

## BILL TRAYLOR'S "FOREST OF SYMBOLS"

The myriad paintings done by Bill Traylor [1853-1949] display a rich assortment of African American conjure signs, as well as black Baptist and Freemasonry symbols. The cross, which carried both conjure and Christian symbolism, and the lynching tree, were of central importance. With these symbols, Traylor created a visual language that had great power and great beauty. Given that he lived for so long behind a "wall of silence for his spirit," it held great mystery as well. Unable to respond openly to Jim Crow violence and the "lynch law" that legitimated his son's murder, Traylor expressed his rage and his call for retribution and change through this symbolic language.

In this talk I follow the interpretations of symbolic anthropologists working in the tradition of Victor W. Turner, who regarded symbols as "determinable influences inclining persons and groups to action."