



Horace Pippin  
American, 1888 - 1946

## *School Studies*

1944

oil on canvas

overall: 61.2 × 76.6 × 0.2 cm (24 1/8 × 30 3/16 × 1/16 in.)

framed: 81.28 × 97.79 × 10.16 cm (32 × 38 1/2 × 4 in.)

Inscription: lower right: H.PIPPIN,

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Meyer P. Potamkin, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art 1991.42.1

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### ENTRY

*Interior* represents a mother and her two children on a winter evening. [1] The room is sparsely furnished. Frozen snow has accumulated at the window in the center background, and the alarm clock to the right indicates that it is six o'clock. The mother sits in front of a stove and smokes a pipe as steam rises from a kettle in front of her. Her profile pose and self-absorbed attitude recall James McNeill Whistler's iconic *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* (best known as "Whistler's Mother," 1871, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). A girl sits on a quilt in the center foreground, and cradles a doll. To the left, a boy stands at a table, presumably reading a book by the light of the candle.

This painting belongs to series of semi-autobiographical domestic interiors that Pippin painted from 1941 until his death in 1946, the best known among them being *Domino Players* [fig. 1]. Recalling aspects of Pippin's childhood, most of these scenes represent members of African American families pursuing a variety of household activities in a single multipurpose room. The paintings all have the same quiet, peaceful ambience and feature many of the same common household items, such as rag rugs, quilts, a stove, and an alarm clock. What distinguishes *Interior*

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and gives added significance to the work's title is the way the three figures, instead of interacting, have turned their backs to each other and seem lost in their own inner worlds. The mother, self-contained and detached from her children, contrasts with the young girl tenderly embracing her doll. The sparse interior further intensifies the austerity and loneliness of the scene, while the vibrant patterns of the three rag rugs, as well as the girl's quilt and the checkerboard tablecloth, enliven the composition. The textures of the wooden floorboards and dilapidated plaster wall are vividly rendered; the treatment of the former is reminiscent of Pippin's earlier pyrographic technique, in which he burned his forms with a metal stylus directly into wooden panels.

The most striking and paradoxical aspect of *Interior* is the incongruence between the impenetrable black night outside and its inexplicably bright, uniformly lit room. Many of Pippin's other nocturnal scenes, such as *Abe Lincoln, The Great Emancipator* (1942, Museum of Modern Art) or *Saying Prayers* [fig. 2], amply demonstrate his ability to render the shadow play of interiors at night in more realistic ways. Nothing can logically explain the presence of the red flames of the candle and the oil lamp in the shining room or the lack of true shadows in the composition of *Interior*. Pippin instead deliberately calls into question the distinction between day and night, inside and outside, depth and flatness, reality and abstraction. The diverse and, at times, contradictory qualities of works like *Interior* led the leading writer and intellectual of the Harlem Renaissance Alain Locke to comment in 1947, shortly after the artist's death, that Pippin was "a real and rare genius, combining folk quality with artistic maturity so uniquely as almost to defy classification." [2]

Robert Torchia

September 29, 2016

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Horace Pippin, *Domino Players*, 1943, oil on canvas on board, The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC



**fig. 2** Horace Pippin, *Saying Prayers*, 1943, oil on canvas, Brandywine River Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, The Betsy James Wyeth Fund, 1980

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## NOTES

[1] The title of the painting was changed in July 2019 from *Interior* to *School Studies*. The overview was updated and this footnote added to Robert Torchia's original entry text on February 18, 2021. According to Anne Monahan, *School Studies* was neither exhibited nor published during the artist's lifetime, and the work was quickly separated from its original title. It was titled posthumously as *Interior* in Selden Rodman's *Horace Pippin: A Negro Painter in America* (New York, 1947). However the painting is identified as *School Studies* in the account book of Pippin's dealer, Robert Carlen (Carlen Galleries, Inc. records, 1775–1997, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC). The title in the account book dates from c. 1944, the date of the Gallery's painting, and is more typical of the narrative titles that Pippin used for his genre scenes (e-mail, May 22, 2019, Anne Monahan to NGA curator Harry Cooper, in NGA curatorial files).

[2] Alain Locke, "Horace Pippin," in *Horace Pippin Memorial Exhibition* (Philadelphia, PA, 1947), n. p.

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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

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*American Paintings, 1900–1945*

The lightweight, plain-weave fabric support is unlined, and remains mounted on its original stretcher. The tacking margins are intact. An additional ground may have been applied over large areas of crackle in the commercially prepared white ground layer. As was his practice during this period, the artist left an approximately ¼-inch border of exposed ground on all four edges of the painting, probably to ensure that the design would not be cropped by the frame's lip. [1] He outlined each of the forms in black paint, and then proceeded to apply paint wet into wet, using both opaque and translucent pigments. Brushwork is evident throughout, especially in the white impastos. Two minor pentimenti that show alterations to the painting by the artist are visible to the naked eye. First, a pot originally appeared on a table at the right, and although both pot and table were painted out, the black shape of the pot is still discernible through the paint on the wall at the far right. Second, in the left center, a pentimento of black paint to the right of the chair beneath the hanging coat suggests that the chair was formerly in a different position. Other than the extensive network of drying crackle, and some wrinkling in the black paint throughout, the painting is in excellent condition. The surface is coated with a layer of varnish.

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[1] Mark F. Bockrath and Barbara A. Buckley, "Materials and Techniques," in Judith Stein, *I Tell My Heart: The Art of Horace Pippin* (Philadelphia, PA, 1993), 168.

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### PROVENANCE

(Robert Carlen Galleries, Philadelphia); Mr. [1891-1973] and Mrs. [1893-1968] R. Sturgis Ingersoll, Esq., Philadelphia; Mr. and Mrs. Irving H. Vogel, Philadelphia; Mrs. A. Lewis Spitzer; (ACA Galleries, New York);[1] purchased 1972 by Meyer P. [1909-2001] and Vivian O. [1915-2002] Potamkin, Philadelphia; gift 1991 to the NGA.

[1] Provenance according to *Horace Pippin*, exh. cat. The Phillips Collection, Washington; Terry Dintenfass Gallery, New York; Brandywine River Museum, Chadds Ford, Washington, 1976: no. 39.

## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1947 Horace Pippin Memorial Exhibition, The Art Alliance, Philadelphia, 1947, no. 36, as Interior of Cabin.

1972 Four American Primitives: Edward Hicks, John Kane, Anna Mary Robertson Moses, Horace Pippin, ACA Galleries, New York, 1972, no. 64, repro.

1977 Horace Pippin, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; Terry Dintenfass Gallery, New York; Brandywine River Museum, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, 1977, no. 39, repro.

1991 Art for the Nation: Gifts in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1991, unnumbered catalogue, color repro.

1994 I Tell My Heart: The Art of Horace Pippin, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; Art Institute of Chicago; Cincinnati Art Museum; Baltimore Museum of Art; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1994-1995, fig. 146.

2003 All the Art in Me: In Search of Horace Pippin, Reading Public Museum, Pennsylvania, 2003, no catalogue.

2015 Horace Pippin: The Way I see It, Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford, 2015, pl. 51.

2018 Outliers and American Vanguard Art, National Gallery of Art, Washington; High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2018-2019, no. 59, repro., brochure fig. 4, as Interior.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1947 Rodman, Selden. *Horace Pippin: A Negro Painter in America*. New York, 1947: 86, no. 81.
- 1989 Bantel, Linda, with Susan Danly and Jeanette Toohey. "The Potamkin collection of American art." *Antiques* 136, vol. 2 (August 1989): 297 pl. IX, 299.
- 2015 Lewis, Audrey M., ed. *Horace Pippin: The Way I See It*. Exh. cat.

Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford. New York, 2015: 9, 77,  
142, repro.

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