

# FINANCIAL TIMES

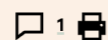
## Frank Walter, The Drawing Center review — transcendental art from a multitalented oddball

The Antiguan poet, singer and painter was obsessed with his lineage and the world around him



'Self Portrait Series: Yellow Shirt (Man in Tree)'

Ariella Budick 7 HOURS AGO



A Frank Walter landscape is a tiny but weighty thing. From his redoubt in the lush hills of the Caribbean, he saw signs and wonders in the everyday — a cow dancing in a field, a bird on the wing, the sea blinking through a dip in the mountains. He described himself as a poet, author, actor, composer and singer, but his most epic endowment was a true artist's eye, the capacity to transfigure what the rest of us merely note. The Drawing Center in New York has given its spellbinding survey an apt subtitle: *To Capture a Soul*.

Walter's work is hardly known, though it's plentiful enough. At his death in 2009 he left behind 50,000 pages of writing, 5,000 paintings, 1,000 drawings, 468 hours of tape recordings and hundreds of sculptures. This mountain of art was stashed in his isolated retreat on the island of Antigua, and almost none of it has been seen before by the public. A small exhibition at David Zwirner Gallery in 2022 presented a few masterful paintings, shorn of context. The curator, Hilton Als, didn't want viewers' judgment clouded by Walter's complicated history as a self-taught artist, hermit and self-aggrandising oddball. The Drawing Center, on the other hand, surrounds his works on paper with the confounding specifics of his life.

Walter was born in Horsford Hill, Antigua, in 1926 and from an early age absorbed his mixed-race family's history through his grandmother's tales. He was impressed with a vein of moderately illustrious German ancestors and less interested in the African people they enslaved. Throughout his life, he struggled with his own identity, often portraying himself not as the dark-skinned Black man that he appeared to others, but as a quasi-abstract white figure. He even invented a racial category of which he was the only member: Europoid.



'Profile of a Man in a Striped Shirt'



'Untitled (Scotland with white river and trees and two birds in flight)'

Walter didn't mind being in a class by himself. As a boy, he had reason to count on an exceptional destiny. A star at his exclusive prep school, he was brilliant at languages, mathematics, botany and pretty much everything else that stimulated his prodigious mind. By age 22, he had become the first non-white — or, well, Europoid — manager of a Caribbean sugar plantation.

In 1953, he set off with his cousin for what was meant to be an extended European grand tour. They started in London, where Walter intended to research his family roots and study ways to modernise the Antiguan sugar industry. But the trip was marred from the start by virulent racism. He had trouble finding work commensurate with his education, and instead scrounged a succession of menial jobs, while also taking night classes in chemistry, metallurgy and physics. Conditions wore him down until, suffering from paranoia and hallucinations, he wound up in an asylum.

He returned to the Caribbean in 1961, penniless but obsessed by an august, if imaginary, lineage; he eventually came to count King Charles III and Diana, Princess of Wales, among his relations. The Drawing Center includes some of the innumerable genealogical charts he made over the course of his life, as well as the fruits of his heraldic research. He drew lions couchant, griffins and visored helmets, and dreamt up a Walter coat of arms: a red heart pierced by an arrow, a royal crown and three five-pointed stars.



'Untitled (Dog and wolf-like animals)'



'Untitled (View of trees through open window)'

His real clan back in Antigua regarded him as a social liability and packed him off to a 25-acre plot on the island of Dominica with instructions to improve it. He cleared the land, founded a charcoal factory and called his new kingdom the Mount Olympus Industrial and Agricultural Estate, reigning contentedly until 1967, when the government confiscated the property. Back in Antigua, Walter built himself a small home on an isolated hill, where he spent his final years drawing, painting, writing and sculpting. "I had begun to lay tremendous stress on my reclusion," he wrote in his autobiography. "I wanted to be by myself for a while."

Most of his pieces are undated, so it is hard to map an artistic progression on to his life story, but you get the sense that, freed from social and economic pressures, he made a rough kind of peace with his mind and focused on art. Trees, birds and farm animals became his companions. He had unlimited opportunities to study the horizon, the sun, the sea and the craggy shore, which he rendered in rapturous miniatures. Whether they were tossed off in concentrated spasms of productivity or doled out over decades, they are all suffused with a timeless sublimity.

Walter had a knack for whittling the world down to immanent paradigms. A fish, floating in cobalt deeps, is both carefully observed and distilled. He translated anatomical elements such as fins, gills and tails into the essence of fishness. He endowed birds with as many wings (three, or possibly four) as they needed to suggest flight, not just to achieve it. One sketch, economically rendered in a few strokes of the pencil, shows a mama beast of indeterminate species nursing her young, and it's the bond between them that matters, not the classification.

Precision often merges with a kind of hallucinatory ecstasy. The sun rises and sets in lurid glory over meadows and beaches, spreading lavender, mauve, orange and crimson in its wake. Dawn spurts from a mountaintop like lava from an active volcano, spreading beams of divine exaltation. Twilight blurs into bands of luminosity.



'White Bird' (c1975)



'Untitled (Heraldic Beast [Dragon])'

Walter remained puzzled about his place in the world, but he was an artist of transcendental clarity, harmonising with the 19th-century Romantic spirit of Caspar David Friedrich. Friedrich dropped puny humans into vast landscapes redolent of the divine; his "Monk by the Sea" is a little peg of humanity at the hinge between the Earth and churning sky. Walter painted a mini-version, more geometrical and less overwhelmed by his own insignificance, but equally beatific. A man in a yellow shirt sits in the crook of a V-shaped tree, gazing out at the tropical surf. If the implied thought bubble above Friedrich's monk might be "I am barely here at all," the epigram for Walter's figure would be: "After all that, I'm still here."

To September 15, [drawingcenter.org](https://drawingcenter.org)

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