



WILLIAM HAWKINS

American, 1895-1990

Prudential, NYC, 1985

Enamel on Masonite

Figge Art Museum, Gift of Thomas Kahl Figge in
celebration of the museum's 10th Anniversary, 2015.9

Prudential, NYC



William Hawkins (1895–1990) Born in Kentucky, William Hawkins grew up on his grandmother’s prosperous farm. He served in France during World War I and then moved to Columbus, Ohio in his early twenties. With only a third-grade education and a stock of practical knowledge, this self-taught artist began making and selling art in the 1930s. He often held several jobs at one time, which ranged from truck driver to horse-breaker to plumber. Hawkins began focusing on his art making in the 1970s and kept working until shortly before his death at the age of 94. The work of this self-taught American artist can be found in numerous museum collections, including the American Folk Art Museum, the High Museum of Art, the National Gallery, the Columbus Museum of Art, the Akron Art Museum, and the Figge Art Museum.

A product of its time

Like many Folk artists, William Hawkins used the materials he had at hand. He often incorporated found objects into his pieces, such as scavenged boards and leftover paint, and would work with a single brush until it was worn out. In the early 1980s, Hawkins was befriended by neighboring artist Lee Garrett. Garrett entered one of Hawkins’ paintings in the amateur division of the 1982 Ohio State Fair, and it ended up winning first prize. With Garrett’s assistance, Hawkins obtained better art materials and access to a New York gallery. Hawkins’ unique style often integrated advertisements, logos, and symbols from popular culture into his artworks.

Take a closer look

With *Prudential*, one is immediately drawn to the central figure of the iconic Rock of Gibraltar used in popular Prudential insurance advertisements. This easily-recognized symbol is given a new perspective with Hawkins’ choice of energetic, expressive brushstrokes with the clear color and sheen of enamel paint. Hawkins’ signature is boldly displayed along the lower edge of this painting. He signed nearly every work like this, with a broad margin at the bottom, proclaiming “William L. Hawkins. Born. KY. July 27 1895” because he was proud of his abilities and made sure people always knew his age and place of birth.

Did you know?

William Hawkins cited his mixed ancestry (a combination of African American, European, and American Indian) as one reason for his talent. Hawkins was never shy about his artistic ability and was known as a popular neighborhood fixture. He had a huge incentive to create work that would sell in order to support himself, many of his 20 children, and sometimes even his grandchildren. Although not a part of this painting, Hawkins often added gaily-patterned frames to his works to make them more attractive and easier to sell.

On your own

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