

Lost in the Zoo: The Art of Charles Sebree

In 1940, Alain Locke chose Charles Sebree, a little known painter from Chicago, as one of the select visual artists to be included in his anthology *The Negro in Art*. That same year, Sebree completed a series of twelve illustrations to accompany Countee Cullen's narrative poem *The Lost Zoo: (A Rhyme for the Young, But Not Too Young)*. With two publications under his belt and mentors ranging from choreographer Katherine Dunham to Alain Locke and Countee Cullen, it would seem that the tables were turning for this up-and-coming young artist from South Chicago. But despite Sebree's relative success and enviable associations, the next year found him drafted to a military base in Illinois, designing costumes for plays by Owen Dodson. A true renaissance man, Charles Sebree would spend the next half-century trying his hand at every medium that struck his fancy—from illustration to playwriting to costume design. Sebree's laudable accomplishments and associates mark him as a key player in the development of African American visual art during the Harlem Renaissance, but today his name remains so unknown that, not only has comprehensive biography never been published, his face is missing even from the ever-expanding ranks of Wikipedia pages. An analysis of documents related to Charles Sebree's collaboration with Countee Cullen on *The Lost Zoo* reveals an artist preoccupied with financial worries and mental distress that hindered his working relationships despite good intentions on all sides. Sebree's work on *The Lost Zoo*, a story of missed opportunities and unfortunate events, marks a fitting analogy for his promising yet unrealized expectations within the burgeoning New York art scene in the years before World War II.

A Renaissance Man: Background and Influence:

Charles Sebree's cynical attitude and sometimes-abrasive personality has been a subject of much commentary by those who knew him. In unpublished letters, Alain Locke cites his

personality as a hindrance to his career (Moorland), and even those who remember him favorably describe him as “piquant, sharp, and acrid” (Eleanor Traylor, qtd in Marshall). This sharp quality served as a hindrance to Sebree’s dealings with galleries and other artists during the early 1940s, marking him as a volatile character among his friends and leaving him victim to what he perceived as underhanded criticism (Moorland). Charles Sebree’s unusually pessimistic and sensitive worldview may be best understood as rooted in his rough childhood in Chicago. Charles Sebree was born on November 16, 1914 in the tiny town of White City, Kentucky, two and a half miles from Madisonville and moved to Chicago with his mother when he was ten years old. By fourteen, however, he was alone, supporting himself, probably as a “policy runner” for “policy barons” in the dregs of Chicago politics of the period (Marshall 4). However, Sebree balanced this roughshod lifestyle with the pursuit of education, attending high school and showing his art at the Chicago Renaissance Society, including “Seated Boy,” pictured below, when he was as young as ten (Marshall 3). This extraordinary drive for both education and independence would crop up again and again throughout Sebree’s lifetime as he excelled with various media, struggling to support himself while never becoming associated with any particular artistic school (Marshall 17).

In the nineteen thirties, Sebree pursued a formal arts education at the Chicago School of Design where he mingled with artists from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines including dancer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham and her future husband, the white artist John Pratt. In Chicago, Sebree bridged the gap between black artists and the still predominately white art scene. Sebree’s experience with Katherine Dunham as a member of her Cube Theater club, a small group of artists immersed in Chicago’s art scene, brought him into contact with many of

the major players in the Harlem Renaissance including Langston Hughes, Charles White, and eventually Alain Locke (Marshall 4).

Despite the Depression, these years in Chicago might be viewed as some of the most formative for Sebree's interpersonal connections and artistic style. After meeting Dunham in 1933, Sebree began working with John Pratt to design costumes for her performances, a skill that would be extremely important later when he would design costumes for plays at Great Lakes Naval Base in Illinois rather than joining combat forces during WWII. His experience as part of the WPA's easel painting division introduced him to many artists of the Harlem Renaissance through classes at Chicago's South Side Community Art Center. In an article published in the *Magazine of Art* praising the creation of the Center, Alain Locke praises Sebree as one of the leading artists in the group, saying that they have "an unacademic approach and a warm intimate touch that makes technique incidental to saying something" (Locke 373). While Locke's article, soaked in the political message of the day, emphasizes the artists' political messages, political motivation would never play a significant role in Sebree's work, setting him apart from many artists of the period. To this point, the images accompanying the article, Sebree's work "Moses" suggests a blue-period Picasso –all thick dark lines and heavily accented brows – rather than a *Crisis* cover. His race, like most of Sebree's figures, is ambiguous, suggesting a forlorn exoticism rather than a particular ethnicity. Notably, to this point, the caption under Sebree's image reads: "Negro art exhibited at the gallery" (*Magazine of Art*). This emphasis on the artist's race rather than the image itself would continue to characterize displays of Sebree's work throughout the next decade.



“Moses” published in *The Magazine of Art*, 1941

The Negro In Art: Charles Sebree and Alain Locke

After losing his position with the WPA easel painting division in 1938, Sebree began making contacts with galleries in New York and Boston in hopes of displaying his work. Thus began the vagabond existence that would mark the next three years of Sebree’s life and leave him relying on Locke for both emotional and financial support. Nowhere is Sebree’s complex network of friends and associates more evident than in establishing his collaboration with Countee Cullen on *The Lost Zoo*. Sebree, who was moving frequently between New York and Chicago in the beginning of 1940, was in constant contact with friends like Alain Locke, who would help to establish the collaboration. A letter from Harold Jackman, writer and friend of Countee Cullen, on the stationery of “Challenge: A Literary Magazine” dated January 21st, 1940 reads: “I just learned this afternoon that you were back in town. I should like to see you to talk with you about an idea a friend of mine is contemplating; it may interest you.” Jackman’s personal note highlights the interconnected nature of collaboration in New York during this

period. On the bottom of the letter Sebree notes: “Beginning of illustrations for *The Lost Zoo* by Countee Cullen” (Beinecke). With this suggestion from a mutual friend, Charles Sebree would move to New York to spend the year working on Cullen’s new book. Alone in the city and nearly broke, this year in Sebree’s life demonstrates the difficulties of a struggling young artist and suggests the emotional turmoil that may have prevented Sebree from gaining the sponsors and support of other African American artists at the time.

In their groundbreaking research into Sebree’s life and experience, scholars Melvin Marshall and Blake Kimbrough describe this period as a formative and traumatic experience marked by frequent absences and emotional distress. They credit these absences to poverty and miscommunication:

At one point when he was illustrating the book, he was in a group show at the Grace Horne Gallery in Boston and stayed on in Boston, sending illustrations to Cullen in New York. Looking out for his two protégés, Locke wrote to Sebree asking what was wrong and why was he still in Boston? Sebree wrote back and apologized for his behavior, explaining that people said he was unstable but it really was not true. He had no regular income and was struggling to survive. (Marshall 8)

While financial difficulties were certainly the superficial reason for Sebree’s decision to stay in Boston, a closer look at Sebree’s correspondence with Alain Locke between April 5 and April 8 1940 reveals a man intensely troubled by insecurity and a temper that alienates many of his colleagues. Over the course of a week, the letters demonstrate the increasing confidence Sebree placed in Locke, asking for Locke’s help in mediating a misunderstanding between he and Cullen. The letters serve as a window into the soul of a man who confides only in his closest friends, projecting an air of hardened confidence to lesser associates. Locke writes incredulously: “The word that you had gone to Boston seemed all very mysterious to me – for I have some sixth sense after all, and though you had spread rumors of prosperity, I was ill at ease about you.

Incidentally, I believe this “make-believe” is one of the roots of your trouble...” Locke’s accusation that Sebree projects an image of success that misrepresents his actual troubles is a key to understanding the following correspondence in which Sebree begs Locke for help in untangling a misunderstanding between Cullen and many of Sebree’s friends in New York. The excessively formal tone that Locke takes on in addressing Sebree’s concerns points to the delicacy necessary in dealing with the injured Sebree. Locke writes: “You know I like your work. You also know that I like you personally. And I am glad you wrote me plainly, and that you evidently are willing to give me your full confidence. I only wish I were in a position to help you” (Beinecke). Locke’s affirmations of his opinion of Sebree allude to Sebree’s trouble managing his financial affairs while under pressure to remain in New York to work on Cullen’s book. *The Lost Zoo*, it seems, marked a mixed blessing that brought out the best and worst of Sebree’s professional connections.

With his talents unveiled at an uncommonly young age by his mentors at the Chicago Renaissance Society, Sebree suffered from the inflated sense of potential. In the same letter, Locke gives a heavy-handed critique of the subjects that had come to mark his paintings even then: “And surely you have in mind getting out of your rut of Dantesque adolescents, for much as I and other sophisticates like them, that isnt [sic] painting up to today’s outlook, and represents an over-worked vein in your work, in technique and in theme” (Moorland). Although this then now distinguishes Sebree’s work from the majority of portrayals of race and modernity during the era, this critique from his primary confidante was not an isolated concern, paired as it was with ongoing interpersonal problems between Sebree and his colleagues. Locke cautions him: “Pollack thinks highly of your work, but, frankly is a little out of patience with your attitude, -as he sees it” (Moorland). These ongoing criticisms underlie Sebree’s concerns during

the period – people of authority were taking an interest in his work, but their many promises seldom led to crucial financial and professional success. Sebree's sense of bitterness only increased as professional success continued to elude him.

Despite his promising debut in Locke's *The Negro in Art* and profitable collaboration with Cullen, Sebree's crushed hopes and lack of success exhibiting in Chicago found him desolate on April 6, still in Chicago and unable to afford a return to New York. In a merging of personal and professional concerns, Sebree writes to Locke asking for assistance and outlining his concerns with the royalty system of galleries and his failure to sell his work:

Anyway the inflation game is very bad and when it was it was brought about by mutual distrust with whomever I was dealing at the time. In so many words, Chicago has really defeated me and my purpose. If I can go back to New York and work Countee Cullen will make arrangements for all of my meals and all that I lack is a small room and materials enough to prepare for a show of the next late fall. (Moorland).

Rather than focusing on his professional commitments to Cullen and Locke, Sebree's concerns are of a lower order: simply finding a place to live, food, and money for materials. The basic necessities of life must have been overwhelming for the young artist whose work was lauded by Pollack even as he found himself unable to pay his rent. In Locke's confidence, Sebree blames himself, but promises to improve: "I do think I have curbed a personality that has been in my way and God knows that been my main trouble" (Moorland). This "personality problem," frequently mentioned by Locke and Sebree, must have hindered the artist in his attempts at professional success and even led to problems among the friends on whom he increasingly relied for support.

Documents suggest that Locke interceded for Sebree after what seems to be a personal conflict between Sebree and Cullen. The exact nature of this conflict is unclear, but seems to relate to Sebree's financial state and tendency to ask his friends for support. Locke writes: "If he [Cullen] and I can arrive at some understanding your problem may be solved. I urge you not to write him in the meantime, however, and hope that you will trust my judgment on this" (Moorland). Sebree's financial and personal problems continued to influence his personal relationships throughout the 1940s as he relied on Alain Locke and Countee Cullen for both financial and emotional support. Even in when writing of his success, his letters are wrought with references to his "illness" – a weakness that is never explicitly described, but alluded to by others as a mental instability (Marshall). This perceived and paranoia mental instability remains a blemish on the Sebree's reputation even today, as scholarly discussions of his work (including, to some degree, this one) continue to focus on Sebree's failures rather than his accomplishments.

After this period of "illness" and crisis (apparently averted), Sebree's letters from New York devolve from purely optimistic updates to professional news paired with juvenile catalogues of costs and concerns. His tone takes on the quality of an eager son updating a father figure on the returns on his investment. On April 22nd, he writes to Locke explaining that he's back in New York and thanking him profusely for his help and support. Sebree provides positive news of the Cullen drawings that Marshall's text fails to express: "Countee drawings are almost complete and he likes them real much [sic]. I hope they will be seen in his book Countee has been very helpful and fed me so well" (Moorland). In his periods of illness, Sebree writes with little punctuation, ending his letters with complaints of exhaustion. In Locke, Sebree found a mentor in whom he could place his myriad worries and responsibilities. In this same letter, Sebree explains: "At this point of my feeble career I need sound advice and I think you can guide

me right.” These requests for guidance seem increasingly paternal as Sebree, in each letter outlines precisely how much money his rent will cost and explains, like a child unsure of finances, if and how he is able to pay it. Notably, he never writes passionately of his work on *The Lost Zoo*, his mentions of the illustrations are practical rather than descriptive of exciting—the task seems more like a job undertaken to finance his paintings than valuable in its own right.

To this end, discussions of the illustrations frequently focus on finances rather than art, and Alain Locke serves as the father figure to Sebree not only in his financial affairs, but also in keeping up with Sebree’s projects and responsibilities. Later, in a letter dated July 13, 1940, Sebree keeps Locke updated on *The Lost Zoo*, he writes, “Countee has gone a way for the summer. He left me food money until his return. I am working on two other drawings for his book” (Moorland). The letter, written in the heavily slanted and stylized script that marks Sebree’s periods of generative success and optimism, runs the gamut from his more typical tendency to update Locke on his financial affairs, a poetic description of a painting that led him to feel “the strength of the long black shadow ever falling across our America,” and pleading with nostalgia from news of the art scene in Chicago. Sebree signs his note “I always think of you with the deepest affection.” His relationship with Locke fluctuates from a fellow artist working for the black cause to a paternal or even sentimental affection. The relationship between these two great figures in the early months of 1940 remains unclear, but markedly different than the more exclusively professional tone between Sebree and Cullen.

The Lost Zoo

A primary impetus for Sebree’s move to New York and subsequently increased reliance on Alain Locke for advice and support, Sebree’s work on illustrations for *The Lost Zoo*

continued despite the disruption that Sebree's personal problems caused. Based on correspondence in Yale's Countee Cullen Collection, it is clear that the first months of the collaboration unfolded smoothly enough. Cullen, still hard at work on the poem, sent copies to Sebree as they were finished, which, paired with a list of possible illustrations, provided the basis for what would be the sixteen full color illustrations of animals, both real and imaginary, and one of the authors, Christopher Cat. Aside from the guidance of the text, Sebree developed the illustrations with little help from Cullen. What little conversation did occur seems purely pragmatic, ensuring that the illustrations match the text on a narrative level and leading to such insightful comments as Cullen's congenial criticism of the Wakeupworld: "Your sketch of the Wakeupworld pleases me, but I notice he only has four feet. Your original sketch gave him six feet, and my verses say he had 'twelve bright eyes and six strong feet.' I hope you can get the extra ones in without too much trouble" (Beinecke). Aside from narrative consistency, no documents suggest that Cullen made any stylistic suggestions. Instead, it seems that his primary concern was to make the text accessible to children.

In this regard, Cullen's choice of Sebree as the illustrator for his text remains unusual. Sebree, known then and now for his muted, cubist inspired depictions of circus performers and harlequins, typically transformed what could be called "childish" subject matter with a modern ennui. The "Sebree eye" as it has come to be called, denotes Sebree's trademark depiction of his subjects with large, heavy-lidded black eyes that suggest a particular melancholy, devoid of alertness or lustre. In *The Lost Zoo*, an ambiguously-raced Noah figure looks dispassionately at the Treasuretit he handles, his eyes and posture suggesting a statuesque calm uncharacteristic of the freneticism that Cullen describes in the characters that drive the Treasuretit to suicide. However, given the heavy themes with which the poem candidly deals, perhaps the tone of

Sebree's previous work is not far from the mark. Cullen's lyrical rhyme, after all, not only describes the animals who didn't make it onboard Noah's Ark, but also explains the reasons for their absences – among them: self-sacrifice, laziness, arrogance, incredulity, and two counts of suicide.



Sebree's "Noah and the Treasuretit" from *The Lost Zoo*

Cullen's poem, subtitled "A Rhyme for the Young *But Not Too Young*," chooses particularly whimsical subject matter only to imbue it with a very adult morbidity and melancholy. The poem, dictated by Countee Cullen's cat Christopher Cat (listed as an author) and merely transcribed by Cullen, revisits the Christian story of Noah's flood, describing Noah's attempts to invite representatives from all species to repopulate the earth after the flood. The animals, however, are all sentient, and the first section of the book is dedicated to describing a form of species-based discrimination and segregation –the animals sign a petition in an attempt to have Sammie Skunk removed from the guest list. This, along with other rooming preferences, is easily and laughably resolved. But as the rain begins to fall, and Noah, unable to hold open the doors any longer, is forced to set sail, Christopher begins to recount the fates of those less fortunate creatures whose unconventional personality traits prevent them from boarding in time.

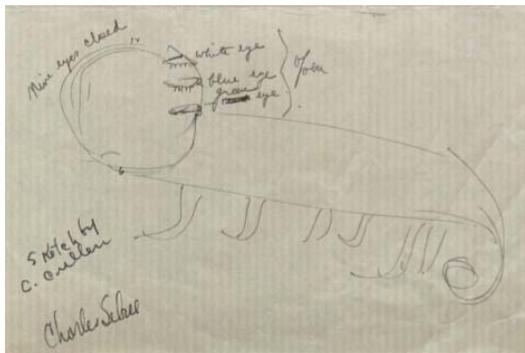
With the exception of two pairs of animals who consciously avoid the ark, the demise of these creatures depends upon the very qualities that set Sebree back as well – unusual personalities and plain bad luck.

Off the Ark: The Animals and What Ails Them

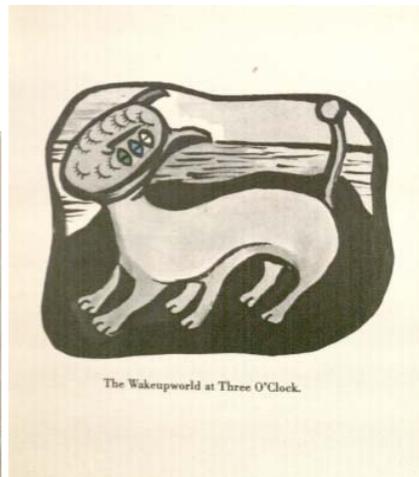
While each of Cullen's twelve animal creations could be analyzed in relation to Sebree's illustrations, each represents a distinct chain of decisions in color and style, based on, but not limited to, Cullen's expectations. By looking at just a few of the most memorable creatures, the reader can view a catalogue of Cullen's interests paired with Sebree's interpretations. The progression of this second part of the poem begins with the mystical song of the Wakeupworld, a magical creature turned time-keeping device whose twelve eyes mark the hours. Cullen describes the creature that would eventually cause Sebree the most trouble illustrating:

At one, an eye all pale and white
 Flew open for the day's first sight,
 And looked alone until at two
 There woke his wondering eye of blue.
 His eye of green at stroke of three
 Blazed like a jewel brilliantly"
 (Cullen 34).

Cullen accompanies his description of the Wakeupworld with a sketch of his own, a fabrication that makes Sebree's creation all the more magical in comparison:



Cullen's sketch



Sebree's "The Wakeupworld at Three O'Clock"

Cullen's description of the Wakeupworld catalogues him as a great traffic signal for the other creatures, critical to their ability to board the ark. Eventually, the Wakeupworld takes so much time marking time for the rest of the creatures that he fails to board the ark himself, as Cullen writes:

He rushed right on through dawn and dark
 Pointing latecomers to the Ark
 Too great the strain was for his heart,
 Slowly he sank; his great knees shook,
 While those his song had helped to start
 Passed on without a backward look
 (Cullen 36)

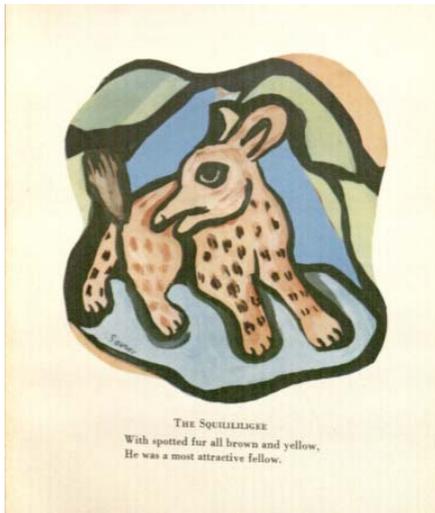
Cullen's creation fulfills his duty to animal-kind, guiding them so efficiently that they forget that he too must be saved. The Wakeupworld is unique among Cullen's menagerie in that he is the only animal to sacrifice himself for the greater good. Sebree, struggling at the time to make crucial connections with ever unreliable galleries, may have felt that he too was being forgotten in a flood of artists and writers all scrambling for publicity.

Perhaps most tragic of Cullen's creatures, the Squililgee represents a true loss to humanity as Christopher describes how his good nature and particularly adorable physique are

said to be irreplaceable after the flood. The Squililigee, which most closely resembles a tiny, fluffy, fox-like creature, suffers the unfortunate flaw of low self-esteem: “But he was fated from the start/ To have a most unhappy heart, / Broken easily” (Cullen 38). The Squililigee’s physical charm and sensitive nature are no match for the taunts that his unfortunately silly name draws from his companions, and instead he eventually no longer remains the sensitive creature he was meant to be, becoming “a trifle sour” as Cullen describes, and finally choosing suicide over guaranteed rescue on the ark:

Therefore he climbed his favorite tree
 The day the flood was set to be,
 And waited patiently;
 He gulped a sob in his little throat
 As others rushed to Noah’s boat.
 Poor Squililigee!
 (40)

Cullen’s description calls to mind a particularly pathetic scene in which the most innocent of creatures is corrupted by cruelty to such an extent that death seems preferable to a life with no respite. The Squililigee’s story remains particularly touching because readers are encouraged to view him as a charming and sensitive creature with precisely the traits we might admire in a person. Sebree’s illustration plays on this sensitivity, imbuing the tiny animal with the “Sebree eye,” a mark of particular sensitivity and interiority that characterizes Sebree’s human faces.



Sebree's "The Squililigee" from *The Lost Zoo*

The Squililigee is the only creature in Cullen's book granted this distinctive characteristic that serves a parallel function to Cullen's exclamation in the text: "Poor Squililigee!" While the loss of each creature is unfortunate, only the Squililigee elicits authorial emotion perhaps because his death is due not to accident or self-sacrifice, but borne of a rational evaluation of the pain of living. Although Cullen's book is marketed to children, it fails to condemn the Squililigee's decision to commit suicide, relying instead on one somber evaluation and the haunting "Sebree eye." Furthermore, Sebree's sensitivity to the Squililigee's plight may be founded on his personal experience swallowing criticism from his friends as well as his critics and trying his hand at a new method in his first and only foray into illustrating. But despite the array of color Sebree uses, his drawings, like that of the Squililigee, retain the tragic tinge that designates his style, as well as serving to remind the viewer that the narrative will not end well.

In a letter in late March or early April of 1940, Cullen writes to Sebree with a new vision for the book's illustrations based solely on making the book more attractive to children. Cullen describes a conversation with a children's librarian during which "She advised me to tell you to make all your illustrations in color, using the most brilliant purples, reds, greens, and yellows you can. These she says have an especial appeal for children" (Beinecke). This new vision of a

book in full color would dramatically alter the production of *The Lost Zoo*, leading to a series of scuffles with the publishers over the cost of printing in color, but emphasizing Cullen's commitment to producing a text that would charm his younger readers. An examination of the images composed by Sebree to accompany Cullen's descriptions of the fantastical creatures now extinct from the earth shows a brilliant working with vibrant color. The living animals are portrayed somewhat conventionally in grays and browns, but Sebree's imagination runs wild in his coloration of animals like the "Hahaha" with its visage like a painted mask or the whimsical Lapalake with its intertube body and magnificent tongue. Because of these vibrant colors and the lyrical play of Cullen's rhyming poem, *The Lost Zoo* offers a tragicomic tone much like Sebree's more somber painted works. The animals, beautiful and brilliant as they are, they are ultimately "lost," just like Sebree's teary-eyed acrobats and harlequins.

But printing in color was not without its challenges for Sebree. Throughout the artist's correspondence with both Cullen and Locke, the question of finances often played a dominant role in deciding not only Sebree's materials, but also where he lived and the size of the canvases he was able to produce. Cullen is clearly aware of this tension as he ends his exuberant letter with a practical caveat: "If working in color doesn't mean any extra expense to you, I wish you would do everything in color. If it does mean extra expense let me know, and perhaps I can help out in some way. We want to make this thing as good as we can" (Beinecke). Here again, finance becomes a critical point of discussion as everyone operates with the understanding that Sebree's financial situation does not allow for luxury.

Even within the context of a successful collaboration, Sebree's financial problems and instability led to professional tension. In what must be the origin of the miscommunication that Marshall mentions, in a letter dated July 31, 1940, Cullen expresses irritation at Sebree's absence

in Boston, citing an intercession by Locke. “I hadn’t any idea where to reach you until I dropped a note to Alain Locke and had your address from him,” Cullen continues with increasing fervor “Along with a desire to find out how near you are to the completion of the final two illustrations you were to do for me, those of the WAKEUPWORLD and CHRISTOPHER. Can you get them to me here within the next ten days, do you think?” (Beinecke) Here again, Cullen’s tone takes on a patronizing note – he hopes that Sebree is doing well, but primarily because of his investment in the artist’s wellbeing and the future of his project. Sebree’s childish behavior has encouraged his colleagues to treat him not as an equal but a juvenile. Cullen describes the letter he has received from the Y.M.C.A asking for Sebree’s whereabouts in an attempt to collect a debt. Sebree’s listing Cullen as a reference for his stay at the Y.M.C.A illustrates his tendency to confuse his business and personal interactions, frequently asking both friends and business partners for loans. This tendency, although borne from his dire financial situation, coupled with a personality soured by adversity, set Sebree apart from his colleagues even at a time when he should have celebrated his success.

Misunderstanding

Various rumors circulate regarding the nature of Sebree’s “illness” and to what extent it influenced his work on *The Lost Zoo*. Biographer Melvin Marshall references a 1985 interview by Jeanne Zeidler, the Hampton University Museum director, with Countee Cullen's widow, Ida, in which she described the artist troubled by mental illness. She claimed that Sebree was "very temperamental ... after he did those illustrations he just seemed to fall apart ... and after he finished all of the illustrations except for *Wakeupworld*, he could not put the paintings on ... the only thing he could do was to paint the three eyes" (qtd. in Marshall 8). Marshall extrapolates from this that “Pressed by the publisher's deadline, Cullen submitted the unfinished drawing and

it was printed in that state” (Marshall). However, Cullen’s correspondence with Sebree suggests that the unfinished appearance of the *Wakeupworld* was a result of printer’s costs, not any fault of the artist. In a letter dated August 2, 1940, immediately following Sebree’s temporary disappearance in Boston, Cullen revises his instructions to Sebree, saying: “Since it seems that they would have to use too many processes in order to show him awake with his twelve colored eyes, suppose you just make a drawing of him awake at three o’clock... The other nine eyes would be closed” (Beinecke). Sebree’s correspondence with Cullen suggests none of the turmoil that Ida Cullen remembers – Sebree seems merely tardy, strapped for cash, and a bit irresponsible, but hardly too ill to work. Depictions of Sebree as a difficult and sometimes unstable companion abound whenever his name is mentioned and probably contribute to his less than expected role in visual art scene of the Harlem renaissance, and such rumors surely lend credibility to accusations of incompetence even when the documents suggest otherwise.

Nevertheless, Sebree’s correspondence with his contemporaries, especially Alain Locke, suggests emotional and financial instability paired with increasing frustration over galleries that express interest in his work but never provide him with support. Sebree describes the trials of what one may imagine as a stereotypical Bohemian experience: living day to day, dollar to dollar with only enough money to buy paint but not food, forced to work only on small canvases that would be more portable when he wasn’t able to pay the rent. However, during his collaboration with Cullen on *The Lost Zoo*, Sebree strove to make contacts with galleries in New York, and, more successfully, in Boston. His prolonged stay in Boston that sent Cullen into such a frenzy during the last months before the publication of *The Lost Zoo* has been attributed both to his mysterious illness and to his relative success exhibiting in Boston. In a letter dated April 22nd, he writes to Locke of his exhibition at the Grace Horne Gallery in Boston, explaining: “The Grace

Horne Gallery is the most vital contact I've made to date" (Moorland). However, because of the onset of WWII, Sebree's collaboration with this gallery did not lead to others. Superficially, this lack of gallery representation hindered Sebree's attempts to gain recognition with the general public. He developed a devoted group of collectors and still participated in artistic training programs, but his name would never receive the amount of press attention that would have been possible through a more conventional route to success. Today Sebree is often remembered for his mental instability rather than his painting.

In the unfortunate, and sometimes terrifying accounts of Sebree's life on the streets of New York and Chicago, the artist's helplessness and passivity in the events around him marks a man beset by a series of unfortunate events and circumstances that snowball to near desolation undermining his sense of security and self worth. A more detailed examination of these circumstances reveals legitimate excuses for Sebree's difficult natures. His lowest moments during the Cullen-Locke affair spiral from a mugging on February 23, 1941, leading to his inability to pay his rent, abandonment by friends, and the fear that his property – and his art – will be seized in a purely financial struggle with property owners (Moorland). With this instability in his personal life paired with words of encouragement from everyone from Gertrude Stein to Picasso (Marshall), it's no wonder that Sebree became distraught over his failure to display in galleries. From Sebree's letters to Locke in 1940, one might speculate that Sebree's famously bitter worldview was the natural result of a string of bad luck and schizophrenic appreciation of his art among his contemporaries. Notably however, Sebree took a more sociological view of his condition, recognizing that to some degree his success was beyond his control not from lack or effort, but because of a series of insurmountable social factors. Sebree, writing to Locke on April 10th in the midst of his misfortunes, attributes his bad luck to: "the

upheaval, the social conditions which are largely responsible for the existence of my problem” (Moorland). While it remains unclear whether Sebree writes of his personal experience or of more general social concerns of prejudice and inequality, his words demonstrate a social consciousness that critics find missing in his work and a contemporary understanding of social factors that resonates with what scholars now know of his life and work.

Galleries

Sebree never overcame the vagabond lifestyle of his adolescence in Chicago, continuing to make artistic decisions based on cost and portability, and he became increasingly distrustful of galleries that he increasingly blamed for his lack of financial success. In the early 1940s he claimed “when I got sick I had to sell all my work very cheap[ly]. This same work that I sold for so very little now hangs in Katherine Kuh's gallery alongside of Matisse, Picasso, etc, and they have gone up for much more than I sold them for” (Marshall 9). Sebree’s anger at being forced to sell his paintings cheaply to support himself was only compounded in 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the United States entered WWII, leading Edith Halpert of Downtown Art Gallery in New York to cancel the series of shows that she had organized for black modernist artists. Only one artist, Jacob Lawrence, had been exhibited before the disaster, and according to archivist and owner Corinne Jennings “Sebree never got his turn and he was apparently very jealous of Lawrence” (qtd. in Marshall). Sebree, at this time recovering from a bout of illness had plagued him while he worked on the illustrations for *The Lost Zoo*, never overcame this perceived slight and would turn down invitations to exhibit in galleries for the rest of his life. This distrust led him to develop a committed group of collectors who he could depend on to buy his work whenever he needed to sell it, however, it severely limited the scope of his publicity. Selling work “under the table” without the commissions that galleries demanded from

art sales, Sebree was able to keep the highest value of his sales – a factor that continued to be essential as Sebree remained hard up for cash – but his reputation suffered from the lack of gallery connections that he had enjoyed when he exhibited at the Chicago Renaissance Society in the 1930s (Marshall).



1938 Exhibition Ticket

From this failure to exhibit and lack of concrete association with any of the artistic schools on whose periphery he orbited (Marshall), Sebree lived in constant fear of rejection in the shadow of great artists and writers – sometimes friends and sometimes employers. Following the conclusion of his work on *The Lost Zoo* Sebree received a letter from Countee Cullen expressing pleasure over the results of the drawings and ending with paternalistic, and somewhat doubtful, words of encouragement: “I hope you are working hard. Remember Alain Locke is expecting great things from you, and so am I” (Beinecke). This tone, found so commonly in Sebree’s letters from Locke, suggests a tacit encouragement and just a note of pity. Despite his best efforts at a display of confidence and success, his confessions to Locke and Cullen had exposed him as greatly in need of both encouragement and financial success. This pair of necessities would never really be fulfilled by the visual art community, leading Sebree to fall back on his expertise in costume

design and to try his hand at playwriting, eventually winning success, respect, and a more stable lifestyle in Washington D.C. (Marshall).

After The Zoo

Although Sebree had enough name recognition to be featured on the front page of the book's publicity statement in the year of its release: "With 16 illustrations in 4 colors by distinguished Negro artist Charles Sebree" (Beinecke, folder 37) it is worth noting that the publisher marketed Sebree's work not only by name but by race. He is not merely a "distinguished artist" but a "negro artist," suggesting that his qualifications are based at least in part upon his race rather than previous renown in the publishing community. Here again, Cullen's focus on color printing plays a significant role in the book's advertising. The color of the illustrations marks them as novel and exotic, just as Sebree's race distinguishes him from other illustrators.

Despite the success of Cullen's book, Sebree's foray into illustration in 1940 remained an isolated undertaking for the rest of his life. Sebree never again attempted to illustrate a children's book, instead focusing his energies on gallery exhibition and just staying afloat. After the outbreak of WWII cancelled his planned exhibition at the Downtown Art Gallery in New York, and as the country turned its attention to the war effort, Sebree's attempts at success fizzled. Ever resourceful, he called on his early training in costume design with John Pratt and used this skill to stay out of combat. As Marshall explains the effect of Sebree's art: "Drafted in 1942, Sebree and Owen Dodson were stationed in an all-black segregated military unit at Camp Robert Smalls, Great Lakes Naval Base, Illinois until 1943. This was perhaps the first time that he faced racial discrimination so blatantly and his art became more topical" (Marshall). Sebree's time at

the camp was formative in his relationship with Dodson and in solidifying his understanding of the theatrical arts, serving as a basis for his later plays, including the acclaimed “Mrs. Patterson” in the 1950s.

Dodson, a lifelong friend of Sebree’s, later encouraged Sebree to donate his correspondence with Countee Cullen to Yale. He explains in a letter to Carl Van Vechten dated March 1944 “When I saw Charles Sebree last I happened to see also some letters at his place from Countee Cullen to him about *The Lost Zoo* and the illustrations for it. I asked Sebree to let the Yale Collection have them since the manuscript was at Yale. You’ll find them enclosed” (Beinecke). Dodson would remain a critical player in Charles Sebree’s life as both increasingly gained popularity throughout the 1950s and 60s. Dodson’s words recognize the importance of Sebree’s contribution to Cullen’s book, but also point to a confidence in artist’s role in the Harlem Renaissance that Sebree may not have been able to recognize in himself. Public persona undeveloped, the information that remains of Sebree’s life exists only as evidence of his relationships with key figures. As for Cullen’s book, it has been rereleased twice since the original edition, in both cases with new, photorealistic illustrations (1969, 1990). Neither edition suggests the melancholy-fantastic charisma that Sebree’s stylized animals embody.

Conclusion

Charles Sebree, like many of the animals he depicted in *The Lost Zoo*, was an unusual creature, seemingly a prodigy destined for greatness, but tripped up by the very traits that set him apart – a sensitivity that took every error to heart coupled with a string of genuine bad luck. Cullen’s creations capture many of the reasons for failure that plagued Sebree even as he illustrated the fantastical beasts. The Squililigee’s sensitive personality left him unable to laugh

off the taunts of his friends, just as Sebree's insecurity devolved into emotional instability. The Snake-That-Walked-Upon-His-Tail, whose success left him arrogant and disliked, is the perfect picture of Sebree's desire to project an image of success that prevented him from asking for help until it was too late. *The Lost Zoo*, in effect a book about failure, offers myriad options for how Sebree may have lost his momentum in the early Forties, and how he remained a key mentor to many of America's next generation of African American artists and writers including future Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison, who says of Sebree: "He was the first person that made me think that I could be a writer. And I paid attention to him. I heard him." (qtd. in Marshall).

Today, Charles Sebree may be remembered in conjunction with his friends and fellow artists: Dunham, Locke, Cullen, Dodson, and even Morrison, but his work on *The Lost Zoo* shows an artist versatile enough to transition smoothly into children's literature, but marked by a personal style inseparable from his somber worldview and personal sense of loss. Given a world more sympathetic to a poor, gay, black man in the 1940s, there's no telling how Sebree's works might rank among the Picassos and Matisses of the era. But even so, Sebree represents an often forgotten figure of the Harlem Renaissance – or any artistic movement for that matter – the artist lost from the pages of history.

Works Cited

- Cullen, Countee, and Charles Sebree. *The Lost Zoo: (a Rhyme for the Young, but Not Too Young)*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Bros., 1940. Print.
- Alain Locke Collection, Box 164-84, Folder Sebree. Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Washington D.C.
- Locke, Alain. "Chicago's New Southside Art Center." *Magazine of Art*. August-September 1941: 370-374. Print.
- Marshall, Melvin, and Blake Kimbrough. "Above and Beyond Category: The Life and Art of Charles Sebree." *The International Review of African American Art* 18.3 (2002): 2-17. *JSTOR*. Web. 26 Mar. 2012.
<http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:bsc:&rft_dat=xri:bsc:ft:iibp:00089042>.
- "The Countee Cullen/Harold Jackman Memorial Collection 1881-1995" *Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library Archives and Special Collections*. 1996.
- Cullen (Countee) Collection MSS 7 Box 2. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.