



Horace Pippin

Title

Gas Alarm Outpost, Argonne

Medium

Oil on canvas

Date

ca. 1931-1937

Dimensions

22 1/8 × 30 in. (56.2 × 76.2 cm)

Accession number

2021.6

Credit Line

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Web Description

Toward the end of his life, Horace Pippin remarked that “World War I brought out all the art in me.” He had served in France as part of the all-Black 369th Infantry Regiment, nicknamed the Harlem Hellfighters. The regiment was deployed overseas in late 1917 and—because American white soldiers refused to fight alongside Black ones—it was reassigned to assist a French military unit along the German border. One of the few Black regiments sent into active combat, the Harlem Hellfighters would also spend a longer time at the front than any other American unit: 191 continuous days in the trenches. The Battle of Meuse-Argonne remains one of the largest offensives in American military history. The 369th Regiment was celebrated for its bravery, and Pippin and his unit were awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French government. Pippin was one of almost 100,000 American soldiers wounded in this battle and was permanently injured by a sniper at Argonne. Several years after his return to his native West Chester, Pippin—without formal training—began creating burnt wood engravings and within a few years had turned to painting in oil. Gas Alarm Outpost, Argonne is one of Pippin’s earliest oils and one of only seven paintings by him with World War I-related themes. In this haunting composition the artist depicts three soldiers on sentry duty behind the front lines. They were assigned to sound the alarm—visible to the right of the door of the partially hidden shed—whenever the hiss of a gas cylinder was heard. The men are outfitted with gas masks, contained in the canvas bags worn around their necks. Pippin reworked the color of the sky several times making it increasingly lighter. In adopting a brilliant shade of blue, he emphasizes two ominous details painted in dark contrast: relentless strands of razor wire and a soldier parachuting from one of the military

planes passing overhead. This iconic painting was one of the most visible works in Pippin's lifetime, being shown in exhibitions regularly beginning the very year it was completed.