

Bessie Harvey



Born: 1929 Dallas, GA
Died: 1994 Alcoa, TN

With little formal schooling, Bessie Harvey worked as a domestic servant and hospital aide for most of her life, in addition to mothering eleven children after first marrying at the age of fourteen. Her distinctive sculptures were only seen by a wider audience when she was almost 50, after they were entered in an art show at the hospital where she worked. Made mostly of found objects and natural forms, these pieces were quickly recognized for their originality and personal expression.¹ For Harvey, her art is highly religious in subject and process. In a kind of artistic manifesto, Harvey wrote about her relationship with God and Art.

My greatest hope is in my believing and trusting and knowing, from self-experience, that truly, God is real. The art is magic, he's majestic, and the art is from him, so it is magic. But for it to be good for you is to know that Bessie Harvey is not magic, only the one that lives within her, the spirit, is the magic one.

Harvey's sculptures were typically wood decorated with paint, beads, shells, cloth, and other found materials, combining "performance (on the order of a puppet show) sculpture, painting, and assemblage".² According to Harvey, God allowed her to see anthropomorphic forms within the wood she worked with, and with that help she could give physical shape to the spiritual presences within these tree roots, limbs, and pieces of driftwood. Her interest in nature was due in part to her belief that she could access or see the spirit of her ancestors within trees, for example, and the general belief that God and nature are one.³



Bessie Harvey, *Chariot Ride*, 1991, Mixed Media, Gift of the Roger H. Ogden Collection

¹ Delehanty, Randolph. *Art of the American South*. Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 1996.

² Farrington, Lisa (2005). *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*. Oxford University Press. pp. 247–249. ISBN 9780195167214.

³ "Bessie Harvey." Wikipedia.com. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bessie_Harvey