were generally harmonious and sophisticated. His inventive use of a variety of improvised hanging devices (and later metal can ring) on his work indicated natural creativity that often goes hand in hand with poverty and necessity.

His work first caught the attention of people walking past his house on Morgan Avenue where Mose began his painting, but none sold. After moving to his final home on Sayre Street, his front porch became a virtual gallery with Mose offering to sell paintings to anyone who admired them. An early admirer who brought his work to public attention was Mitchell Kahan, former curator at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts. In 1981, the museum mounted a one-man exhibition of Mose’s work.

In the first article published about Mose in February 1981 in the Montgomery Advertiser, he is quoted as saying, “I’m not interested in art. I just want to paint my pictures.” In the same article the late Dr. Robert Bishop, Director of the Museum of American Folk Art said of Mose’s paintings, “You can hang him beside a Picasso, and you have the same kind of creativity and deeply personal vision.” A year after this article, Mose’s work was placed at the forefront of the art world by being included in the exhibition, Black Folk Art in America 1930-1980 at the prestigious Corcoran Gallery, associated with the Smithsonian Institution. Two aspects of his work, among others, remained constant throughout his career: Mose gave names to his paintings that show a strong connection to fantasy.