

COLLECTING GUIDE *Frank Walter*



2,000 photographs, 468 hours of recordings, and a 50,000-page archive.

Unencumbered by a formal art education Walter's work found expression in a variety of media from Polaroid film cartridge boxes to mosquito coil boxes. His was a tortured genius born out of a life-long struggle with mental illness triggered by prejudice and alienation.

Racial identity quite literally haunted Walter, from visions of his white forebears, to unbearable prejudice in Windrush Britain, its presence is felt in his sun-drenched landscapes to his brooding depictions of the Scottish countryside.

This month both the Garden Museum in London and the David Zwirner gallery in Hong Kong (both curated by Professor Paca), pay tribute to Walter's genius.

David Zwirner's senior director, James Green, said: "In recent years, we've also witnessed a significant expansion of his market, as his work has been actively sought by collectors around the world."

Being Frank

Two exhibitions on other sides of the globe show how work by the reclusive Antiguan artist Frank Walter is taking the world by storm, Antique Collecting reports

Any cruise ship visitor to St John's, the capital of the small Caribbean island of Antigua, from the 1970s to early '90s may have come across Frank Walter.

He was the man keeping shop at his uncle's hardware store in Market Street, near the harbour, hawking, among other things, hand-coloured photocopied drawings, placards and even wooden 'L' signs for learner drivers. With his aristocratic bearing and received pronunciation he may have seemed a benign presence, even eccentric.

Few could have been aware the man behind the counter was, in fact, one of the most complex and visionary chroniclers of the 20th century.

Had it not been for a chance encounter by art historian Professor Barbara Paca in 2003 at the artist's secluded retreat the world may never have encountered the extraordinary output of Frank Walter.

Paca was amazed by the dizzying enormity of his work – some 5,000 paintings, 1,000 drawings, 600 sculptures,

Above Frank Walter (1926-2009) *Man Climbing a Coconut Palm and View of Red Canoe and Boat in Harbour*, (undated), oil on cardboard, 40.4 x 52cm. Courtesy Frank Walter family and Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, on show at the Garden Museum

Early days

Francis Archibald Wentworth Walter, known as Frank Walter, was born in Liberta, in Antigua, in 1926. He died as a recluse living in a self-built house and studio on Bailey's Hill in 2009.

One of six brothers and sisters, from a young age, Walter's intellect was apparent to his family, and he quickly gained the admiration and respect of his community securing a place at the, predominantly white, Antigua Grammar School.

Run mostly on British public-school lines, it had started to open up to the island's growing non-white population, a policy which owed less to fairness, as much as pressure from the Colonial Office to expand an educated labour force.

It was the first, but not the last, time Walter would experience injustice due to his skin colour. The confusion was compounded at home where, after his mother died and his father started another family, he was brought up by his grandmother and maiden aunts.

At their apron strings he learnt of his complicated genealogy, the consequences of which would influence him for the rest of his life. The women told tales of his aristocratic heritage, his noble white birth, claiming his black skin was the result of being "sun-kissed".

Easy for the young Walter to assume his towering intellect – he excelled in Greek, Latin and modern languages – was due, not just to his own ability, but – as family folk law determined – a lineage stretching back to Charles II.



Left Frank Walter (1926-2009) *Antiguan Lady on Green Grass*, undated. Courtesy Frank Walter Family and Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, on show at the Garden Museum

Right Frank Walter (1926-2009) *Untitled (Goat Field)*, 1984 © Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, courtesy Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts and David Zwirner, on show at David Zwirner, Hong Kong

Below Frank Walter (1926-2009) *Untitled (Palm Tree Frond)*, undated, oil on singleply cardboard, 42.7 x 28.7cm. Courtesy Frank Walter Family and Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, on show at the Garden Museum

German heritage

In fact, Walter was descended from both German slave owners and enslaved people of African descent. Understanding this dichotomy and his complicated genealogy became one of Walter’s obsessions.

Professor Paca said: “Frank Walter was the only person of his generation to know the complex history of his European and African ancestors. He kept it secret out of fear of isolation from his peers. Genealogy meant a great deal to him as later in life he was socially alienated.”

For the rest of his life Walter viewed himself as European, specifically German, and often identified as a white man. His heraldic symbols and self-proclaimed titles, which included 7th Prince of the West Indies, Lord of Follies and the Ding-a-Ding Nook, all referred to properties owned by the Walter family in the 18th century.

In his only published book *Sons of Vernon Hill* (1987) Walter used the name Franz Waithé, a German first name and surname from the old Scottish name for Walter, meaning strong warrior.



Highland fling

By 1960, while living in the UK, the hallucinations Walter had been experiencing, partly due to starvation, overwork and mental exhaustion, became worse. On May 6, already obsessed by his links to the British royal family, he saw a vision of Charles II who summoned him to Scotland to protest the marriage of Princess Margaret and Antony Armstrong-Jones (who were also due to honeymoon in Antigua).

The next day he set off from Stoke-on-Trent to Melrose Abbey to claim his right to marry the princess. His 36-hour tour also takes him to Edinburgh, Dalkeith, Jedburgh and Kelso, an experience which stayed with him and provided the inspiration for a series of paintings.

Painted from memory Walter produced a body of intimate and emotive landscapes depicting the colourful meadows of wildflowers and rolling hills of the Scottish countryside.

In these and Walter’s Caribbean landscapes, skies glow in hues of lavender, pink, and red, often layered with flowers and foliage that the artist enlivens with sponge-like brushwork in equally vibrant colour. Professor Paca said: “Through these paintings Walter interprets his homeland, which for interesting personal reasons includes Great Britain and Europe as a sacred idyll, chronicling the harmony of his solitude there with a skilled and sensitive paintbrush.”

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Plantation manager

By the late-1930s in Antigua, despite the growing non-white middle class, there were no non-white owners of sugar-producing estates or managers of sugar factories. It wasn't until 1948 at the age of 22 that Walter became a manager at the Antiguan Sugar Syndicate, being the first person of colour to secure a management role in the Antiguan sugar industry.

At the time the industry was in severe decline, especially in Antigua, with low wages and poor conditions. With limited resources, Walter modernised the cultivation and processing of sugar, also seeking to reduce social exploitation and racial inequality. In 1953, he turned down the role of managing director instead choosing to embark on a 10-year educational tour of Europe where he could realise his notion of modernisation.

Rampant racism

Walter left Antigua for Europe in the early 1950s, and landing in the UK he soon encountered the racism endured by the Windrush generation. The trip was to prove mentally and physically challenging and so harsh it triggered periods of mental instability which, on occasion, saw him admitted to hospital.

In his unpublished autobiography Walter describes the menial jobs he was forced to take on as an unskilled day labourer in London, Leeds, and Stoke-on-Trent. In an attempt to escape the day-to-day injustices he encountered, Walter retreated into the world of imagination, visiting local libraries, creating an alternate reality linking him to the crowned heads of Europe.

In the autumn of 1956, sacked from his job as a button

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dye, Walter travelled to Germany to visit the country of his forebears and research his family tree – one branch of the family having come from Markgroningen, near Stuttgart.

Back to the Caribbean

Dogged by material and mental hardship, in 1961 Walter made the decision to return to Antigua – but the island is much changed with tourism, not agriculture, the country's mainstay. He moved to the nearby island of Dominica where he was assigned a plot of land, which five years later was withdrawn. In 1967, with the grip of British control slipping, Walter returned to Antigua.

His move to a secluded hilltop studio on Bailey's Hill, where he stayed until his death in 2009, followed two decades in and around St John's working for his family's hardware shop, where he worked on artistic projects at night.

Encouraged by his output he approached a number of western organisations from the British Coal Board to the West German youth hostel association, as well as cruise ships to explore the possibility of staging an exhibition.

In the limelight

But artistic acclaim, so dreamed of in his lifetime, only came four years after his death when, in 2014, after a chance meeting with Professor Paca, his work went on show in the Ingleby Gallery in Edinburgh. In 2017, Walter represented Antigua and Barbuda at the 2017 Venice Biennale. Since that time he has had solo

exhibitions around the world including America, France and Germany.

Frank Walter: Artist, Gardener, Radical *is on at the Garden Museum, 5 Lambeth Palace Rd, London SE1 7LB, from October 4 to February 24, while Frank Walter Pastorale is on at David Zwirner, 5-6/F, H Queen's, 80 Queen's Road, Hong Kong until October 28, marking the first time Walter's work has been seen in Asia.*



Top left Frank Walter (1926-2009) *Plantation Fields and Workers*, undated, oil on card, 31.8 x 45cm. Courtesy Frank Walter Family and Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, on show at the Garden Museum

Above *Self-portrait with glasses on forehead* (undated). Black-and-white photograph mounted on cardboard, 35 x 27.5cm. Courtesy Frank Walter Family and Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, on show at the Garden Museum

Below Frank Walter (1926-2009) *Bowl of Fruit*, undated, Courtesy Frank Walter Family and Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, on show at the Garden Museum





Left Frank Walter (1926-2009) *Untitled (Lavender Sky, Burgundy Trees)*, n.d. © Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, courtesy Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts and David Zwirner, on show at David Zwirner, Hong Kong



Right Frank Walter (1926-2009) *Untitled (Strange Woman in Skirt)*, n.d. © Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, courtesy Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts and David Zwirner, on show at David Zwirner, Hong Kong



Above Frank Walter (1926-2009) *Untitled (Two Tree Trunks, a Pink Sky, and a Black-and-White Fence)*, n.d. © Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, courtesy Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts and David Zwirner, on show at David Zwirner, Hong Kong



Left Frank Walter (1926-2009) *Untitled (Pink and White Flowering Tree)*, n.d. © Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, courtesy Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts and David Zwirner, on show at David Zwirner, Hong Kong



Right Frank Walter (1926-2009) *Untitled (Leaning Tree Salmon Sky)*, n.d. © Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, courtesy Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts and David Zwirner, on show at David Zwirner, Hong Kong