Awakening the Spirits
Art by Bessie Harvey
Said Bessie Harvey of her role as an artist, “I bring it out to where everybody else can see it.” Beholding what we did not, she eased art’s passage from the spirit world to ours. Tugging her materials from the earth, she knew at once how to bring them to life: “When I pull a root up from the ground, I see it all cleaned up. I see what it wants to be, because God shows me what he wants it to be.”

Through Harvey’s art-making, she delivered what already existed. Midwifery, rather than birth, was a metaphor for her creative process. Once, in the mid-1980s, she created a birthing, reading the wood as a reclining woman in labor, the baby’s head crowning between her legs. Finishing this gritty and audacious piece late at night, she called her dealer, Shari Cavin, to say that the image was so graphic that she wanted to get it out of the house before her young grandkids might see it. It’s quite rare for artists to depict the messy realities of birth. Among those who have ventured to do so are Marc Chagall, Frida Kahlo, Alice Neel, Judy Chicago, and Bessie Harvey.

Initially, Harvey’s family thought she was crazy to spend her time fleshing out the souls she saw in roots, branches and scrap wood. But they came around to acknowledging her special gifts when a steady stream of company came to call, folks who paid money and left with their prized purchases in their arms. Harvey told me this in 1983, when I was one of those out-of-town callers who came to meet the sculptor whose singular wood constructions I had seen in a collector’s home in Nashville. An artist chum and I tracked down Harvey’s home base while I was in Tennessee doing field work for another exhibition. At one point during our visit, Harvey confided that she often dreamed that she could fly, a fact that disconcerted those close to her. “Why, I have those dreams too!” my friend exclaimed, and Harvey beamed.

Making art, she often told interviewers, was a lifesaving act, one that kept her sane. “When I was at my lowest point...God enlightened me. Art—that’s what He gave me....The spirit would release me from all of the hurt, and I could hear Him speak and talk to me....” Harvey respected the spirit embodied in wood, daily encountering inanimate objects with predetermined wills. She spoke of ascertaining what a root “wants to be.” Artists who were far more worldly than she have expressed themselves similarly. The great architect, Louis Kahn, used to ask his students, “What does the brick want to be? It wants to be an arch.”

Bessie Harvey shared an ability to see the final product by surveying the raw material with none other than the Renaissance master, Michelangelo. When he looked at an unworked block of marble, he could envision a figure hidden within it. As a carver, Michelangelo’s task was to liberate that body by removing the stone covering it. In his own day, his admirers called him “divine,” by which they meant “inspired by God,” and not “wonderful,” or “sublime,” which is the way the word is used today. This concept of the artist as visionary, as one who has special, God-given powers to see what others do not, is an integral part of our art world, whether the artist is trained or unschooled, from Florence, Italy or East Tennessee.

In the past, self-taught artists were rarely accorded the advantages available for those with traditional training. Exceptions include Henri Rousseau in Europe, and Horace Pippin and John Kane in the United States. But in the last decade, artists such as Martin Ramirez, Thornton Dial and Bessie Harvey have been shown and collected in contexts other than that of folk art. Every two years, New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art mounts an influential exhibition to highlight important developments in the world of contemporary art. Stepping off the elevator there in 1995, I confronted three of Harvey’s intrepid constructions which were included in the survey. In the accompanying catalog, curator Klaus Kertess spoke of her work’s “exultant inventiveness and powerful baroque plasticity.” Harvey’s hardcrapple life and late-blooming career were irrelevant. Her direct and expressive sculpture was speaking to anyone who took the time to look.