

Seeing and Thinking About the Unexpected in American Art

by Richard J. Powell

Collection of Howard University



"Forever Free," 1867, by Mary Edmonia Lewis.

Can one successfully examine American art using works by Henry Ossawa Tanner, Archibald J. Motley, Elizabeth Catlett and Sam Gilliam? The exhibit "To Conserve a Legacy: American Art From Historically Black Colleges and Universities" does so through artists and works not customarily considered visual conduits of an American character and identity. As one might expect, the most frequent subject of the artworks in the collections of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) is black America itself: its heroes, communities, pastimes, problems, fears and dreams. Each of these themes is given concrete, palpable form, fashioned with equal doses of fantasy, reality and abstraction.

"To Conserve a Legacy" surveys the art collections of six HBCUs—Clark Atlanta University, Fisk University, Hampton University, Howard University, North Carolina Central University, and Tuskegee University—and, based on these surveys, exhibits the most culturally representative works (see exhibition schedule, page 26). A core group of these institutions—Clark Atlanta, Fisk, Hampton and Howard—were founded as a result of President Abraham Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation and efforts by the Freedmen's Bureau, the American Missionary Association, and other religious organizations to assist and educate former slaves. It is not surprising, therefore, that part of the self-defining process for these institutions (upon their creation and long afterward) entailed gathering



"William J. Edwards and the teachers of Snow Hill Institute," by Arthur Bedou.

published documents, memorabilia, and works of art that depicted or visualized emancipation.

Of course, the general theme of freedom—both literal and figural—is in evidence at various moments in American art history; however, the specific theme of the emancipation of enslaved black men and women began to appear in American art in the years immediately following the 1863 presidential edict.

Edmonia Lewis' marble sculpture "Forever Free" (1867) satisfied most of the artistic expectations that the ideal audience would have had for a work on this topic: the reverential, upward gazes; the gestures of gratitude and victory; and the ex-slave's humble attire. However, despite the cool white marble and superficial overtures to other contemporary

sculptors (such as Harriet Hosmer and Hiram Powers), Lewis' impassioned, decidedly anti-neoclassical "Forever Free" matched the emotionally wrenching slave narratives and emancipation sagas of her literary counterparts Harriet Jacobs and Sojourner Truth.

Representations of emancipation and freedom were capable of being more than just images of broken shackles or genuflecting slaves. For some, the very idea of an African American operating outside the sphere of slavery was enough to signify bodily freedom. Similarly, for many African-American painters and sculptors, the avoidance of the black subject altogether and the conscious demonstration of artistic skills and a command of the academic ideals of art denoted another

kind of emancipation: freedom from assumptions of black inferiority.

Almost simultaneous with Lewis' "Forever Free" was Robert S. Duncanson's oil painting "Cottage at Pass Opposite Ben Lomond" (1866): a homage to Celtic romanticism begun during the artist's 1865 tour of the Scottish Highlands. Duncanson's audiences would have been hard-pressed to link this painting thematically to a still-cleaved post-Civil War America or to a politically astute African-American artist. More likely, the art-viewing public would have immediately associated this painting with one of several schools of American landscape painting, whose images of the wilderness, westward-expanding civilization, and imaginary, idealized vistas were coveted by the country's leading art

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Collection of Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries

"Man With a Brush," 1840, by Frederick C. Flemister.

collectors. For Duncanson, his success with this genre was a clear indication of his own emancipation and artistic independence: a victory over society's presumptions of what an African-American artist should create.

"Mark what I say here in black and white," Duncanson wrote to his son (who wanted him to be more proactively African American). "I have no color on the brain; all I have on the brain is paint." This pronouncement highlights the painting's sociopolitical core and liberating effects, despite its surface serenity and assumed distance from

the topical and ideological.

Because of the efforts of historians and artist-teachers at many HBCUs, "Forever Free" and "Cottage at Pass Opposite Ben Lomond" have become important visual tools for teaching students about concepts of freedom, art and culture in 19th-century America. By the time these two works of art entered the permanent collections at Howard ("Forever Free," during the late 1960s) and North Carolina Central ("Cottage," during the mid-1980s), histories of African-American art and artists were being rewritten to

acknowledge the range and scope of subject matter, aesthetic sensibilities and artistic intentions among this group of cultural arbiters. However, exploring the educational uses and potential of visual art at HBCUs began neither in the 20th century nor with works solely by black artists.

Almost from its inception in 1868, Hampton Institute's faculty, staff and students viewed the collecting of art, artifacts and folklore as a major component of their mission. Beyond the institute's historical emphases on manual training and a broad liberal arts education, the material and oral cultures of peoples of color have played a key role in Hampton's curricular and extracurricular undertakings.

Gen. Samuel Chapman Armstrong, Hampton Institute's founder and first principal, proclaimed the centrality and importance of African-American and American Indian art forms to the greater cultural enterprise when he asserted that "the Negro has the only American music; the Indian has the only American art." Alluding here not only to cultural production in America, but also to Hampton Institute's specific calling to educate the sons and daughters of ex-slaves and exiled American Indians, Armstrong saw the intrinsic value of providing Hampton students with a truly diverse learning environment. "The mingling of the students is good for both," he wrote some years later, "pushing the Indians by the force of surrounding influences quickly and naturally along, and reacting finely upon the Negro by the appeal to his sympathies and better nature. The work for another race broadens and strengthens our movement and adds, if possible, to its inspiration."

When, in 1905, Hampton acquired a collection of 72 baskets from the Chitimacha peoples of the lower Mississippi Valley, the reasons for accepting these baskets were threefold: ethnological (their stylistic

links to baskets made by the ancient Aztecs), revivalist (in hopes that American Indian students would study these baskets and resuscitate their archaic designs and forms) and commercial (in anticipation of their providing students with models upon which to manufacture similar ones for sale). This commingling of pride, gratitude and unabashed capitalism suggests that Hampton's call for assimilation had implications far beyond questions of cultural suppression or expression.

Teaching, collecting and exhibiting the visual arts at HBCUs has been a labor-intensive enterprise not entirely supported by these institutions. Rather than becoming established as part of a long-range agenda by administrators and trustee boards, the collecting and exhibiting of art at HBCUs has occurred when someone acts as a catalyst to make things happen.

This was certainly the case for Howard University when (in 1928) art professor James V. Herring successfully petitioned to create a permanent art gallery in the renovated basement of the university chapel—the first art museum of its kind at an HBCU.

And it was the case at Fisk University. From 1946 to '47, artist Georgia O'Keeffe donated approximately 100 works of art to Fisk in memory of her recently deceased husband, the renowned photographer and art dealer Alfred Stieglitz. Through her friend Carl Van Vechten, O'Keeffe was aware of the important advancements in higher education taking place at Fisk; both O'Keeffe and Van Vechten believed that the visual arts could play a special role in furthering the university's educational mission.

Included among the extraordinary African sculptures, the valuable modern art (by such European luminaries as Auguste Renoir, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Paul Cézanne and

Pablo Picasso), and other fine works given to Fisk were many paintings, sculptures, works on paper and photographs by American artists (including O'Keeffe) who had long been affiliated with Stieglitz, his important circle of artists and intellectuals, and his influential New York gallery.

helped instill in black and white audiences a greater appreciation for black subjects in art.

To understand just how unusual (and often vexing) it was for the white art establishment and public to first visualize and then revere black subject matter, one need only return to those early years of Atlanta



"Cottage at Pass Opposite Ben Lomond," 1866, by Robert S. Duncanson.

Perhaps at the forefront of the colleges and universities that, at midcentury, embraced African-American images and works of art as integral to learning was Atlanta University. Now known as Clark Atlanta University (following Atlanta University's merger with another HBCU, Clark College, in 1988), this institution inaugurated in 1942 an annual art exhibition, with a nationally juried competition for black artists and a regular program of awards and purchase prizes in various artistic media and genres.

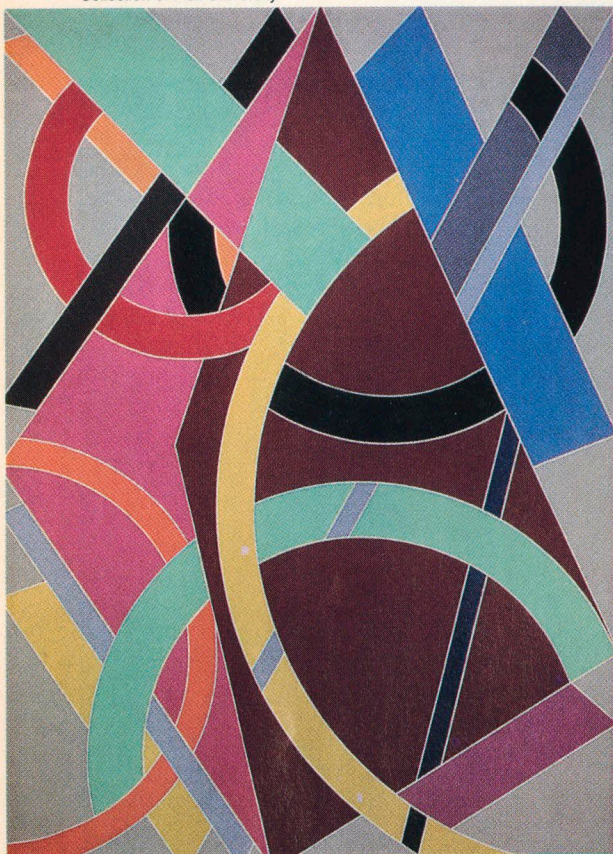
Although the annual exhibitions at Atlanta University ended in 1970, in the 28 years that the competitions were held, they accomplished much to develop a greater awareness of the visual arts within African-American communities and to cultivate individual and institutional black patronage. More important, the exhibitions

University's annual exhibitions and read the reviews and commentaries on these "all-Negro" art shows. Disparaging statements that described Atlanta University's black art students as "chocolate," their subject matter as having a "primitive" quality, and their themes as largely concerned with "racial consciousness and antagonism" were not infrequent, and they illustrate just how radical it was then to undertake the annual exhibitions.

After the first three exhibitions, their originator, artist-teacher Hale Woodruff, called for the loosening of the "all-Negro" emphasis of the exhibitions. His call was rejected by Atlanta University President Rufus E. Clement, who felt that his institution's affirmation of the long-depreciated black artist had not lost its necessity, despite all of the patriotic words and high hopes for racial rec-

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Collection of Fisk University



"Do You Think A Is B?"
1975-77, by William Thomas Williams.

conciliation in the postwar years.

Has it lost its necessity today?

When, in 1976, curator Joshua C. Taylor assembled the important bicentennial exhibition "America as Art," he questioned the wisdom of organizing a major exhibition of American art that included no works by John Singleton Copley, Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins or John Singer Sargent. "America as Art" was instead a visual and cultural excursion through American symbols, ethnic and class-based identities, and other assorted ideas and themes, realized largely through popular art forms, as well as paintings and sculptures by what most scholars would consider "minor artists." He wanted the exhibition to address "the identity of art with our cultural past" and to provide "unexpected pleasures" and "joy to the eye."

The curators of "To Conserve a Legacy: American Art From Historically Black Colleges and Univer-

sities" are less likely to point out or bemoan the absence of works by Copley, Homer, Eakins or Sargent in their exhibition, preferring instead to encourage viewers to take pleasure in seeing and thinking about the unexpected in American art and in what these institutions would call the culturally definitive nature of their holdings.

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with Jock Reynolds, of "To Conserve a Legacy: American Art From Historically Black Colleges and Universities." This essay is adapted from "Through African American Lens," by Richard J. Powell, first published in the catalog To Conserve a Legacy: American Art From Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Addison Gallery of American Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem, 1999). Reprinted by permission from Richard J. Powell.

Exhibition Schedule

"To Conserve a Legacy: American Art From Historically Black Colleges and Universities" is a major exhibition of works from the collections of Clark Atlanta, Fisk, Hampton, Howard, North Carolina Central and Tuskegee universities. The exhibition explores themes of history, legacy and conservation; these themes are also explored in a conservation training program for minority students and a catalog.

The exhibition highlights African-American art from each HBCU collection and places it within the full historical context and stylistic range of American art and culture. The six HBCUs represent magnificent holdings of American art, including works by Romare Bearden, John Biggers, Elizabeth Catlett, Roy DeCarava, Aaron Douglas, Sam Gilliam, Jacob Lawrence, Georgia O'Keeffe, Horace Pippin, Alfred Stieglitz, Henry O. Tanner and Hale Woodruff.

March 17-June 27, 1999

Studio Museum in Harlem
New York, N.Y.

August-October 1999

Addison Gallery of American Art
Andover, Mass.

November 1999-January 2000

Howard University Gallery of Art with the Corcoran Gallery of Art
Washington, D.C.

February-May 2000

Art Institute of Chicago
Chicago, Ill.

June-September 2000

Clark Atlanta University Art Collections with the High Museum of Art
Atlanta, Ga.

October-December 2000

North Carolina Central University Art Museum with Duke University Museum of Art
Durham, N.C.

January-March 2001

Fisk University Art Galleries with the Tennessee State Museum
Nashville, Tenn.

April-July 2001

Hampton University Art Museum with the Chrysler Museum
Hampton, Va.