200 Years of African American Art

The Arthur Primas Collection

Essay by P. Stephen Hardy
“200 Years of the Black Experience in Art”

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by P. Stephen Hardy

"History lives. It lives in the people."

The Arthur Primas Collection is a vast body of artworks that illustrates the African-American experience throughout two centuries of American history. It is a testament to the resilience, creativity, and cultural contributions of African-Americans. The collection contains a diverse range of mediums and movements, across 200 years of fine art practice. It is also unique among collections of predominantly African American art, which, most often, attempt to provide a survey of African American artistic production. The focus here is on works that express the nature and identity of the African-American experience, and the way it has been interpreted and remembered by this collection that the social is at the same time intensely personal and universal. This unifying principle is broad enough to include a surprising range of works and artists.

Known primarily as landscape artists, Grafton Tyler Brown (1841-1918) and Edward Mitchell Bannister (1828-1901) were both born as free Blacks in the North-East Bannister in Canada and Brown in Pennsylvania. Brown is considered to be the first professional African American artist in California. He arrived in the mid-1860s, when slavery was still the law in the Southern United States, and set up a thriving business as a commercial draftsman.

Grafton Tyler Brown witnessed the expansion that transformed the nation. He recorded it with illustrations of burgeoning gold-rush towns, sprawling ranches, farms and country sides, that called people of all walks of life westward. His documentation of the areas surrounding San Francisco became part of the lore of the west for those in the eastern and southern states, hungry for a new way of life. Unfortunately many of those who came west brought their prejudices with them. The original oil painting, Along the Columbia, 1872, is likely an early landscape work. Brown was not trained as a painter and did not truly devote himself to landscape painting until he headed north to Canada in 1882. He sought greater racial tolerance than could be found in and around San Francisco, California. This painting is emblematic of three essential American themes of the 19th century - discovery, exploration and settlement.

Brown often included allusions to trains and railroads in his landscape compositions. The train holds many symbolic meanings from the intrusion of civilization on the from the limitations of city and rural southern life. As Brown was a free Black from settlement.

Bannister often chose biblical scenes as his subjects as seen in the painting, Last Supper, circa 1940s. Like Beauford, Joseph used exaggeration of the physical form and non-natural colors but he expressed a more serene and simplified vision, without the energetic brushwork employed by Beauford. Joseph Bannister's Christ, in the center of this globe, seems more mottled than flesh. He glides with an inner light that recalls the luminous, biblical tableaus of Henry Ossawa Tanner. This also serves to highlight the act of reaching for the bread, an allusion to the offering of the body and blood of Christ for the salvation of all humankind.

The renowned figurative painter Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) is best known for his series of paintings that retold major events in Black history, including the liberation of Haiti led by Toussaint L’Ouverture in 1790s. Lawrence’s celebrated Toussaint L’Ouverture series was completed when he was 21 years old, in 1938, and is the result of meticulous research and heart. We can see in images such as in his screenprint, To Preserve Their Freedom, 1986, one of the 41 panels from the L’Ouverture series, what Lawrence called his “dynamic cubism”. This work was originally painted in egg-tempera paint on paper 1937-1938. He later printed the series in a slightly larger screenprint format.

Lawrence was not interested in romantic, idealized portrayals produced as a balm against racist stereotypes so prevalent at that time. His representations were reduced to the bare essentials with overlapping, hard-edged shapes reminiscent of Henri Matisse. His figures, frozen in silhouette and posed in Egyptian-like stances, powerfully conveyed the human drama of oppression and hard-won freedom. Lawrence strove to relate those stories with straightforward honesty, and therein lay their power.

There is much to celebrate in this collection. There are examples of seminal works from artists whose importance to the canon of African American art can not be overstated. James Amos Porter (1903-1970) is represented with two works in this exhibition. He is equally important for his contribution as an artist and his contribution as a historian. His scholarship earned him the title, “the Dean of Afro-American Art History” from his colleagues and students. Porter was the first scholar to offer a systematic, critical assessment of African American artists and their works. His groundbreaking book, “Modern Negro Art”, published in 1943 is still essential reading for those who seek to understand African American art practice. Porter was determined to document and place Black artists’ works within the wider context of American fine art production. Porter’s most celebrated works consist of beautiful portraits and iconic figures, the “grand, Man With Umbrella, 1957, like his charcoal drawing, Mother and Child: Monumental Mother, 1944, present Black individuals as larger-than-life metaphors of strength and resilience against the ominous backdrop of the times they inhabit. The subjects fill up the picture frame and eclipse the backgrounds of shadow laden color and stormy skies, respectively.

The collection includes signature works from the brothers, Beauford Delaney, (1901-1979) and Joseph Delaney, (1904-1991). Each of them departed from the prevailing genteel realism of the 1930s and 40s in favor of their own visions of life. Beauford’s Portrait of Carolyn Davis, Poet, 1945, exhibits the influence of Van Gogh and the liberated palette of expressionism. He rendered his images with exaggerated forms and brilliant contrasts of non-natural colors. Beauford’s vision depicts a world distorted by the extreme pressures of society, emotion and competing ideologies. His explorations pushed him toward abstraction, though he resisted being classified as an abstract artist.

Joseph Delaney’s works recall the brothers’ upbringing as sons of a Methodist minister. He often chose biblical scenes as his subjects as seen in the painting, Last Supper, circa 1940s. Like Beauford, Joseph used exaggeration of the physical form and non-natural colors but he expressed a more serene and simplified vision, without the energetic brushwork employed by Beauford. Joseph Delaney’s Christ, in the center of this globe, seems more mottled than flesh. He glides with an inner light that recalls the luminous, biblical tableaus of Henry Ossawa Tanner. This also serves to highlight the act of reaching for the bread, an allusion to the offering of the body and blood of Christ for the salvation of all humankind.

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The legendary John Biggers (1924-2001) inspired generations of artists with works that abound in symbolic imagery and carefully crafted details. The lithograph, *Upper Room*, 1984 proved to be extremely popular and was mass produced and consumed in the form of posters and lower end prints for many years. The "upper room" is a reference to the place where the Harlem Renaissance Jazz Age, the Great Migration, the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War with communist Russia, the Civil Rights Movement and Reaganesque. He developed a unique blend of surrealism or magical realism along with social commentary on the hardships of African Americans. Lee-Smith's "boy" tableaus present as simple scenes in desolate landscapes but unfailingly before the viewers' eyes as layers of meaning become visible.

Hughie Lee-Smith, like Elizabeth Catlett and Charles White, saw an amazing breadth of African American history and culture. Though his work is not always handled as specifically as in the example of Romare Bearden, Hughie Lee-Smith (1915-1999) and Howar dena Pindell (born 1943), artists who's weight and stature continue to escalate, focused their attention on the psychological effects of America.

Dancing on a Dune, 1949 begins to show elements of Lee-Smith's mature work. He did not feel obligated to create works that exclusively depicted the bodies of African Americans. Whether Blacks are present or not, the figures he employed approached the Black experience which mirrored the sense of isolation and emotional distance felt in industrial nations worldwide. Dancing is an act that calls for solid, firm footing. These dancers are balanced on the edge of shifting sand with jagged rocks on the left and a small area of scrubby, dark grass on the right that appears neither soft nor inviting. Though grasping each other's right, the couple is not engaged with each other. The man regards the woman but she is fixated on something off to the left. They lean away from each other which forms a dramatic tension between them. Their arm, outstretched for balance, almost appear to gesture toward opposite directions, perhaps symbolizing different goals or perspectives. This typifies what has been described as his ability to convey a sense of timelessness and remoteness between his figures and the landscapes they inhabit.

Bearden grew up in Harlem during the heady days of the Harlem Renaissance. He later emerged as a visionary artist whose hand was facile at a variety of mediums and styles. Visual artist, poet, art historian, and costume designer, it seemed there was nothing he could not do. In the years following World War II and II, they enjoy places of prominence in the recognition of the style of abstract expressionism. It was a style that emphasized the dynamic action of the artist's hand to create works that had no resemblance to objects in the real world. He was one of the first African American artists to use the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Both were intensely concerned with issues of social justice and equality. Coincidentally, the two were married for a time in the 1940s. In large part, it is the unique presentation and the emotional power in both Catlett and White's oeuvres that make their work so valuable. They speak eloquent volumes on the human costs of inequality, lack of opportunity, and the power brokering of the privileged classes.

Two remarkable giants whose works directly address these issues are Elizabeth Catlett (1915-) and Charles White. In the years following World War II and II, they enjoy places of prominence in the recognition of the style of abstract expressionism. It was a style that emphasized the dynamic action of the artist's hand to create works that had no resemblance to objects in the real world. He was one of the first African American artists to use the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Both were intensely concerned with issues of social justice and equality. Coincidentally, the two were married for a time in the 1940s. In large part, it is the unique presentation and the emotional power in both Catlett and White's oeuvres that make their work so valuable. They speak eloquent volumes on the human costs of inequality, lack of opportunity, and the power brokering of the privileged classes.

Bearden often returned to his birthplace of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. The traditions of Black life whether in the teeming bustle of New York City or the quiet home town reappear throughout his productive career. The lithograph, *Mecklenburg Autumn*, 1979 is an example of both his signature style and the deep emotion he felt for his childhood home.

A strong theme in this collection is the sense of place and how the realities of place affect people. Though it is not always handled as specifically as in the example of Romare Bearden, Hughie Lee-Smith (1915-1999) and Howar dena Pindell (born 1943),
There is a decidedly different dynamic in the canvases of Robert Colescott. His biting humor, scathing irony and insistence on pushing forward the practice of pure painting, rather than rely on adding text, collage or other materials have earned his status as one of the great African American artists. He resides in Los Angeles, California with his wife and son.

Robert Colescott, (1925- )
Tobacco: The Holdouts, 1987
Acrylic on canvas

Frederick Douglass
Harpers Weekly Magazine Cover, 1883

"The art can bring us all together and create dialogue – open up the mind. It’s a safe place to discuss – in the art gallery."

- Arthur Primas

Copyright 2010 P. Stephan Hardy. Mr. Hardy is the award-winning co-author, along with his wife Sheila J. Hardy, of “Extraordinary People of the Harlem Renaissance”, Scholastic 2000 and “Extraordinary People of the Civil Rights Movement”, Scholastic, 2001. He is a self-taught visual artist and former Program Manager-History, curator and educator for the California African American Museum, Los Angeles, California. He is a self-described griot, storyteller and history keeper, whose mission is to inspire people with the lessons and stories of our shared history and culture.
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Cover Image:
Charles White (1918-1979)
Gospel Singers, 1951
Tempera on board

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