

# CHARLES WILBERT WHITE



This work is known by two titles: *Mother* and *Awaiting His Return*. The woman who dominates the composition stares into space, her strongly modeled figure a study in patience. Given the date (1945), the framed star in the background (a symbol of the U.S. military), and the word "mother" inscribed in the lithograph's lower left corner, the two titles make equal sense. The woman's face is easily that of a mother waiting for a loved one to return from service in World War II. Artist Charles White has chiseled her facial features with determination while infusing her expression with a sad insomnia. The cubist faceting of her figure imparts a feeling of solidity and strength in her that is reinforced by her imposing size and foreground placement. Her hands and face are nearly architectural with their sharp edges and straight-line markings of light and shadow. Yet her tired eyes, her chin set into the palm of her hand, and the merest hint of doubt in her expression signal concern.

White, primarily known as a painter of historical murals, in 1942 shifted his focus to portraits of everyday African-Americans on the advice of Harry Sternberg, an instructor at the Art Students League, New York. White's portraits, like *Mother*, depict anonymous people dealing with situations common to the black experience. The meticulous draughtsman used his skill to render human emotion and endurance in the face of such obstacles as discrimination. His works from the 1950s, the decade when the civil rights struggle exploded in the United States, show the cost of such perseverance in images of black men and women fighting for social justice.